

Not all who want to, can—not all who can, will:  
Extending notions of unconventional doctoral  
dissertations

by

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## Abstract

My research seeks to destabilize imaginings of dissertations—conventional and otherwise—by highlighting a range of doctoral dissertations that, seemingly against all odds, manage to diverge from well-worn epistemic and textual paths. Whether it's a dissertation from South Africa whose author brings auto-ethnography and illness narratives into a discipline known for its skepticism of anything qualitative (Richards, 2012), a dissertation from Canada whose author purposely eschews standard edited academic English in order to privilege traditional Indigenous knowledges (Stewart, 2015), or a dissertation from the United States whose author coded and designed a digital scholarly edition of *Ulysses* without writing a single chapter in the process (Visconti, 2015), my research questions what brings these dissertations together as well as considering what sets them apart.

To reach a contextualised understanding of unconventional dissertations, including how they are produced and received, I adopt a textographic approach to the study of writing. Informed by this approach, as well as my stance towards writing overall, this dissertation draws on data that includes questionnaire responses, transcripts from unstructured interviews with writers of unconventional dissertations, and unconventional dissertations. Findings indicate that tendencies to conflate 'doctoral dissertations' with conceptions of legacy forms of scholarly communication still prevail. At the same time, the present study demonstrates how some dissertations appear conventional on the surface to belie the unconventionality lurking below. Even entrenched forms of scholarship can shift when the functions and values motivating these forms are approached with open curiosity. Finally, while this study confirms widespread views that not all who want to create an unconventional dissertation will be able to, it also highlights some reasons for why those who *can* create unconventional dissertations may still choose to refrain.

Framed as a response to urgent calls for critical examinations of how scholarly knowledge is produced, communicated, and assessed, this study contributes to a small but rapidly growing area of research that tracks 'unconventional' or 'non-traditional' scholarly projects and their lifecycles. Finally, this study also responds to collective needs for publicly accessible resources that can be used to advocate for diverse forms of scholarship and the equitable practices and infrastructures required to sustain them.

## Gratitude & Acknowledgements

I could tell you that I worked extremely hard to pull this dissertation off and it would be true. But it wouldn't be the entire truth. To push this dissertation to the finish line, I relied extensively on the support of others such as:

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Finally, may I just acknowledge that I never expected to find myself falling in love with dissertations as a genre? But somewhere between the twentieth and the fifty-first dissertation, I did. Fall in love, I mean. Anyway, without those dissertations and the people who wrote them, there would be no “*this*.” So, to all of you: Thank you.

(Pssst...Hey Rowan! It's Dr. Mama to you now!!! Although I also like “Doc Amell” because it sounds like it could be the name of a character in a Pixar movie, so you could also try that on too. You're only two years old right now, so I'll understand if you need to take some time to figure it out.)

# Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	2
GRATITUDE & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	4
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	5
LIST OF TABLES.....	9
LIST OF FIGURES.....	11
LIST OF APPENDICES.....	12
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	12
NOTES ON THIS DISSERTATION’S STYLE, LANGUAGE, AND ACCESSIBILITY.....	13
SECTION ONE.....	14
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	15
WHAT IS AN UNCONVENTIONAL DISSERTATION?.....	17
WHAT IS A CONVENTIONAL DISSERTATION?.....	18
DISSERTATION OVERVIEW.....	20
CHAPTER 2: ORIENTING TO A STUDY OF UNCONVENTIONAL DOCTORAL DISSERTATIONS.....	22
MY “GEO-HISTORICAL-INSTITUTIONAL” TRAJECTORY.....	23
<i>Entering the freefall</i> .....	26
CONCEPTUALISING “WRITING” IN DOCTORAL WRITING.....	29
<i>Academic literacies</i> .....	31
<i>Socio-rhetorical view of writing</i> .....	32
CHAPTER SUMMARY.....	33
CHAPTER 3: MAKING SENSE OF CONVENTION AND VARIATION IN /AMONG DISSERTATIONS.....	35
SOCIO-RHETORICAL APPROACHES TO GENRE.....	36
<i>Implications for a study of unconventional dissertations</i> .....	39
ANALYTICAL LENS #1: IDENTIFYING OPPORTUNITIES FOR UNCONVENTIONALITY.....	41
ANALYTICAL LENS #2: ANALYSING CONVENTIONS AND VARIANCE ACROSS DISSERTATIONS.....	47
ANALYTICAL LENS #3: LEARNING FROM RESEARCH ON VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS DISSERTATIONS....	51
CHAPTER SUMMARY.....	56
CHAPTER 4: THE STUDY.....	59
TEXT, CONTEXTS, AND MEETING HALFWAY.....	59
OVERVIEW OF DATA COLLECTION METHODS AND RESEARCH TIMELINE.....	62
QUESTIONNAIRE.....	64
INTERVIEWS.....	66

<i>Recruitment process</i> .....	67
<i>Transcription process</i> .....	68
<i>Approach to analysis</i> .....	70
DISSERTATIONS .....	71
<i>On the development of a publicly accessible database</i> .....	73
<i>Generating visual depictions of dissertations using artificial intelligence</i> .....	74
CHAPTER SUMMARY .....	77
<b>SECTION TWO</b> .....	<b>79</b>
<b>CHAPTER 5: WHAT IS AN UNCONVENTIONAL DISSERTATION?</b> .....	<b>80</b>
"THE DEBATE IN MY FIELD WOULD BE WHAT A 'TRADITIONAL DISSERTATION' EXACTLY CONSISTS OF" .....	81
SIGNALLING UNCONVENTIONALITY: "THIS DISSERTATION DOES NOT. . ." .....	88
<i>"I will therefore gently ease the reader into my writing style": Strategic appropriation as a form of resistance</i> .....	92
CHAPTER SUMMARY .....	97
<b>CHAPTER 6: YOU CAN'T SOUND LIKE GENE KELLY WHEN YOU HAVE AN ANONYMOUS EXTERNAL EXAMINER</b> .....	<b>99</b>
GENERAL OVERVIEW AND DESCRIPTION .....	100
ARRIVING AT AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND THE DISSERTATION, OR "HOW DO I TELL MY OWN STORY OF THIS?" .....	102
YOU CAN'T SOUND LIKE GENE KELLY & EXPECT TO GET THE DEGREE: NAVIGATING THE LOCAL EXAMINATION CONTEXT .....	108
'FLAGGING IT AS SCHOLARLY' .....	110
"HOW FAR CAN YOU PUSH IT BEFORE IT BREAKS?" .....	118
CHAPTER SUMMARY .....	119
<b>CHAPTER 7: WHAT'S MY SUPERVISOR GONNA DO WITH A NOVEL?</b> .....	<b>121</b>
GENERAL OVERVIEW AND DESCRIPTION .....	122
THE "TYRANNY OF GENRE"? : EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL 'ENTANGLEMENTS' .....	126
MITIGATING PUSHBACK AND ENABLING LEGWORK: A NOTE ON THE STABILIZING NATURE OF 'ENTANGLEMENTS' .....	130
SCAFFOLDING THE WRITING PROCESS USING MINI-PROPOSALS .....	135
"DO THAT WHEN YOU HAVE TENURE" .....	137
CHAPTER SUMMARY .....	138
<b>CHAPTER 8: 'WELL, MAYBE YOU SHOULD HAVE FIVE OR SIX MANUSCRIPTS INSTEAD OF FOUR'</b> .....	<b>140</b>
GENERAL OVERVIEW AND DESCRIPTION .....	140
THE BEGINNING OF THE END .....	144
"I FELT LIKE I WAS KIND OF SHOCKING PEOPLE" .....	147
IMPEDED DECISIONS, DIVERTED VISIONS, AND OTHER ASIDES .....	150
RESISTANCE AT THE DEFENSE .....	155
CHAPTER SUMMARY .....	157

<b>CHAPTER 9: ‘SO THAT WE ARE ALL ON THE SAME PAGE’—ON BEING STRATEGIC IN PLANNING FOR SUCCESS.</b>	<b>159</b>
GENERAL OVERVIEW AND DESCRIPTION	160
ACCOUNTING FOR AN UNUSUAL MACROSTRUCTURE: HYBRID COMPLEX-MANUSCRIPT?	164
NO CLOUT, NO ‘DISS’—NOTES FROM A FORMER DISSERTATOR TURNED SUPERVISOR	167
CHAPTER SUMMARY	174
<b>CHAPTER 10: WHEN THE ELECTRONIC THESIS COMMITTEE CONSISTS OF ONE PERSON WITH THE POWER TO DELAY YOUR GRADUATION</b>	<b>177</b>
GENERAL OVERVIEW AND DESCRIPTION	178
“IT’S NOT ALLOWED”: THE POWER OF ORDINARY FORMATTING GUIDELINES	182
CHAPTER SUMMARY	190
<b>CHAPTER 11: ‘CAPTURING THE NEBULOUS’ AND MAKING IT COUNT</b>	<b>191</b>
GENERAL OVERVIEW AND DESCRIPTION	192
“JUST SORT OF EVOLVED THIS WAY”	195
UNCONVENTIONALITY CAN’T REALLY OCCUR ACROSS ALL DOMAINS—OR CAN IT?	199
REPAIRING A TEXTUALIST ORIENTATION	202
REVIVING THE USE OF MACROSTRUCTURES	204
<i>The symbolic potential of dissertation macrostructures</i>	206
RETRIEVING RHETORICAL FUNCTIONS	208
CHAPTER SUMMARY	215
<b>SECTION THREE</b>	<b>217</b>
<b>CHAPTER 12: PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS – MORE THAN AN AFTERTHOUGHT?</b>	<b>218</b>
PEDAGOGICAL MATERIALS	220
THINKING STRATEGICALLY ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CONVENTIONAL AND UNCONVENTIONAL ASPECTS OF DISSERTATIONS	220
QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER REFLECTION	223
<i>Self as Case: Re-imagining my dissertation in light of this research</i>	225
CASES FOR FURTHER REFLECTION	228
<i>Teaching Case #1</i>	228
<i>Teaching Case #2</i>	230
<i>Teaching Case #3</i>	231
<i>Teaching Case #4</i>	233
<i>Teaching Case #5</i>	235
<i>Teaching Case #6</i>	237
CHAPTER SUMMARY	238
<b>CHAPTER 13: NOT ALL WHO WANT TO, CAN—NOT ALL WHO CAN, WILL</b>	<b>239</b>
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS: A CASE OF DÉJÀ VU?	240
IMPLICATIONS	244
OVERLY OPTIMISTIC VIEWS?	245
FUTURE INQUIRIES	249
FINAL THOUGHTS	254

<b>POSTSCRIPT: NOT ALL WHO CAN, WILL</b> .....	257
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	258
<b>APPENDICES</b> .....	285
<b>1. ETHICS APPROVAL</b> .....	285
<b>2. QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS</b> .....	286
<b>3. PEDAGOGICAL MATERIALS</b> .....	289
QUESTIONS TO GUIDE THE WRITING PROCESS (HANDOUT) .....	289
THINKING WITH TEXTOGRAPHY .....	290
EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL FOR UNCONVENTIONALITY IN 'EVERYDAY' GENRES .....	292

## List of Tables

<b>Table 1.</b> Tardy’s (2016) synthesis of areas or opportunities for unconventionality in academic writing. ....	47
<b>Table 2.</b> Description and examples of original macrostructures associated with research on dissertations (Dong, 1998; Paltridge, 2002). ....	49
<b>Table 3.</b> Description and examples of macrostructures emerging from research on education-based dissertations (Anderson et al., 2020; Anderson et al., 2021).....	50
<b>Table 4.</b> Description and examples from Ravelli et al.’s (2013) analysis of written and creative components of visual and performing arts dissertations.....	53
<b>Table 5.</b> Participants’ experience with supervising and/or writing unconventional dissertations.....	67
<b>Table 6.</b> Summary of the unconventional aspects of interview participants’ dissertations and dissertation macrostructures.....	69
<b>Table 7.</b> Tardy’s (2016) synthesis of areas or opportunities for unconventionality in academic writing .....	87
<b>Table 8.</b> Summary table for Dr. Rose Richards (2012).....	99
<b>Table 9.</b> Chapter headings in Richards’s (2012) dissertation presented alongside a traditional-simple macrostructure. ....	102
<b>Table 10.</b> Summary table for Dr. Rachel Ivy Clarke (2016) .....	121
<b>Table 11.</b> Chapter headings in Clarke (2016) dissertation presented alongside a traditional-simple macrostructure.....	124
<b>Table 12.</b> Summary table for Dr. Nancy Bray (2018) .....	140
<b>Table 13.</b> Chart comparing Bray’s (2018) dissertation to the macrostructure of manuscript-style (or publication-based) dissertations. ....	143
<b>Table 14.</b> Summary table for Dr. Sydney Freeman Jr. (2011) .....	159
<b>Table 15.</b> Chapter titles and status of manuscripts in Freeman’s (2011) dissertation. ....	164

<b>Table 16.</b> Chart comparing Freeman’s (2011) dissertation to the macrostructural organization of a traditional-complex dissertation.....	165
<b>Table 17.</b> Chart comparing Freeman’s (2011) dissertation to the macrostructural organization of hybrid simple/manuscript dissertations (Anderson et al., 2020; Anderson et al., 2021).....	166
<b>Table 18.</b> Proposed macrostructure for hybrid complex/manuscript dissertations. ....	167
<b>Table 19.</b> Summary table for Dr. Kristin LaFollette (2019).....	177
<b>Table 20.</b> Areas of unconventionality in LaFollette’s dissertation (adapted from Tardy, 2016, p. 131) .....	179
<b>Table 21.</b> A comparison between the organization of a traditional-simple dissertation (Paltridge, 2002) and LaFollette’s dissertation. ....	181
<b>Table 22.</b> Summary table for Dr. Amanda Visconti (2015) .....	191
<b>Table 23.</b> Mapping Visconti’s dissertation onto the areas of genre innovation suggested by Tardy (2016).....	201
<b>Table 24.</b> The four rhetorical functions (Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012; Ravelli et al., 2021; Thomson & Kamler, 2016). ....	209
<b>Table 25.</b> The four rhetorical functions, as dispersed across the different components of Visconti’s dissertation.....	210
<b>Table 26.</b> Heuristic for construing relations between the components of an unconventional dissertation (Modified from Ravelli et al., 2021; Ravelli et al., 2013). ....	223

## List of Figures

<b>Figure 1.</b> “Researcher Identity” on “Indian Land”? Brittany Amell, October 2018. Chalk pastel and collage on paper. ....	25
<b>Figure 2.</b> Wedding invitation (Wiernik, 2019).....	37
<b>Figure 3.</b> Geographic location of questionnaire participants .....	65
<b>Figure 4.</b> A selection of some of the images I generated for the unconventional dissertations in my dataset using DALL-E AI .....	75
<b>Figure 5.</b> For Richards’s (2012) dissertation, I asked DALL-E to visualise a plush toy kidney getting out of a fancy car.....	100
<b>Figure 6.</b> Overview of the introductory chapter to Richards (2012), taken from the table of contents (p. vi).....	113
<b>Figure 7.</b> For Clarke’s (2016) dissertation, I asked DALL-E to create a painting like image of an academic questioning rocket science in a library .....	122
<b>Figure 8.</b> “See What I Did There.” A photo of an embroidery of a library catalog card designed and stitched by Clarke (2022). ....	139
<b>Figure 9.</b> For Bray’s (2018) dissertation, I asked DALL-E to generate an image based on the description, “If rhetorical genres were people, this one would be a mix of personal and academic pieces.” .....	141
<b>Figure 10.</b> For Freeman’s (2011) dissertation, I asked DALL-E to create an oil painting of the “curriculum of a university president.” .....	160
<b>Figure 11.</b> For LaFollette’s (2019) dissertation, I asked DALL-E to “imagine a collage grows legs and appears to walk off of a page.” .....	178
<b>Figure 12.</b> The same collage, rotated two ways (LaFollette, 2019, p. 12).....	187
<b>Figure 13.</b> For Visconti’s (2015) dissertation, I asked DALL-E to visualise a photograph of James Joyce working behind a computer in a Dublin coffeehouse. ....	192
<b>Figure 14.</b> Screen shot of Visconti’s (2015) digital dissertation website. ....	193

<b>Figure 15.</b> List of references for each of the components that comprise Visconti's dissertation. ....	194
<b>Figure 16.</b> A screenshot of a portion of Visconti's (2015f) manifest, available on GitHub. ....	198
<b>Figure 17.</b> Diagram of components for Britt's re-imagined dissertation. ....	228
<b>Figure 19.</b> Photograph of a page from Britt's research notebook. ....	250

## **List of Appendices**

Appendix 1	Clearance from Carleton's Research Ethics Board
Appendix 2	Questionnaire Items
Appendix 3	Pedagogical Materials

## **List of Abbreviations**

INT	refers to excerpts from Interview
QUES	refers to excerpts from questionnaire responses

## Notes on this dissertation's style, language, and accessibility

As much as possible, I follow the recommendations as set out by the American Psychological Association in the seventh edition of its style guide. This is the style guide preferred by the School of Linguistics and Language Studies. Some divergences will appear, however. For instance, I chose to place the captions underneath some figures and tables (versus above them) because I felt it aided the reading experience and I use footnotes in some places. I use Neue Haas Grotesk Text Pro font for my headings and Lucida Sans font for body text.

In terms of language, I steadfastly remain committed to an inconsistent use of Canadian, British, and American spelling. I believe this inconsistency is appropriate because I live and write in Ottawa, which is located on the unceded and unsurrendered territory of the Anishinaabe people and is considered the capital of the settler-colony known as Canada. Here, it is equally acceptable to spell words that end in *—ize*, like “problematize,” using *—ise*, or as “problematise” and vice versa. I realise this might seem trivial to some, but it feels important to me to contribute in my own small efforts that seek to undermine faulty assumptions that there is one single unified and agreed upon understanding of what constitutes “English.” I also prefer to shorten words like “cannot” or “should not” to “can’t” and “shouldn’t.”

In terms of accessibility, I have worked to educate myself on how screen readers might interact with this document in an effort to aid the reading experience for persons using these tools. I do not have a screen reader, nor was I able to borrow one in time to test this. I’m certain there are many errors I have made that I will only become aware of in time. I can only apologize in advance and promise that I am committed to doing better in the future.

# Section One

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Calls for academics to engage in a critical and meaningful examination of how scholarly knowledge is produced, shared, used, and received have only increased over the years (Monk et al., 2021). At the same time, doctoral education programs around the world face intensified pressure to transform in response to shifting landscapes and demands faced by doctoral students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Burford et al., 2021; Paré, 2017; Porter et al., 2018). As Paré (2017) has pointed out, a surprising amount of academic knowledge is now developed and shared by some scholars via tweets, blog posts, podcasts, wikis, web pages, and repositories (often in addition to traditional academic outputs); yet when it comes to doctoral dissertations, he notes, we are “still demanding book-length monographs that travel no farther than the library bookshelves” (p. 408) .

Indeed, a decreasing number of prospective tenure-track positions coupled with broader shifts in social, political, and economic processes only adds to the urgency of re-imagining doctoral programs, and the function and form of the dissertation in particular (Caretta et al., 2018; Paré, 2019). Further, technologies and media will only continue to emerge, bringing with them new potentials for the creation and communication of academic research and knowledge (Fitzpatrick, 2011; Greenhow & Gleason, 2014).

As a pedagogical tool integral to the PhD, the doctoral dissertation is in a unique position to engage students in developing the competencies and critical thinking skills they need to stay in step with a changing world. However, despite ongoing calls for expanded conceptions of scholarship and the dissertation more specifically, the academy appears to “not only refrain from encouraging, but actually prohibit, dissertations that are more in step” with shifts in the way knowledge is produced and shared (Porter et al., 2018, p. 4; see also Day et al., 2013; Parham, 2018). While studies focused on investigating this resistance are crucial, the present research has taken a different tack. Namely, I

concentrated on tracking down examples of dissertations that have managed to be “unconventional” in order to learn more about the conditions that enabled their success.

To support this focus, the present investigation adopts a textographic approach to the study of unconventional dissertations. Textographies of writing offer a way to “increase our understanding of what it means to say that academic writing is situated” (Swales, 1998/2018, p. 1). Many textographies, including this one, are not attempting to become an ethnographic study in any typical sense. Instead, textographies of writing tend to focus on individuals rather than collectives to understand the “how” or “why” of a text. Arguments are built through the close analysis of written text and deepened through the analysis of other forms of data gathered with the intent to help a researcher shed light on the conditions surrounding a text, such as interview transcripts and responses to questionnaire items (Paltridge et al., 2012; Swales, 1998, 1998/2018). Reaching a contextualized understanding of the conditions leading to the production and reception of certain texts is thus one of textography’s key aims (Swales, 1998/2018).

Two overarching research questions guided the present textographic investigation of unconventional dissertations. They are as follows:

1. What are unconventional dissertations?
2. Given the reputation that unconventional dissertations have for being difficult to pull off, how do authors of unconventional dissertations succeed in bringing them about?

In line with a textographic approach to research, I gathered different sources of data over the span of two years. Specifically, I collected responses from 70 participants to 22 (long and short answer) questionnaire items and the transcripts from interviews with nine authors and/or supervisors of unconventional dissertations. I also collected and analysed 71 dissertations, 51 of which were identified as unconventional via word of mouth, database searches, participants, a profile page on the Canadian Association for Graduate

Studies (CAGS) blog, and/or via my own analysis. Findings from this study indicate that tendencies to conflate ‘doctoral dissertations’ with conceptions of legacy forms of scholarly communication still prevail. At the same time, the present study demonstrates how some dissertations may even appear conventional on the surface to belie the unconventionality lurking below. As this study will come to suggest, even entrenched forms of scholarship can shift when the functions and values motivating these forms are approached with open curiosity. Finally, while the findings from this study reinforce widespread views that not all who want to create an unconventional dissertation will be able to, it also brings into view some possible reasons for why it might be the case that even those who *can* create unconventional dissertations may still choose to refrain.

### **What is an unconventional dissertation?**

For the purposes of the study described herein, I’ve opted to use “unconventional” as an acceptably imperfect umbrella term to describe dissertations that depart from convention(s) *in a manner perceived as successful by members of the intended audience* (Tardy, 2015; 2016). To say that unconventionality is greatly influenced by a dissertation’s intended audience is to suggest that what might be considered unconventional in one discipline may not be considered unconventional in another. Even within the same or similar contexts, what is considered unconventional can shift, taking on different appearances depending on the audience and the preferences, needs, and knowledges they have (or are imagined to have). To be included in my study a dissertation must have passed examination.

If trying to define a word like “unconventional” is a slippery term best considered alongside its antonyms, a study of “unconventional” dissertations ought to similarly consider the notion of a “conventional” dissertation. As such, discussions of what is considered conventional are embedded alongside discussions of what is considered unconventional throughout the present dissertation. However, for reasons relating to

scope, these discussions tend to be more narrowly focused, centred for instance on the context surrounding a particular dissertation's production. In the next section, I briefly outline some of the history behind the idea of a conventional dissertation in an effort to provide a broader historical context. This is not meant to be an exhaustive history of "conventional" dissertations in the West, however. Readers interested in this might do better to consult Clark (2006) and Paltridge and Starfield (2020). Rather, my goal is to better understand how certain expectations about dissertations have become naturalized over time, thus providing a background of taken-for-granted assumptions, against which unconventional dissertations can stand out.

### **What is a conventional dissertation?**

The "conventional" dissertation as we know it today in Canada is a relatively recent innovation in graduate education (Clark, 2006). Precursors to the dissertation, particularly in the medieval university, were typically a combination of mostly oral forms that included lectures and disputations (Clark, 2006). Paper was difficult and expensive to obtain, resulting in fewer texts to begin with. Relatedly, the idea of a "sole-author" was relatively unheard of—medieval writers would often write their interpretations of a text in the margins (and sometimes in-between lines), such that it became difficult to identify the original text or author (Stoicheff & Taylor, 2004). Medieval students thus attempted to enter in and contribute to scholarly conversations orally, by demonstrating mastery using techniques of argumentation and debate (Barton, 2005; Clark, 2006). The initiate (or doctoral student) completed their formal education by making several "oaths to the Church, the community, and the school" (Barton, 2005, p. 35).

The advancing spread of print technology shifted conceptions of scholarship and writing, which in turn shifted conceptions of the dissertation (Barton, 2005; Bolter 2001, Engels-Schwarzpaul & Peters, 2013). With the additional influence of positivism and empiricism in the 19 century, German scholars became more interested in producing

knowledge based on scientific experiments (Barton, 2005). Rather than engaging in long, drawn out oral disputations, these scholars believed that students ought to be likewise conducting experiments and writing about them. This was a time when it felt like the possibilities for new discoveries were endless, and that an individual conducting research could “make a real contribution to the rapidly expanding field of scientific inquiry” (Barton, 2005, p. 48). Students were:

expected to strive to discover something new and useful. The dissertation, as a result of such inquiries, was valuable precisely because it would make a valid and useful contribution to scientific knowledge. In the German's view, a dissertation ought to conform to a model based on controlled experiment and empirical deduction and constitute what we might call an extensive laboratory report. The traditional chapters of a dissertation, including ‘Methodology,’ ‘Results/Findings,’ and ‘Analysis and Interpretation of the Findings’ suggest how closely the dissertation structure was linked with scientific experiments. (Barton, 2005, p 48)

Thus, the expectation that dissertations would follow the structure of a report on a scientific experiment and make a contribution to scientific knowledge is a relatively modern invention that has nonetheless now come to be reflected in many, if not all, guidelines and policies governing the dissertation in Canadian universities (Porter et al., 2018). What it means to make a contribution, in actual practice, is rarely explained (Lovitts, 2007).

If there is a lesson to be learned from this brief history, it is that the idea of a “conventional” dissertation (including its form) is tied to how the academy understands an *original* or *new* contribution to knowledge (Porter et al., 2018). Dissertations as we know them today haven't always looked the way they do, which suggests that they may not necessarily look the same way tomorrow, however entrenched certain expectations and formats appear to be. This tension—that doctoral dissertations are changing and yet also

remaining the same—is reflected across the literature and an aim of the present study is to examine how this tension emerges in participants’ accounts and dissertations. Closer examinations of unconventional dissertations can offer a much-needed window into successful responses to questions of how dissertations have been re-imagined in specific contexts and, at the same time, also offer a view of situated responses to broader questions that get at the core of what it means to engage in scholarly work overall.

### **Dissertation overview**

This dissertation is divided into three sections. Section One orients readers to the project and consists of four chapters. An overview of the project, including its aims, methods, and findings have been presented in the present chapter. In Chapter 2, I consider how aspects of my personal and academic influenced the research trajectory I have found myself on, including how I conceptualise a study of writing, the questions I chose to study, and the methods I chose to study them (Crotty, 1998; Hesse-Biber, 2014). Chapter 3 homes in on convention and variation, including how these concepts might be mobilized in a study of unconventional dissertations. If Chapters 1 – 3 provide the “what” (i.e., focus, topic, background) and “why” (i.e., rationale) for the present study, Chapter 4 provides details pertaining to the “how” (i.e., methods), as well as the “who” (i.e., participants).

Section Two forms the bulk of the dissertation, comprising seven chapters in total. The first chapter in this section (Chapter 5, “What is an unconventional dissertation?”) begins with an exploration of questionnaire participants’ descriptions of dissertations that depart from conventions. Then, in an effort to offer some contrast, I bring in examples of different ways authors of the unconventional dissertations in my dataset signal the unconventionality of their dissertation. Chapter 5 ends with a focus on the ways in which Stewart (2015) strategically bends or resists conventions to highlight their implications for Indigenous scholars and knowledges. Chapters 6 through 11 embody responses to questions of what unconventional dissertations are, as well as how authors succeed in

bringing them about. Profiling six participants and their dissertations, each chapter provides an alternative (albeit imbricated) perspective on what it might mean to undertake an unconventional dissertation, including the conditions surrounding its production and reception.

Section Three concludes the dissertation. In Chapter 12, I explore some pedagogical insights resulting from the present study and present some materials that can be remixed by readers to suit their own purposes. Finally, in Chapter 13, I conclude the dissertation, beginning with a review of my key findings. I also highlight the contributions my research makes, as well as some implications, and discuss potential avenues for future research.

## Chapter 2: Orienting to a study of unconventional doctoral dissertations

To understand writing as a social and rhetorical is to view the “composing of texts” as an inextricable “part of the social process by which knowledge is constructed” (Artemeva, 2004, p. 5). Likewise, when it comes to carrying out research and composing research texts, many qualitative researchers today would argue that neither can be totally separated from the researcher (Creswell, 2013). Hesse-Biber (2014), for example, recommends that “a researcher recognizes, examines, and understands how [their] social background and assumptions can intervene in the research process,” because, like “the researched or participant, the researcher is a product of [their] society’s social structures and institutions” (p. 200). Offering a different line of approach, Crotty (1998) has suggested that four basic elements comprise a research process (the methods, methodology, theoretical perspective, and epistemology), and when put together, these elements can act like a map that offers researchers “a way of looking at the world and making sense of it” (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). Like real maps, these research maps involve “a certain understanding” of what is known and what can be known within a given space, including what this “knowing” entails (Crotty, 1998, p. 8).

In this chapter, I present one part of my research map. That is, I explore how aspects of my “geo-historical-institutional” trajectory (to make use of Lillis’s 2019 term) have shaped the research I have chosen to engage in (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 200). I then introduce academic literacies and socio-rhetorical approaches to writing, two views that inform how I conceptualise a study of writing, including the questions I chose to study and the methods I chose to study them (Crotty, 1998; Hesse-Biber, 2014).

## **My “geo-historical-institutional” trajectory**

Before my doctorate, I was a graduate student studying to complete a Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics and Discourse Studies. During this time, I became deeply invested learning more about experiences with learning to write in higher education contexts. More specifically, I was concerned with the experiences of Indigenous students writing and studying in a settler-colonial university located in the eastern part of Canada. It is no secret that postsecondary institutions and education are frequently experienced by Indigenous scholars in ways that are far from benign. Listening to the four Indigenous students who shared some of their experiences with me for the study I reported on in my master’s thesis, I was struck by the seemingly hundreds of direct and indirect ways students recounted receiving messaging that they needed to separate their identities and cultures from their writing and learning process. Sometimes these messages were resisted. Sometimes they were negotiated. And sometimes they were accommodated—often, it seemed, to the detriment of the students. Given the ongoing history of settler colonialism in Canada, it was unsurprising but nonetheless still alarming. I defended my master’s thesis shortly after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC] released 94 calls to action. Several of these calls relate to eliminating gaps in the educational attainment rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians and to creating the kinds of inclusive environments needed if Indigenous peoples and knowledges are to flourish inside the academy (TRC, 2015).

Thus, I began my doctoral studies with a desire to contribute meaningfully to efforts to chip away at the prevailing knowledge-making practices and conventions that are frequently identified as harmful by Indigenous academics (Kovach, 2009; Pidgeon, Archibald, & Hawkey, 2014). As I wrote in one of my applications at the time, I wanted to work on projects that “showcase the stories and experiences of Indigenous academics in a way that reaches prospective and current Indigenous graduate students who may otherwise

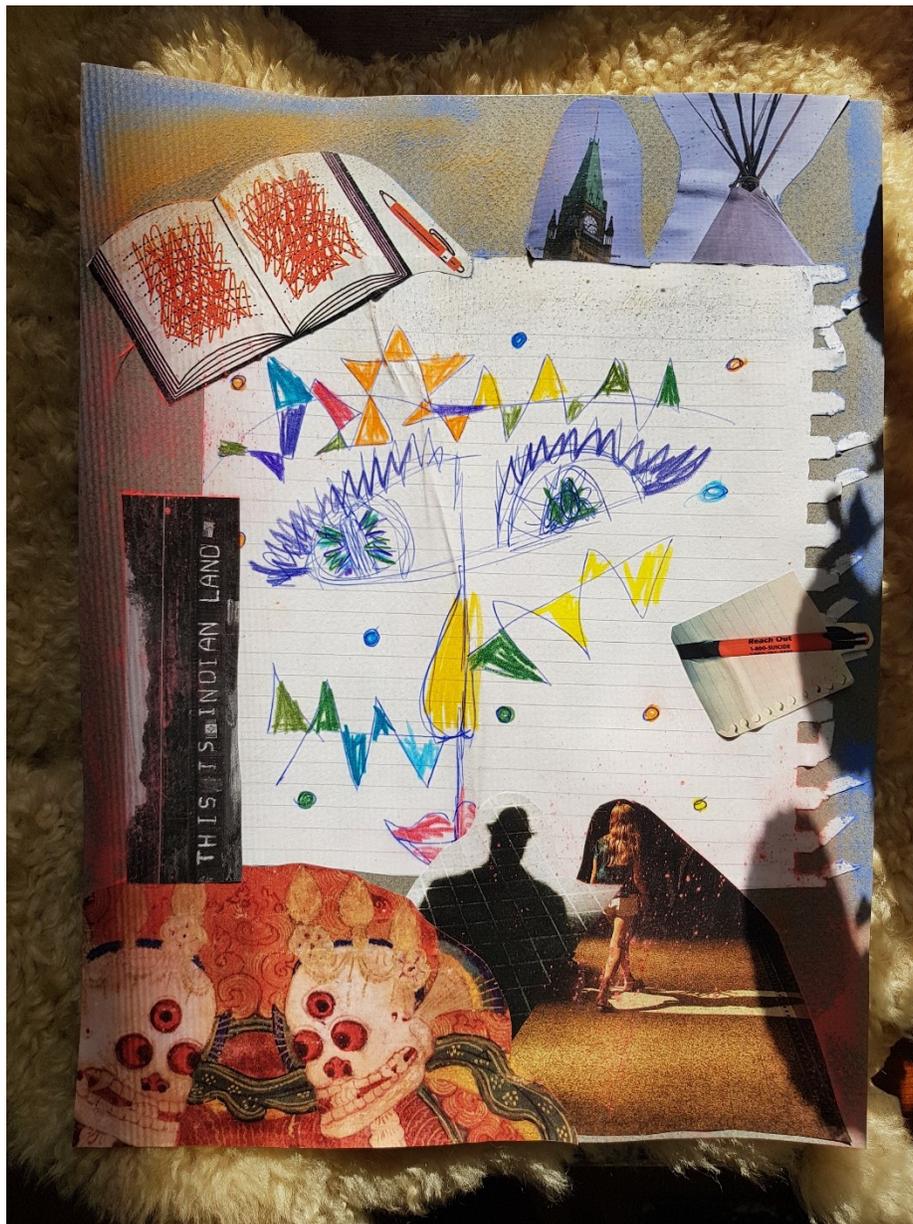
feel isolated and alone during their academic journeys.” However, I frequently found myself questioning what role I could play in research projects like these, likely because behind the scenes I was struggling with my own “history of reading” (to borrow from Ahmed, 2004, p. 31) and of being read by others. More specifically, I grappled with the wrongness of identifying myself as Indigenous or as someone with a mixed background (‘Anishinaabe-Settler’ is what I wrote in my master’s thesis), as well as the wrongness with allowing myself or others (specifically white-settlers) to elide or erase this aspect of my story. Today I have a feeling that, so long as settler colonialism continues its destructive violence, I am not likely to resolve this sense of wrongness. Besides, I’ve come to wonder whether perhaps trying to find a way to resolve anything is to miss the point entirely.

I have since developed an imperfect and inadequate vocabulary in an attempt to describe this aspect of my positionality. I combine two words, “settler” and “ally,” to get to “settler ally.” I see this phrase as problematic, ambiguous, and instructive. A series of questions are raised for me when I draw on this phrase in my work, such as:

- Do I mean to suggest I am an ally to settlers?
- Is it appropriate to self-identify as an ally?
- Who or what am I allied to (or with)?
- What does it mean to identify as an ally?

The practice for me is not in finding out how best to answer these questions; the practice for me is in continuing to ask them. When I stop thinking about them, when they no longer become questions for me to consider, I know I am in trouble. I hang on to these, like a set of ethical questions. Ethical questions “can shift people toward active responsibility that is rooted in consent, as Indigenous people often emphasize” (Montgomery & bergman, 2017, p. 120). This can mean “finding the wiggle room of freedom—the capacity to work on our relationships—and participate in new and old forms of nurturance and resistance” (Montgomery & bergman, 2017, p. 120).

**Figure 1.** “Researcher Identity” on “Indian Land”? Brittany Amell, October 2018. Chalk pastel and collage on paper.



Over the past few years, I have witnessed how the allyship of white women can be a fierce and harmful thing. As a woman who is visibly white and read as white by others, I have benefitted from structures designed specifically to benefit white people while harming others. To be a settler ally is to intentionally peel back the layers of settler-colonialism to explore its personal and collective impacts, including the myriad and intersectioning ways in which it shapes our relations to ourselves, our ancestors, and to each other. There are

ways to make aspects of this process visible on the page, but I chose instead to enact my process in my daily life, in the moments too mundane to read about and in the spaces between “what we say we want the world to look like and what we actually carry out in our smallest acts” (Parham, 2018, p. 683). Parham (2018) continues on to write

Many in the academy have already experienced the consequences of the most enfranchised faculty and staff not being required to carry and to take care . . . every member of the scholarly enterprise must be given more opportunities to come into this work if the institutions in which we labor are to survive at all. (p. 683)

To be a settler ally is to enter into a relationship with what it means to be a settler and what it means to be an ally. Like all relationships, this one requires work to be meaningful. But “working on relationships,” Montgomery and bergman (2017) remind me, “also means the capacity to dissolve and sever them, and to block those which are harmful” (p. 120). I believe that there are times when the most powerful and caring thing a researcher can do is to step away from their research. So, this is what I did. Whether I return to this topic or not will depend on what comes after.

### *Entering the freefall*

Just a short year or two after entering my doctoral program with the hopes of using my doctoral studies as a way to contribute to efforts to amplify the experiences and stories of Indigneous academics, I abandoned my project entirely. It took me years of blundering through literature, conversations, classrooms, conference presentations, depression, and art-making (see Figure 1 for an example) to connect the dots between my investment in advocating for knowledge (or epistemic) equity and my obsession with digging into (and under) understandings of what constitutes academic scholarship.

I make it seem as if it was a tidy process. It was not. I felt hopeless for a long time. I genuinely considered dropping out of doctoral studies. The collegiality I experienced through the multiple collaborative projects I worked on during this time kept me going, as

did a dogged belief that, at my core, I am a researcher and scholar. Even as I struggled with imposter syndrome and a lack of a cogent research focus, I derive a sense of well-being that comes from working with others to bring their knowledge and wisdom into the world. I feel luckiest when I am able to reflect on my experiences and what I've learnt, and then share this with others.

I became more interested in diverse forms of scholarship. As I prepared to propose the research I would undertake for my dissertation, I chanced upon a then-recent report released by the Canadian Association for Graduate Studies on the state of the doctoral dissertation (Porter et al., 2018). It was as if a brilliant sun suddenly broke above the horizon after a long, dark night.

As a doctoral writer myself, I developed a personal interest in doctoral writing, but I had begun to develop an academic interest in the topic as well (e.g., Amell, 2022; Amell & Badenhorst, 2018; Amell & Blouin-Hudon, 2018; Badenhorst & Amell, 2019; Badenhorst et al., 2021). I already knew writing was inseparable from knowledge production and the academy, and had a solid sense that it could enable or block innovation (Paré, 2014a, 2014b; Schryer, 1993; Tardy, 2016). However, Porter et al.'s (2018) report gave me a reason to focus my inquiry on the doctoral dissertation as a set of a socially constructed and "historically evolved" knowledge-making practices (Starke-Meyerring et al., 2014, p. A-23). Readers interested in learning more about this report may wish to read the summary I provide in Box 1.

Today, I am better able to see how demands for the critical examination of common sense understandings regarding what constitutes academic scholarship, including how it is created and communicated are neither new nor limited to one discipline (see, generally: Ahmed, 2012; Battiste, 1998; Boyer, 1990; Porter et al., 2018; Cushman, 2013; Chapman & Greenhow, 2019; Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012; Haraway, 1988; Inoue, 2015; Lea & Street, 1998; Tuck & Yang, 2014). In addition to critiquing the near-stranglehold hold settler-

colonialism often seems to have on knowledge production, this diverse group of scholars have also:

- Defended the value of qualitative research methodologies (Gage, 1989; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln et al., 2018),
- Argued for forms of knowledge, methods, and writing that are emplaced, embodied, and incomplete (Bannerji et al., 1991; Lorde, 1984; Minh-Ha, 1991; Smith, 2012; Waite, 2017),
- Asserted the place of digital and multimodal forms of communication and technologies in academic scholarship (Ball 2012; Kirschenbaum, 2014; Paré, 2017; Renwick et al., 2020; Shipka, 2011; Wiens et al., 2020), and
- Critiqued the notion of academic discourse itself (Boyer, 1990; Canagarajah, 2002a; Inoue, 2015; Prendergast, 1998; Royster, 1996)

The present study joins the above points, sharing many of the same concerns with unexamined and exclusionary definitions of what or who is considered academic or scholarly (Burford, 2017a; Burford, 2017b; Canagarajah, 2002b; Edwards, 2019; Inoue, 2015; Parham, 2018), as well as struggles over and for epistemology/ies, knowledge production, pedagogy, and learning (Lillis & Scott, 2007; Schon, 1995; Patel, 2014).

**Box 1. Summary of the Canadian Association for Graduate Studies' 2018 report on the doctoral dissertation**

The report synthesizes the results from at least a dozen consultations held between 2016 and 2018 across seven Canadian provinces (Porter et al., 2018). Students, faculty members and academic leaders were encouraged to share their perspectives on the current state and future of the dissertation. Questions that guided the inquiry included “how can we ensure scholarly quality and rigour in this already changing landscape?” and “to what extent is there enthusiasm for and/or concerns over changes to the dissertation?” Unsurprisingly, results from the consultations indicated a wide range in opinions regarding the advantages and limitations of “broadening” understandings of the dissertation. Under this “broadened” understanding of the dissertation, candidates might incorporate a variety digital or material artefacts and publicly relevant documents, such as policy papers, curricula, websites, business plans, games, book proposals, or blueprints. These materials could form a substantial component of the dissertation, rather than the appendices. A fair amount of cautious excitement was expressed regarding an openness to adapting dissertation requirements meant to increase the relevance of doctoral education today. However, many expressed the need for a healthy dose of skepticism: Regardless of how dissertation requirements shift, it is still crucial to value traditional, disciplinary-based scholarship and communication.

Porter et al. (2018) cite several reasons for enhancing and expanding conceptions of the dissertation, including what constitutes legitimate or valid scholarship in the academy. Included among the reasons cited is a growing awareness of the need for dissertations to better reflect the changing landscape of scholarship and doctoral education outcomes in today’s increasingly digital society (see also Paré, 2017). Drawing on Boyer (1990) and others, Porter et al. (2018) remind readers that ‘discovery’—a privileged and not unproblematic mode of scholarship—is but one mode alongside others that include the scholarship of teaching, integration, engagement, and application. Additionally, Porter et al. (2018) persuasively argue that overly narrow conceptions that conceive of the dissertation as one and the same as an academic monograph makes less sense in a world where scholarly communication takes on increasingly diverse forms. To be clear, Porter et al. (2018) neither debate nor question whether monograph dissertations should continue to be offered. Instead, Porter et al. (2018) point to what they argue is a need for more closer inspection of resistance to proposals for viewing the monograph as one among many forms a dissertation may take.

### **Conceptualising “writing” in doctoral writing**

Several scholars have dedicated their attention to how writing is perceived, studied and taught (e.g., Berlin, 1982; Faigley, 1989; Ivanic, 2004; Kamler & Thomson, 2008; Lea & Street, 1998; Nystrand, et al., 1993; Raimes, 1991). Although the present study does not focus so much on categorizing approaches to doctoral or dissertation writing, this research

is useful insofar as it lays bare underlying assumptions associated with the study and teaching of writing in a manner not often associated with current research on doctoral and dissertation writing.

The thing is, there are a number of ways one can tackle a discussion of prevailing approaches to writing, making the task anything but straightforward. Further, while scholars might agree on some of the more general aims, epistemologies, and ideologies underlying different approaches, they also frequently diverge (see Nystrand et al., 1993, for a discussion of this in writing studies). For instance, while Bazerman (2016) groups a discussion of research on writing into four themes (“why and when people write,” “the consequences of writing,” “how writing gets done,” and “how writing is learned”), Bizzell (1982) has divided theorists and researchers into two different camps (“inner-directed” and “outer-directed”). Nystrand et al. (1993) and Reither (1985), on the other hand, describe three main evolutions in writing studies research (prescriptivism to descriptivism, cognitive to sociocognitive, and social constructivism or new rhetoric—see also Berlin, 1982 for more on new rhetoric and yet another grouping). Raimes (1991) refers to “traditions” rather than approaches, suggesting that there are four main traditions that dominate the perception, study, and teaching of second language writing (form-focused, writer-focused, content-focused, and reader-focused), whereas Cumming (2016) offers yet another view (contrastive rhetoric, cognitive models of processing, genre, and sociocultural theories). In the landscape of literacies studies, Ivanic (2004) has suggested that perceptions of writing can be grouped together according to shared beliefs about writing, learning to write, and teaching and assessing writing. Ivanic’s (2004) groupings are brought together under the broad umbrella term of “discourse” and are as follows: skills discourse, creativity discourse, process discourse, genre discourse, and sociopolitical discourse. The three models suggested by Lea and Street (1998)—skill-based, socialization, and academic literacies—can be slotted into Ivanic’s (2004) categorizations.

In the present study, however, I adopt academic literacies (e.g., Lea & Street, 1998) and what Artemeva (2004) and others occasionally refer to as a socio-rhetorical view of writing. Both are frequently found in the literature on doctoral writing, particularly literature that highlights the *writing* in doctoral writing. The remainder of this chapter provides a brief overview of each, beginning with academic literacies.

### *Academic literacies*

Academic literacies (or AcLits) tends to be a widely used phrase encompassing different meanings. However, I use it here to signal an intentional distancing from views that position writing as a value-free, uncontested, and decontextualized "skill" with one universally shared and agreed upon definition (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2019; Lillis & Tuck, 2016). Proponents of this view often argue that what will "count" as writing will depend on a number of factors that revolve about identity, power, and the politics that surround "counting" and "not counting." AcLits researchers take a "social practices" approach that attempts to account for the socio-cultural, disciplinary, and institutional contexts in which literacies take place (Kamler, 2003). Because AcLits has been influenced by scholarship in Critical Discourse Analysis and Systemic Functional Linguistics (particularly Fairclough, and to some extent Halliday), as well as New Literacies Studies, the "approach views the institutions in which academic practices take place as constituted in, and as sites of, discourse and power" (Street, 2010, p. 349). Another dominant feature of AcLits is a focus on identities and students' experiences with writing. Researchers often view writing as deeply entwined with identity—so much so that asking a writer to change an aspect of their writing can feel like a request to change an aspect of their identity (Ivanic, 1998; Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis & Scott, 2007; Lillis et al., 2015). AcLits researchers have studied how doctoral writers demonstrate their identities through their writing, for instance through the language they use, the manner in which they organise their paper, and the thinking that is made visible via their research and writing choices (Guerin, 2013).

Adopting an AcLits perspective can offer researchers a vocabulary they can draw on to debunk uncritical assumptions about what constitutes successful writing and spotlight the ways in which writing struggles may also be power struggles (Aitchison, 2009, 2015; Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Badenhorst et al., 2014; Doyle et al., 2018; Kamler & Thomson, 2006, 2008; Thomson & Kamler, 2016). This perspective can also support researchers with foregrounding the everyday embodied and emotional experiences of doctoral writers (Aitchison, Catterall, Ross, & Burgin, 2012; Badenhorst, 2018, Burford, 2017b; Maher et al., 2008). However, some have suggested (e.g., Lillis, 2019) that AcLits research is (or ought to be) moving towards emphasizing *transformation* over criticality. So, while identifying and calling out normative orientations to writing still matters, equally important is a concern with the values underpinning conventions. Also important is an investment in advocating for the recognition and appreciation of diverse ways of doing academic things with writing (Lillis, 2019). Sometimes this approach is also referred to as a sociopolitical orientation to writing (Burford, 2017a) or a critical and social practices perspective (Lillis, 2019).

### *Socio-rhetorical view of writing*

Like academic literacies, a socio-rhetorical view of writing also understands writing as a situated response. However, while academic literacies began in the UK, evolving out of New Literacies Studies (Lea & Street, 1998; Street, 2010, 2013) in response to shifts toward a more “open” education system in the mid-1980s (Lillis & Scott, 2007), the notion of a socio-rhetorical view of writing developed in response to shifts within North American writing studies. Most notable among these shifts, at least as it pertains to the development of a socio-rhetorical view of writing, was the reintroduction of rhetoric and the notion of writing as social (Artemeva, 2004; Freedman & Medway, 1994; Freedman & Pringle, 1980; Paré, 2009). To say writing is social is to suggest, in part, that it is socially situated and to claim, as Dias et al. (1999) have, that the contexts writing occurs in are integral:

The context is not simply the contingent circumstances within which we happen to switch on the writing motor. Writing is not a module that we bring along and plug into any situation we find ourselves in. Rather, the context constitutes the situation that defines the activity of writing; to write *is* to address the situation by means of textual production. . . . all writing is a response to, and assumes as starting point, a situation. (p. 17, italics in original)

This isn't to suggest that writing can only respond to a situation. In fact, as Reither (1985) notes, writing is "one of those processes which, in its use, creates and constitutes its own contexts" (p. 621).

A social and rhetorical view of writing also reinstates writing as a form of social *and* rhetorical *action*. That is, through writing, we attempt to make things happen (Paré, 2009). In other words, "we don't write writing, we write *something*," whether that something is a "proposal, an argument, a description, a judgement, [or] a directive," we hope it will "have an effect, produce results, change minds, spur to action, create solidarity, or seed doubt" (Paré, 2009, p. 5, italics in original).

## Chapter summary

In this chapter, I introduced academic literacies and socio-rhetorical views of writing, I also identified aspects of my "geo-historical-institutional" trajectory that led me to undertake the present study. These views of writing, combined with my trajectory, inform how I conceptualise writing, the questions I chose to study, and the methods I chose to study them.

In Chapter 3, I extend the views introduced here of writing as social and rhetorical to consider socio-rhetorical approaches to genre, and the implications of this approach for a study of unconventional dissertations. Socio-rhetorical approaches to genre differ from classical views that emphasize the literary categories of texts. Instead, genres are reconceptualized as "recurring patterns" of social and discursive actions "that arise in

human collectives, such as research cultures and institutions, over time” (Starke-Meyerring et al., 2014, p. A-14). These typified, recurring patterns of response are seen to be in place because they accomplish communicative and rhetorical purposes (goals) in a way that allows members of the collective to carry out their collective aims (Starke-Meyerring et al., 2014, p. A-14). Through repeated use, genres allow members of a group or collective “to act together by tacitly inscribing expectations, proscriptions, values, and norms for who can write what, when, how, and with what impact” (Starke-Meyerring et al., 2014, p. A-14).

Over time, these ways of acting together become conventionalised (Paré, 2014a) or habitualised—terms that can be used to describe the process of transforming repeated or regularised actions into unquestioned expectations (Kuhn, 1962/2012; Starke-Meyerring et al., 2014). Once transformed, these assumptions effectively “keep writing invisible in institutions of higher education,” thereby contributing to the contextual backdrop that shapes a given dissertation (Starke-Meyerring, 2011, p. 92). However, the same invisibility that can make conventions and expectations difficult for, say, a doctoral writer to question can also make them difficult for a researcher of doctoral writing to study. Thus, I will require a research “map” that can help me to make sense of data while, at the same time, remaining sensitive to the need for contextualised understandings of unconventional dissertations.

## Chapter 3: Making sense of convention and variation in /among dissertations

The dissertation, as a social practice, has been characterized as the outcome of complex negotiations that surround the entire dissertation process (Paltridge, Starfield, Ravelli, & Nicholson, 2012). However, given that the focus of the present study is doctoral and dissertation writing, it's worth troubling the word "negotiation," as it appears to imply that a kind of suitable, mutually beneficial agreement has arisen between parties as a result of dialogue. The experiences of doctoral writers often reflect a different reality—one where choices are constrained, and affordances are limited. There are power differentials that play into shaping the local writing contexts doctoral students find themselves in, with one of the most obvious differentials being that the dissertation will ultimately be evaluated, and few (if any) doctoral students will want to risk failing this evaluation. Given this, it is important to remain critical of usages of 'negotiation' that appear to imply there is a natural smoothness or ease accompanying the dissertation writing cycle. Instead, understanding 'negotiation' as an act that entails appropriating some conventions in order to resist, subvert, or otherwise re-work others for new or different purposes and ideologies might have more promise (Tardy 2016, p. 63).

This view shifts the focus back to doctoral writers who will need to be able to read the rhetorical situation and "make strategic decisions about conforming, resisting, or subverting the existing patterns or conventions" (Denny, 2010, p. 112). This view also shifts the focus to the role supervisors and perhaps even committee members play in helping doctoral writers to understand the "rhetorical options" that are available as well as the "the effects of manipulating these options" (Tardy, 2016, p. 132). However, not to be overlooked is the importance of supporting students with evaluating the effects of *not* pursuing the unconventional. For some, "blending in" can signify both "assimilation and a

lack of recognition by the dominant,” which in turn brings another set of consequences (Denny, 2010, p. 110). For others, pursuing an unconventional dissertation might conflict with the time and energy that is available to them.

This chapter begins with a general introduction to socio-rhetorical approaches to genre. Following this, I explore a few of the implications that a socio-rhetorical approach to genre has for a study of unconventional dissertations. Building from there, the remainder of the chapter focuses on presenting the analytical lenses I use to help me make sense of the data. The first lens is geared towards identifying five key areas where unconventionality might show up. The second lens has to do with recurring patterns in the organization of dissertations, including how some patterns continue to prevail and others are only just beginning to appear. The third lens turns to a select review of the literature on performing arts dissertations, which consist of both a written and creative component, and considers how findings from these studies might be applied to a study of unconventional dissertations.

### **Socio-rhetorical approaches to genre**

Socio-rhetorical approaches to genre are foremost interested in a text’s social action—the outcome a text is attempting to coordinate and achieve—rather than arranging and categorizing textual forms. Allied with socio-rhetorical understandings of writing, this view of genre likewise suggests that writing coordinates work and carries out social action (Miller, 1984; Schryer, 1993). This “action” can range from simple stuff, like putting together a shopping list, to coordinating more complex activities, such as undertaking scientific research (Schryer, 1993, p. 207). In other words, we write because we want to bring about some sort of action or achieve some sort of intended effect (Miller, 1984; Tardy, 2019). Over time, these ways of writing come to represent “frequently traveled path[s] or way[s]” of using writing or communication to get things done (Schryer, 1993, p. 207). Attempting to arrange textual forms into discrete categories like “poetry” or

“romance,” an approach associated with literary understandings of genre, tends to be critiqued by rhetorical genre theorists for its rigidity and inability to account for the fluid, hybrid nature of communication. For instance, although Figure 2 appears to be a research article, it’s clear that it is not attempting to fulfill the purpose of a research article. Instead, as we look more closely, we can observe features that are consistent with wedding invitations, such as coordinating attendance to a ceremony and reception. That said, socio-rhetorical theorists of genre build on Miller’s (1984) reconceptualization of genre as “recurrent, significant action” (p. 165) and, as such, acknowledge that form and social-rhetorical action are interconnected—each depending on the other to make itself known.

**Figure 2.** Wedding invitation (Wiernik, 2019)

Love & Marriage 9/4 (2016) 16-24

RSVP online at Wedding Homepage

**Love & Marriage**

wedding homepage: <http://wiernik.org/wedding>




Wedding Invitation

## Marital union of scientists in separate fields: Invitation to celebrate their love

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**RELATIONSHIP INFO**

*Relationship history:*  
Met on 31 March 2013  
Proposed on 16 August 2015  
Accepted on 16 August 2015  
Ceremony date 4 September 2016

*Keywords:*  
Science and statistics  
Myosins  
Individual differences  
Nerds/greks  
Puns and wordplay  
Cats

**ABSTRACT**

**Background:** Researchers at the University of Minnesota undertook an intensive three-year interdisciplinary longitudinal study of a romantic relationship. Under diverse treatment conditions (dating, intercontinental separation, cohabitation), the target couple exhibited exponentially increasing levels of happiness. Results suggest that transition to a new marital relationship paradigm is warranted.

**Methods:** Marital procedures will take place on **September 4, 2016** beginning at **16:00 (4:00 PM)** at the **Stillwater Public Library** in Stillwater, MN. Dinner and reception will immediately follow the ceremony.

**Discussion:** It is hypothesized that the presence of family and friends will have a catalytic effect on the joy of the occasion. Implications for lifelong happiness and fulfillment are discussed.

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**INVITATION DETAILS**

**Location:** Stillwater Public Library, 224 3rd St N, Stillwater, MN 55082

**Date and Time:** Sep 4, 2016, 4 PM

**RSVP:** <http://wiernik.org/wedding>  
Please respond by August 1, 2016

**Lodging:** A block of rooms is reserved at Americinn for Sep 4, 2016. Block reserved until August 8. Use code WIER040916. Book at <http://hotelstillwater.com> or call 651-275-0980. Additional houses, cabins, and rooms are also available for rent in the area.

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Order of authorship is arbitrary. Both authors contributed equally.



**Fig. 1.** Please join us to celebrate our wedding!

When it comes to written genres, as certain forms of writing begin to recur over time in response to similar enough situations issuing similar enough demands for action and response, these forms of writing become conventionalized. In an academic setting—but also more broadly—these conventions function as a heuristic or strategy that enable an academic community to create, share, and advance disciplinary understandings (Paré & Smart, 1994, p. 146). To put it again another way, conventions are regularities that help us with identifying genres in the first place—we know what we are reading because we can recognize it and, because we can recognize it, we also have a sense of what the writing is trying to accomplish (Schryer, 1993; Tardy, 2016).

In this way, genres become habits or habitual ways of ‘acting together’ that in turn lead to expectations regarding what comes to be understood as—to put it colloquially—how things are done ‘round here’ (Miller, 1984; Schryer, 1993; Starke-Meyerring et al., 2014). This knowledge includes conventions that govern who can initiate communication, who can respond, and in what manner or form (Paré, 2014a). These socially preferred ways of ‘acting together’ with/in writing—to borrow again from Miller (1984, p.163)— are often implied rather than made explicit (Starke-Meyerring, 2011), meaning they become so routine (and routinized) they are taken-for-granted as common knowledge (Schryer, 1993). When these unspoken assumptions exist, they can be a sign that negotiations—or “a way of everybody getting on and going on despite hunches and suspicions” (Giltrow, 2002, p. 201)—have occurred. However, the very thing that allows some community members to share mutual understandings can also alienate others (Giltrow, 2002, p. 196). As such, effective participation in a genre is influenced by power, how it is distributed, as well as how that distribution affects writers and their interactions with readers (Tardy, 2009, p. 3). In this way, conventions can act as a kind of “pre-emptive feedback,” that rule “out some kinds of expression,” while “endorsing others” (Giltrow, 2002, p. 190). Thus, it can be difficult to see how a dissertation is “negotiated.”

Yet, the same forces that limit genre and genre use—that is, the very features that allow us to recognize genres when they recur—are what can provide (some) “freedom of expression” for writers (Schryer, 1993, p. 208). Indeed, for as much as genres rely on stability and convention, they also rely on movement and change (Miller, 1984; Tardy, 2016. Schryer (1993) reminds us that “contradictions always exist” and that “it is through contradictions, in fact, that change occurs” (p. 210). Instead of trying to resolve this contradiction, genre theorists embrace it because it reinforces the social, transformative nature of genres (Schryer, 1993). Tardy (2016) similarly notes the role conventions play in enabling innovation, writing that “without a norm, we cannot have departures” and “without departures, we cannot have innovation” (pp. 8-9). Miller (1984), seemingly aware of this paradox inherent contradiction, emphasized the importance of understanding genre as a fluid construct, rather than a rigid or fixed one. More specifically, Miller (1984) underscored the idea that genres are rooted in socially “established. . . ways of ‘acting together’” and, because of this, that genres can “change, evolve, and decay” (p. 163).

In an effort to address the implications of this paradox for research and practice, Schryer (1993) proposed we consider genres as “stabilized-for-now or stabilized-enough sites of social and ideological action” (p. 208). Expanding the definition of genre to include this notion folds in the sense that genres are “sites for the centrifugal and centripetal forces that struggle to maintain and yet renew discourse practices” (p. 209). To put it again another way, genres (including the dissertation) rely on variation or at least the possibility of variation. Without the possibility of variation, a genre becomes ossified and therefore rhetorically unsound.

### *Implications for a study of unconventional dissertations*

Adopting a socio-rhetorical approach to writing doesn’t necessitate the adoption of a rhetorical approach to genre; however, I have found the adoption of a rhetorical approach to genre to be a particularly useful analytical lens. Describing the possibilities that a

reconceptualised (socio-rhetorical) definition of genre can bring, Schryer (1993) helpfully pulls out the different dimensions that genre asks researchers to consider:

Miller's redefinition of genre goes a long way in helping us to theorize about perceived recurrent ways of using discourse. She asked us to examine textual products for shared formal characteristics; she reminded us that recurrent forms have cognitive consequences for their users; she made the concept of genre rhetorical in that she connected it to both audience and exigency; finally, she asked us to consider the actual work that a genre coordinates. She elaborated a useful theory in that it asked us to consider a possible genre from textual, cognitive, and contextual or rhetorical perspectives. (p. 207)

Thus, in addition to knowing what to write and how—including which specialised words to use or avoid, which turns of phrase readers will be more likely to recognize and accept or reject, as well as how this all might align with a writer's goals—writers will also need to figure out how and why dissertations are organized the way they are (at a structural *and* linguistic level), as well as the procedures and protocols that surround a dissertation and impact how it is carried out and received (Tardy, 2009).

Further, adopting a rhetorical approach to genre as an analytical tool pulls out at least two other factors that have consequences for a study of unconventional dissertations. The first is that unconventionality (or innovativeness, to use Tardy's vernacular) is a "value assigned by others" rather than a quality that is "inherent" to a certain text (Tardy, 2016, p. 131). In other words, while dissertation writers can put effort and time into creating innovative texts, if their departure from convention(s) are not "perceived as effective and successful by the text's intended audience or community of practice," the dissertation writer risks having their work failed by the committee (Tardy, 2016, p. 9). Second, this analytical lens highlights the "need to think beyond form when considering opportunities for innovation" (Tardy, 2016, p. 130). While innovations at the level of form, format, or

structure (words often used interchangeably) of a dissertation tend to receive the most attention, likely because these innovations are the easiest to observe, equally important is a consideration of the other dimensions that comprise an instantiation of a genre (Schryer, 1993; Tardy, 2016). The next section takes a deeper look at the three analytical lenses I rely on throughout this dissertation to help me with making sense of what these other dimensions might be, as well as how best to go about considering them.

### **Analytical lens #1: Identifying opportunities for unconventionality**

Underpinning a socio-rhetorical understanding of unconventionality, at least as I've corralled it here in this dissertation, is a concern with the ways in which texts link back to their broader social and cultural spheres. This reorients the focus from seeing writing and innovation as something that primarily happens at the level of the individual mind to seeing it as something that happens in “ways that are characteristic of a community” (Lemke, 2005, p. 8)—that is, as a social practice. Lemke (2005) describes the notion of a social practice as a “kind of *doing*” that comes to be a “part of what binds the community together and helps to position it as a community” (p. 8, italics in original). While these social practices have material consequences for the individuals that comprise a community, Lemke (2005) interestingly embeds his interpretation of social practices in how he conceptualises community—not as a “collection of interacting individuals” but instead as a “system of interdependent social practices: a system of doings, rather than a system of doers” (p. 8). Social practices become characteristic of a community as well as what distinguishes it from others.

Understanding social practice as a way of doing things that are characteristic for a given community overlaps with social and rhetorical genre-based conceptualisations of innovation. Describing an advertisement for a hotel, Bhatia (2004) notes how the ad relies on assumptions made regarding the viewer's social, political, temporal, and personal trajectory in order for it to make sense. An excerpt from the advertisement reads: “Give

yourself and your family *an eggscuse to eggsplore an eggstraordinary holiday this Easter*" (Bhatia, 2004, p. 187, italics in original). Bhatia (2004) describes it this way:

To reinforce the association between Easter and eggs, the new coinages are all highlighted in italics. Obviously, anyone who is not familiar with this association would find this advertisement rather strange. The important point about such associations is that they communicate best in the context of what is already familiar. In such contexts, words on their own carry no meanings; it is the experience that gives them the desired effect. Therefore, if one is not familiar with the original, the value of the novel expression is undermined. (p. 188)

By bringing the word "egg" together with words that begin with "ex" (excuse, explore, extraordinary), the advertisement plays with language in ways that still constitute characteristic usages of language for that particular community. As Bhatia (2004) notes in the above quote, the hybridized words have no meaning on their own. In this way, the advertisement points to its connection to (and dependence on) its context as well as its imagined audience as members of a community that shares in the same "interdependent social practices" or "system of doings" (Lemke, 2005, p. 8). At the same time, just as the advertisement indexes who makes up its imagined audience, it also indexes who might *not* be included. At the most basic level, this might mean anyone who is not familiar with the norms governing language use (i.e., that "ex" and "egg" can be interchangeable) or the norms governing the association of Easter with eggs. Summoning Bhatia (2004) again, sometimes "the constraints on generic construction, or the pre-knowledge of it [these constraints], gives power to insiders of specific discourse communities" (p. 188).

This "pre-knowledge" that Bhatia (2004) refers to could also be referred to as genre knowledge—both importantly remind us that writing is not simply a matter of acquiring language or skills. When writing is framed as a transferrable skill, its situatedness tends also to be ignored (Starke-Meyerring et al., 2014). Further, if conceived of as an axiomatic

skill, writing can then become something that is “owned by and observable in individuals at any given moment” (Starke-Meyerring et al., 2014, p. A-23). Issues with writing and knowledge-making practices become individual problems; writers become responsible for resolving their own ‘privatised’ problems, and the “culturally shaped nature” of writing, including its “deep rootedness in cultural, institutional, and disciplinary traditions of knowledge-production,” becomes submerged (Starke-Meyerring, 2011, p. 80).

For instance, studying how genre knowledge developed over time and in different contexts, Tardy (2009) followed four international graduate students attending a U.S. university and noticed that the writers approached certain writing tasks that suggested they thought of “form and content as distinct from issues of the rhetorical context or procedures” (p. 23). While writers asked questions about the “proper” form the writing should be in, or about readers’ expectations, they did not ask what Tardy (2009) referred to as “more integrated questions,” such as how to modify their text (e.g., its organization) for the specific context and audience (p. 23). In order to pose these kinds of questions, Tardy (2009) proposed writers needed better integrated genre knowledge, which is to say they needed to bring different dimensions of knowledge together to enact a genre in an effective way. As writers become more sophisticated, these dimensions of genre knowledge would become more integrated, so much so that it would be difficult to separate or distinguish between them until the writer encounters a new or unfamiliar genre (Tardy, 2009).

In Tardy’s (2009, 2016) conceptualisation, genre knowledge is the combination of rhetorical, formal, process, and subject-matter knowledge<sup>1</sup>. *Rhetorical knowledge* often

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<sup>1</sup> Note: Although this portion of the chapter is meant mainly to highlight the complexity involved with writing, rather than offer an in-depth review of the substantial literature available on genre knowledge, readers may still appreciate knowing that Tardy has since re-named “genre knowledge” to “genre-specific knowledge” (see: Tardy et al., 2020). This newer reconceptualization retains the same elements that are mentioned here, however Tardy et al. (2020) acknowledge that a meta-awareness of genre (after Gentil, 2011) also plays a

overlaps with both formal knowledge and process knowledge. Of these two, *formal knowledge* refers to the writer's understanding of the "structural elements" of a genre, which includes conventions around how texts are organized, sources are cited, and specific words (and meanings) are used. *Process knowledge*, on the other hand, refers to the procedural practices that determine how a genre is carried out, such as the conversations or other spoken interactions that could help to facilitate the success of a genre. *Rhetorical knowledge* refers to the writer's understanding of their particular socio-rhetorical context(s). This includes the writer's understanding of what the genre is meant to do, as well as their ability to "anticipate the readers of the genre, in terms of their purposes for reading the text, their expectations for the text, and their values that may influence their reception of the text" (Tardy, 2009, p. 21). Relatedly, this dimension of knowledge also includes a writer's understanding of their own positioning as it relates to the readers, context, and dynamics of power (Tardy, 2009). The final domain—*subject-matter knowledge*—relates to the writer's ability to rally the material necessary for the text's success. This can of course vary depending on the text. For instance, the knowledge required to write a dissertation in physics will be different from the knowledge required to write a grocery list.<sup>2</sup>

Returning to the example (*egg-sample?*) introduced earlier of the advertisement that plays with language by combining words that begin with "ex" with "egg," Bhatia (2004) argues that such an innovation can only be successful when introduced in the context of what is already familiar. To relate back to Tardy's (2009) framework, this suggests that writers would need to have a certain facility with bringing the domains of rhetorical, formal, process, and subject-matter knowledge together. In other words, in order to

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distinguished role in the acquisition of genre knowledge. The specifics of this, however, are beyond the scope of this dissertation.

<sup>2</sup> Because Tardy's (2009) work focuses on the writing that graduate students do, some researchers find it useful to refer to content knowledge rather than subject-matter knowledge.

introduce an innovation that is received well enough, writers would need some measure of expertise and genre knowledge (Tardy, 2016). For instance, the creator of the hotel advertisement would need to have a feel for their intended audience, their knowledge and needs, what they would likely find amusing, and the appropriate timing for the advertisement. They would also need to have a sense of what social action the advertisement intends to carry out, as well as the appropriate ways to circulate the advertisement and who to talk to in order to coordinate this circulation. Finally, they would need to know enough about the hotel in order to promote it accurately. Other considerations, such as the type of font and colour used, would also need to be factored in. Given that I barely flinched at the “egg” puns on account of them being *so predictable*, I find it surprising to see what the creators of the advertisement would have needed to orchestrate in order to pull it off.

This quick analysis is meant to illustrate the complexity that can underlie even the most conservative of departures from conventions, as well as the range of ways a text (or dissertation, in my case) can be unconventional that may or not include changes to the form a text takes, such as at the level of research questions, research practices, analysis, or composing practices. As Tardy (2016) explains:

If genre is considered to be a social and rhetorical category, and genre knowledge includes knowledge of textual forms, rhetorical strategies, epistemologies, ideologies, sociopolitics, context, and situated practices, then innovation, like convention, does not occur solely at the level of form. (p. 171)

In other words, to paraphrase Paltridge et al. (2012), *just because a successful dissertation appears conventional doesn't mean it conforms to or upholds the status quo*.

If what doctoral writers know about writing a dissertation involves bringing together the dimensions of rhetorical, formal, process, and subject-matter knowledge, it seems plausible that doctoral writers will also need to “draw on these same knowledge

dimensions when seeking to bend—or avoid bending—conventions” (Tardy, 2016, p. 17). What this also suggests is how difficult it can be to create an unconventional dissertation that also manages to remain conventional enough to meet readers’ expectations. Dissertation writers will need to figure out which conventions or norms hold sway, and which are negotiable. In *Beyond Convention: Genre Innovation in Academic Writing*, Tardy (2016) presents a meta-framework for the “kinds of unconventionalities that might fall under a conception of ‘genre innovation’” (p. 130). This framework is a synthesis of other frameworks, including those that relate to the different dimensions of genre knowledge (rhetorical, formal, process, and subject-matter knowledge). Five areas are identified by Tardy (2016): linguistic and textual form, modality, rhetorical aims and strategies, content, and practice. A summary for each is offered in Table 1. In addition to being an analytical aid, this table might be used to help writers identify and consider which conventions are negotiable and which are not, given their particular contexts (Denny, 2010; Tardy, 2016). In this sense, knowledge of these areas can arm doctoral writers with a repertoire of options, based on their rhetorical circumstances and timing—options that may or may not include playing with the dissertation’s form, format, or structure.

It’s important to note that while the areas or opportunities are presented separately both in Tardy’s (2016) work and here, they are in reality quite intertwined at times. For instance, when a participant describes an autoethnographic dissertation as unconventional in their context, this unconventionality might very well be indicated at the linguistic level (uses first-person), as well as at the practice (uses unconventional method) and rhetorical aims and strategies level (uses first-person only occasionally to engage with readers in a different way).

**Table 1.** Tardy’s (2016) synthesis of areas or opportunities for unconventionality in academic writing.

Linguistic & Textual form	Unusual word choices; non-canonical grammar forms; mixing of linguistic codes; unconventional move structures
Modality	Integration of unconventional modalities; use of an uncommon modality for that genre
Rhetorical aims and strategies	Unconventional use of stance or engagement markers; use of rhetorical appeals uncommon to the genre
Content	Incorporation of unusual or unexpected ideas
Practice	Unique approaches to research methodology, design, or composing processes

## **Analytical lens #2: Analysing conventions and variance across dissertations**

Again, while necessarily constraining, conventions can also enable genre change or innovation (Schryer, 1993; Tardy, 2016). This knowledge carries important implications for researchers, one being that researchers interested in carrying out studies of genre innovation must also be prepared to incorporate a consideration of genre conventions (Tardy, 2016). By combining insights gleaned from macrostructural approaches to genre analysis with insights derived from the analysis of interview and questionnaire data, the present study takes this suggestion into account. Macrostructures are one of the many strategies we rely on to help us organize information, create a sense of cohesion across ideas, and reduce or filter out unnecessary complexity (van Dijk, 1980). As features of genres, macrostructures can be utilized as a research lens to identify the practices, conventions, and variance that characterize a certain genre (Paltridge & Starfield, 2007). In this way, they can help to explain “how social contexts and communities shape writing practices and decisions” and, in the case of the dissertation, shed light on whether the dissertation, as both a process and product, is meeting the “deeper goals” of the doctorate (Anderson et al., 2020, p. 3).

Dong's (1998) study of 137 students and 32 professors in the U.S. identified two main organizational structures dissertations seemed to take: the "article-compilation" format and the "traditional" format (also referred to as the "five chapter" dissertation). A dissertation following a "traditional" format is one that tends to follow the introduction (I), methods (M), results I, and discussion (D) or IMRD format traditionally associated with empirical research (Paltridge, 2002). Examining 15 doctoral dissertations and 15 masters' theses, Paltridge (2002) distinguished between two types of "traditional" dissertation macrostructures—the traditional "simple" and the traditional "complex." Both are similar to each other, but the traditional-complex macrostructure consists of a report on more than one study which thereby necessitates a modified IMRD format. Table 2 provides a sample outline of the traditional-simple and the traditional-complex macrostructure. A sample outline of two additional macrostructures, the topic-based and manuscript-style, are also included in Table 2.

In brief, a topic-based dissertation usually consists of coverage of a variety of sub-topics, grouped into chapters, but not separate studies, and a manuscript-style dissertation consists of published, in-press or accepted, or publishable manuscripts (Paltridge, 2002; Anderson et al., 2020). Despite the prominence of "electronic dissertations"<sup>3</sup> and the possible affordances they can bring with regards to changes in form, function, and reader interaction, recent research conducted by Anderson et al. (2020) suggests that the four macrostructures described above and in Table 2 still tend to hold sway. However, additional macrostructures continue to emerge, particularly as the genre of the dissertation shifts to encompass developments in doctoral education.

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<sup>3</sup> There was, at one time, quite a bit of scholarly debate dedicated to the discussion of then-emerging "electronic" forms of dissertations, which were those created using word-processing software such as Microsoft Word (see Barton, 2005, or Lang, 2002). Of course, the meaning of an "electronic dissertation" today has changed quite considerably.

**Table 2.** Description and examples of original macrostructures associated with research on dissertations (Dong, 1998; Paltridge, 2002).

<b>Traditional-Simple</b> <i>One study, IMRD format</i>	<b>Traditional complex</b> <i>Multiple studies, modified IMRD format</i>
Introduction Methods Results Discussion Conclusion	Introduction Methods Study 1 Study 2 Conclusion
<b>Manuscript Style</b> <i>Published, in-press or accepted, or publishable manuscripts</i>	<b>Topic Based</b> <i>Several chapters, range of subtopics, not studies</i>
Introduction Manuscript 1 Manuscript 2 Manuscript 3 Conclusion	Introduction Sub-topic 1 Sub-topic 2 Sub-topic 3 Conclusion

For instance, recent research on the macrostructures of dissertations completed in education at five major research-intensive universities in Canada has highlighted the emergence of two additional macrostructures: the hybrid simple manuscript and the hybrid topic (Anderson et al., 2020; Anderson & Okuda, 2021; Anderson et al., 2021). The hybrid simple/manuscript macrostructure is one where a traditional-simple macrostructure is combined with a manuscript style macrostructure. In other words, the dissertation focuses on one study and is predominately organized using an IMRD chapter structure, but some chapters may consist of previously published material. The hybrid topic-manuscript is predominately organized using a topic-based macrostructure, where an introductory chapter is preceded by a series of chapters that focus on sub-topics related to the overarching topic laid out in the introduction. Like the hybrid simple/manuscript dissertation, some chapters in the hybrid topic-manuscript dissertation will also include previous published material. Table 3 summarizes these two macrostructures.

**Table 3.** Description and examples of macrostructures emerging from research on education-based dissertations (Anderson et al., 2020; Anderson et al., 2021)

<b>Hybrid simple/manuscript</b> <i>IMRD, contains previously published content within chapters or as chapters, content may be modified or included in its entirety</i>	<b>Hybrid Topic-Manuscript</b> <i>Organized using the topic-based structure but contains previously published content within chapters or as chapters, content may be modified or included in its entirety.</i>
Introduction Methods * <i>Published</i> Results 1 Results 2 * <i>Contains published material</i> Discussion Conclusion	Introduction Sub-topic 1 Sub-topic 2 Sub-topic 3 * <i>Contains published material</i> Sub-topic 4 * <i>Published</i> Conclusion

Published material may be incorporated in different ways. For instance, dissertations may have one chapter that consists of a publication, in its entirety, (e.g., as the sorts of standalone type chapters that one might typically associate with a manuscript-based dissertation). Dissertations could also include chapters that consist of a combination of different sections cleaved from previous publications alongside new material found only in the dissertation. Or dissertators might also choose to take a previously published manuscript (or manuscripts) and modify them to create a new piece altogether.

Comparing the research conducted by Anderson et al. (2020) and Anderson et al. (2021) to previous research on macrostructures showcases how attending to this dimension of genre can reveal the ways in which dissertation practices are changing *and* staying the same. To put it another way, bringing a macrostructural lens to the analysis of dissertations allows us to paint a picture of the ways in which the genre is stabilized-enough *and* fluid. This in turn brings other dimensions to the fore. For one, recent research has highlighted the importance of understanding the role the dissertation macrostructure can play in supporting doctoral writers (Anderson et al., 2020; Anderson &

Okuda, 2021; Anderson et al., 2021; Paltridge & Starfield, 2020). Some macrostructures might better align not only with the student's disciplinary community, but also with their "future career decisions" (Anderson et al., 2021, p. 16). This research also sheds some light on how doctoral writers negotiate centripetal and centrifugal forces in their dissertation. For instance, contrasting topic-based dissertations to the traditional IMRD-based dissertations in their corpus, Anderson et al. (2021) observe how:

At times, many of the topic-based dissertations seemed purposefully anti-empirical in how they were structured; in other words, this dissertation structure allowed authors the opportunity to express their research and voices in ways that resisted the confines of 'traditional' empirical research and the traditional dissertation structure. (p. 16)

Put again, appropriating conventions in one area—the topic-based macrostructure in this case—provided writers with the stability they needed to flout conventions in other areas (Tardy, 2015; 2016).

### **Analytical lens #3: Learning from research on visual and performing arts dissertations**

Research on "unconventional" dissertations is still relatively limited, though some notable exceptions include work on visual and performing arts dissertations in Australia—a then-new degree that had recently emerged examples (see Paltridge, Starfield, Ravelli, & Nicholson, 2012; Paltridge, Starfield, Ravelli, & Tuckwell, 2012; Ravelli et al., 2013; Ravelli et al., 2021). The team's research focused on the written components of the dissertation as well as on the relationship between the written component and the practice or creative component. Dissertations in the visual and performing arts were interesting because "conventions and expectations for the form and examination of the doctoral thesis" had "yet to stabilize," which resulted in "wide variation across institutions in terms of guidelines, expectations, and practices" (Ravelli et al., 2013, p. 396). By sharing the

multiple ways participants in their study presented their work, the authors were able to counter contemporary perceptions of the dissertation, for instance, as a “pre-conceived template” (Paltridge, Starfield, Ravelli, & Tuckwell, 2012, p. 342).

Dissertations in the visual and performing arts (V&PA) consist of “neither the creative work on its own, nor the written component on its own, but the two together” (Ravelli et al., 2013, p. 401). This is a distinct variation on traditional conceptions of the dissertation because, unlike traditional dissertations, “significant aspects of the claim for the doctoral characteristics of originality, mastery and contribution to the field” in V&PA dissertations are “demonstrated through the original creative work” (Paltridge, Starfield, Ravelli, & Nicholson, 2012, p. 990). However, a written component that substantiates and contextualises claims of originality, mastery and contribution is often required in addition to the creative work. Further, whereas the written component is examined in one location, the creative work is often examined at a different time “*in situ*,” that is, “in an exhibition space or a theatre” (Paltridge, Starfield, Ravelli, & Nicholson, 2012, p. 990). The unique structure of these dissertations presents several challenges for doctoral writers/artists and supervisors who are required to make a series of rhetorical decisions regarding the relationship between the creative and written component, as well as how best to represent this relationship in writing.

Homing in on the relationship between the written and creative component of V&PA dissertations, Ravelli et al. (2013) study how “wildly diverse” (p. 401) dissertations can be seen to occupy the same genre. In other words, they wonder how such disparate pieces can come to be viewed as accomplishing the same social action. Ravelli et al. (2013) found there were four main ways the creative and written components of V&PA dissertations worked together “to make ‘a’ text” (p. 401). Table 4 summarizes this research.

**Table 4. Description and examples from Ravelli et al.'s (2013) analysis of written and creative components of visual and performing arts dissertations.**

<p>Relationship between components is more or less construed as <i>separate</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Parallelism</i>: Written and creative components share the same “thematic concerns” but are otherwise treated as parallel processes with little textual connections made between them (Ravelli et al., 2021, p. 224).</li> <li>• <i>Influenced</i>: Written component is positioned as influencing the creative component but is also, at the same time, largely construed as separate (Ravelli et al., 2013).</li> </ul> <p>Relationship between components is more or less construed as <i>connected</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Incorporated</i>: The two components are positioned in terms of their influence on each other, but remain separate (Ravelli et al., 2013). For instance, the written component might regularly refer to the creative component “to describe or illustrate a point or to act as the object of theorization” (Ravelli et al., 2021, p. 224).</li> <li>• <i>Intermingled</i>: The creative and written components operate together, in unison. For instance, the creative work is brought into the written component often and interactively (Ravelli et al., 2013).</li> </ul>
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The first and least common of these four, Separate-Parallel, “barely construes a relation at all with the creative work” (p. 402). Noting their observations of one such example (“Hayley’s thesis”) Ravelli et al. (2013) write:

There are only four explicit references via language to the creative work in the whole of the written component, and the hurried reader might not pick up at all that there is a creative work accompanying this project. There are no images of Haley’s own creative work in the written component, only of other art historical images. There are a few implicit or metaphorical references which might enable one to see connections, such as the name ‘Mirror Land’ as the name of the creative work, and as a term used throughout the written component; and there are some generalized references to Haley’s own creative practice. Overall, however, the relation is metaphorical and abstract, and it is almost as if the two components are construed as being in parallel. (p. 402).

The authors go on to note that this approach is indicative of a “research question model,” in which both components serve as individual response to the same question (Ravelli et al., 2013, p. 402). Thus, while the autonomic nature of the two components characterizes the Separate-Parallel dissertation type, the two components still function together to form the visual and performing arts dissertation. When the creative and visual components remain separated but are construed as influencing the other, the dissertation is said to be a candidate for the second type, separate-influenced. The following sentence from Le Guen’s dissertation provides an example:

*This analysis* of the stylistic characteristics of the French violin sonata composed between 1860 and 1910 *has informed my* contextual understanding, interpretation and performance of the violin sonatas written during that period. (quoted in Ravelli et al., 2013, p. 403, emphasis my own)

The creative component for Le Guen’s dissertation included a series of recitals of violin sonatas.

The last two types (Connected-Incorporated and Connected-Intermingled) are similar to each other in that the creative and written components are construed as connected. In connected-incorporated dissertations, there is a “constant ‘bouncing back and forward’ between” the creative and written components, which serves to reinforce and, at times, illustrate how the “creative component draws upon the theory described in the written component” (Ravelli et al., 2013, p. 408). The written and creative components in connected-intermingled dissertations, on the other hand, work together in such a way that makes them inseparable. The creative component might be referenced repeatedly in the written component, for instance, via the use of text or visuals such as is the case with Berridge’s dissertation (in Ravelli et al., 2013, pp.411-414). Berridge includes a thumbnail image of the creative component on every page of the written component and this, Ravelli

et al. (2013) theorise, serves to remind readers of the link between the two components while also establishing the agency and power of the creative component in its own right.

Homing in on the written components of 36 visual and performing arts dissertations (V&PA), Paltridge, Starfield, Ravelli, and Nicholson (2012) found that while the macrostructures of some V&PA dissertations were quite “traditional,” at the same time, they might be misrecognized if subjected to a comparison to more “conventional” dissertations: “Some of the texts we examined, if subjected to the ‘defining features’ criteria, might not be considered examples of successful doctoral dissertations when matched against doctoral dissertations in other areas of study, when very clearly they are” (Paltridge, Starfield, Ravelli, & Tuckwell, 2012, p. 342). The authors conclude that although successful V&PA dissertations might make use of conventions, this does not necessarily mean they “conform with conventional doctoral writing practices” (Paltridge, Starfield, Ravelli, & Tuckwell, p. 342).

Paltridge, Starfield, Ravelli, and Tuckwell found that the elements typically associated with the dissertation genre (e.g., contextualising and locating the research within the broader field, drawing in/on theory, and demonstrating the contribution) were all present in the written components of the V&PA dissertations. That said, although doctoral artists/writers often took the categories associated with more traditional dissertation macrostructures (i.e., introduction, methods, results, and discussion), they “re-conceptualized them in a way that better fit their area of study and particular project” (p. 341). It is interesting to note that at times these re-conceptualizations “might not be immediately recognizable as examples of the typical elements that make up the typical macrostructure of a more conventional doctoral dissertation” (p. 341). Nevertheless, the authors conclude that the VP&A dissertations they studied still conformed to the underlying expectations and conventions associated with doctoral dissertation—for instance, instead of a review of the literature, an author-artist might supply a review of art.

Interestingly, some visual and performing arts dissertations made use of the macrostructure categories more typically associated with empirical study-based dissertations in a different way. For instance, some dissertations opted to follow the IMRD (introduction, methods, results, and discussion) model and maintain all or most of the section headings—a finding that might surprise some readers, given the artistic focus of visual and performing arts doctorates. Echoing Anderson et al. (2021), this finding points to an essential implication: *writers of innovative dissertations may choose to make use of traditional macrostructures to enact an argument*. In the case of the V&PA dissertations, this argument might be that “the creation of an artistic work and/or an investigation of the process of doing so (or of one’s artistic practice generally) constitutes a kind of empirical study” (Paltridge, Starfield, Ravelli, & Tuckwell, 2012, p. 337). At the same time, adopting a more traditional macrostructure might mitigate some of the risks associated with pursuing an alternative style of inquiry. In an interview with Paltridge, Starfield, Ravelli, and Nicholson (2012), Fenton explains his choice to adopt a traditional macrostructure for his V&PA dissertation. He says, “I felt that I needed to justify the practice-led research by using the structure of the academy” (as quoted in Paltridge, Starfield, Ravelli, & Nicholson, 2012, p. 996). His supervisor echoes this, saying “I’m quite happy for the exegesis [written component] to be quite traditional. I actually think it’s good for examiners” (as quoted in Paltridge, Starfield, Ravelli, & Nicholson, 2012, p. 996).

## **Chapter summary**

This chapter began by introducing socio-rhetorical approaches to genre and identified some of the implications this approach has for a study of unconventional dissertations. From there, three analytic lenses were discussed. The first analytical lens digs into the notion that unconventionality (or innovativeness) is strongly influenced by context and ends with an introduction of the five key areas in academic writing where unconventionality is most likely to show up. The second introduces the notion of

macrostructures as an analytical lens that can help with understanding some of the recurring ways in which dissertations are organized. The third and final lens presented a review of select research completed on visual and performing arts dissertations, where dissertations consist of two components (a written and creative component) and considered how findings from these studies might be applied to a study of unconventional dissertations.

Understanding that dissertations can be unconventional in a range of ways introduces some complications in a study of unconventional dissertations but having an analytical framework that is rooted in a socio-rhetorical understanding of writing and the three analytical lenses outlined in this chapter helps significantly. For one, I prioritize communal attributions of unconventionality over my own opinion of whether a dissertation is conventional or not. For another, it allows me to demonstrate the range of ways dissertations might be unconventional, which in turn helps me to make writing conventions (which are often implied and sedimented) more visible. Plus, understanding that unconventionality need not be limited to the form a dissertation takes resulted in a widening of my perspective as well as the range of dissertations I collected. For example, in Chapter 7, I share why I would have likely overlooked Dr. Clarke's dissertation had it not been for my analytical framework and our interview. This framework has also helped me with identifying instances when certain forms of the dissertation seem almost synonymous with the idea of the dissertation, as well as what this can mean for a writer—a thread that is picked up across the chapters in the second section of this dissertation ("Findings"). Finally, the combination of these lenses with the understanding that I bring of writing more generally brought to light a need to underscore the importance of thinking more carefully about the values and functions that undergird different aspects of a dissertation, as well as the pitfalls that can come with overly form-focused analyses of unconventional dissertations.

In the next chapter, I describe the approach I took to my research, which sought to better understand what unconventional dissertations might be, as well as how authors of unconventional dissertations managed to bring them about. I describe how textographic approaches to research are well-suited to questions like these, given that one of the aims of textographic research is to maintain a connection between texts and their contexts. This aim informs the kinds of data that are gathered and the methods that are used. In my case, I combined analyses of dissertations, transcripts from interviews with authors, and responses to questionnaire items to help me foreground the situated nature of unconventional dissertations and dissertation writing. Details for each of these sources of data are also provided.

## Chapter 4: The study

In this chapter, I explain how I used textography to investigate unconventional dissertations, including what they are and how they came to. I describe how this approach to research is well-suited to a study concerned with the situated nature of writing. I outline the methods I used to collect different textual and contextual forms of data, such as responses to a questionnaire, interview transcripts, and dissertations. Details for each of these sources of data are also provided.

### Text, contexts, and meeting halfway

In this dissertation, I have thus far described how an academic literacies and socio-rhetorical view of writing both underscore the social and situated nature of texts. Because dissertations are socially situated and tend to unfold in ways that are characteristic of a disciplinary context, what is considered unconventional in one context could be considered typical in another (Lemke, 2005; Tardy, 2016). In addition, this perspective also points to the possibility that the institutional and socio-historical context will also play a role in shaping the dissertation, for instance influencing the methods or approach to research a dissertator chooses (or expected to choose) as well as “the claims that can be made in the text, claims that cannot be made in the text, and what will count as ‘evidence’” (Paltridge et al., 2016, p. 25). Finally, this perspective also explains how beliefs and perceptions about what constitutes a successful dissertation are rarely unpacked or examined, thus transforming into tacit, *arhetorical assumptions* about writing (Doody, 2020).

Arhetorical assumptions about writing tend to perpetuate erroneous beliefs about writing and texts as separate from a “social situation, audience, and inherited assumptions” (Doody, 2020, p. 114). These assumptions are unfortunately rather popular in doctoral education and do little to support doctoral writers’ learning or “their ability to participate in disciplinary communities” (Doody, 2020, p. 24). When assumptions are allowed to fade from view, under a guise of common sense for instance, opportunities to push back and

“name alternatives” can be lost (Gere et al., 2021, p. 390) at individual and systemic levels. Rather than focusing on identifying ways to enact the sorts of system-wide changes Parham (2018) and others argue are needed, efforts can become bogged down or stalled altogether by arguments over whether beliefs and assumptions about what constitutes legitimate scholarship exist to begin with.

However, beliefs and assumptions about what constitutes legitimate scholarship can and do manifest in material ways, two examples being those of disciplinary graduate handbooks that discuss the dissertation or university-wide guidelines governing the dissertation (see Starke-Meyerring et al., 2014). Still, these too often fade into the “unnoticed background” (Swales, 1998, p. 246). Thus, while beliefs and assumptions are a critical part of a given context, their frequently tacit nature can introduce difficulties during the research process, which may lead to portrayals that, however unintentionally, reinforce a sense that writing is or can be divorced from its context (Lillis, 2008, p. 374). Indeed, even the most seasoned of researchers have been criticized for being too focused on a text, despite making attempts to account for the relationship between a text and its context (Lillis, 2008; Paltridge, Starfield & Tardy, 2016).

This isn’t to suggest everything is doom and gloom when it comes to researching writing. Several strategies have been identified in the literature. Taking time to flesh out how one is theorizing writing, drawing on the wealth of scholarship available in writing and literacies studies is another useful tool. For instance, academic literacies and socio-rhetorical approaches to academic writing both offer substantial guidance when it comes to connecting texts and contexts. Starfield (2014) et al. and others (e.g., Lillis, 2008) have recommended researchers “not only produce *descriptions* of academic texts, but also *explanations*” of them so that we know what a text is like as well as why (p. 114, italics in original). Textography, as a research strategy, is particularly well-suited to these tasks (Swales, 1998/2016; Paltridge & Stevenson, 2017).

Textography offers a path forward for researchers who are concerned with the ways in which writing and knowledge production are situated and shaped by powerful contextual forces, as well as how writing can itself be a powerful force for change (Lillis, 2008). Textographic approaches to research focus on building arguments through the close analysis of written texts in order to gain insight into the “how” and “why” of a text (Paltridge et al., 2012; Swales, 1998). Combining the analysis of textual data with the analysis of contextual data benefits textographic researchers immensely, allowing them to reach a broadened explanation of the textual practices surrounding the production and reception of knowledge (Paltridge & Stevenson, 2017; Starfield et al., 2014; Swales, 1998, 1998/2016). For instance, surveys might be conducted to draw out stakeholders’ perceptions of writing and identify samples of text for analysis. Interviews might be conducted with writers and stakeholders to better understand what “formal knowledge, process knowledge, rhetorical knowledge and content knowledge (Tardy, 2009) they see as being essential to the writing of texts in their contexts” (Paltridge & Stevenson, 2017, p. 53).

This isn’t to suggest that the combination of data sources is unique to textography, however. The practice of bringing different sources of data together in an effort to broaden the researcher’s frame of view and/or account for different perspectives is also sometimes referred to as triangulation. With this practice, there is often an understanding that

data from different sources might not yield consistent or convergent findings, but rather, might provide multiple perspectives or insights, including conflicting or contradictory ones. The challenge for the researcher is to explain why such discordances might exist. (Duff, 2019, p. 149)

In the present study, I relied on different sources of data to generate findings that aim “to bridge the gap between text and context” while still maintaining a “focus on the text” (Starfield et al., 2014, p. 116). However, it might be worthwhile clarifying that while

textography *incorporates* the practice many refer to as triangulation, textography is not *the same thing as* triangulation—meaning the two terms are not synonymous with each other. For instance, while it could be argued that the practice of triangulating data has a philosophical framework that underpins it (e.g., that realities are multiple and contested, that representativeness versus generalizability matters, etc.), it would be inaccurate to describe it as an approach to research in and of itself. Textography, however, focuses on the study of writing and texts (and, frequently, knowledge production) and, perhaps as a consequence, takes for granted certain epistemological and ontological assumptions about writing (e.g., that it is socially constructed, situated, rhetorical, etc.) that are not inherent in the practice of triangulation per se. So, while a researcher of motivation and emotion might draw on triangulation as a tool during their research process, unless texts or writing is also a focus of their study, it seems unlikely they would say they are conducting a textography of motivation and emotion. With that in mind, the next section transitions readers to the methods grounding this study, beginning first with an overview of the data.

### **Overview of data collection methods and research timeline**

After receiving clearance from Carleton's Research Ethics Board (see Appendix), the study broadly unfolded in the following manner:

1. Between May and September 2019, I circulated a questionnaire over Twitter and email listservs. The questionnaire consisted of 22 short and long answer questions geared to understanding how respondents identify alternative, unconventional, non-traditional or innovative dissertations, as well as any terms they preferred to use. Questions also sought to stake out some initial impressions regarding the experiences respondents had with these sorts of dissertations, if any. The questionnaire received 70 responses from people around the world. I used the questionnaire as a recruitment tool for interviews.

2. Between 2019 and 2022, I conducted nine unstructured interviews with authors and/or supervisors of unconventional dissertations, each interview lasting approximately 45 – 90 minutes. Of this number, eight had written unconventional dissertations.
3. Between 2019 and 2021, I collected and analysed 71 dissertations. Of these, 51 were deemed to be unconventional by word of mouth, participants, news coverage, database searches, and/or my analysis.
4. Towards the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020, I collected the dissertation policies and guidelines from 38 PhD-granting Canadian universities. I had originally intended to incorporate an analysis of the ways dissertations were framed across Canadian universities—similar in some ways to the one completed by Starke-Meyerring et al. (2014). However, the size of my study ballooned as I added more and more dissertations to my database for analysis between 2020 and 2021. This left me with some choices to make about the scope and length of my dissertation. Ultimately, I opted to forego paying significant attention to reporting on this data in the present study.

In addition to gathering the above forms of data, I also relied on supplementary material to fill in some gaps. This material included:

- Textual samples provided by participants (e.g., examples of email communications sent to committee members, proposals, emails received regarding dissertation formatting requirements)
- Email communications between participants and myself
- Online profiles or other references to dissertations flagged as unconventional in some way (e.g., news articles, blog posts, podcasts, Twitter mentions)
- Relevant institutional guidelines for participants' dissertations

- Blog posts written by or about interview participants, news media articles, scholarly articles, or podcast/YouTube episodes
- Other sources of information recommended to or created by participants (such as emails, blog posts, podcasts, book chapters, or published journal articles)

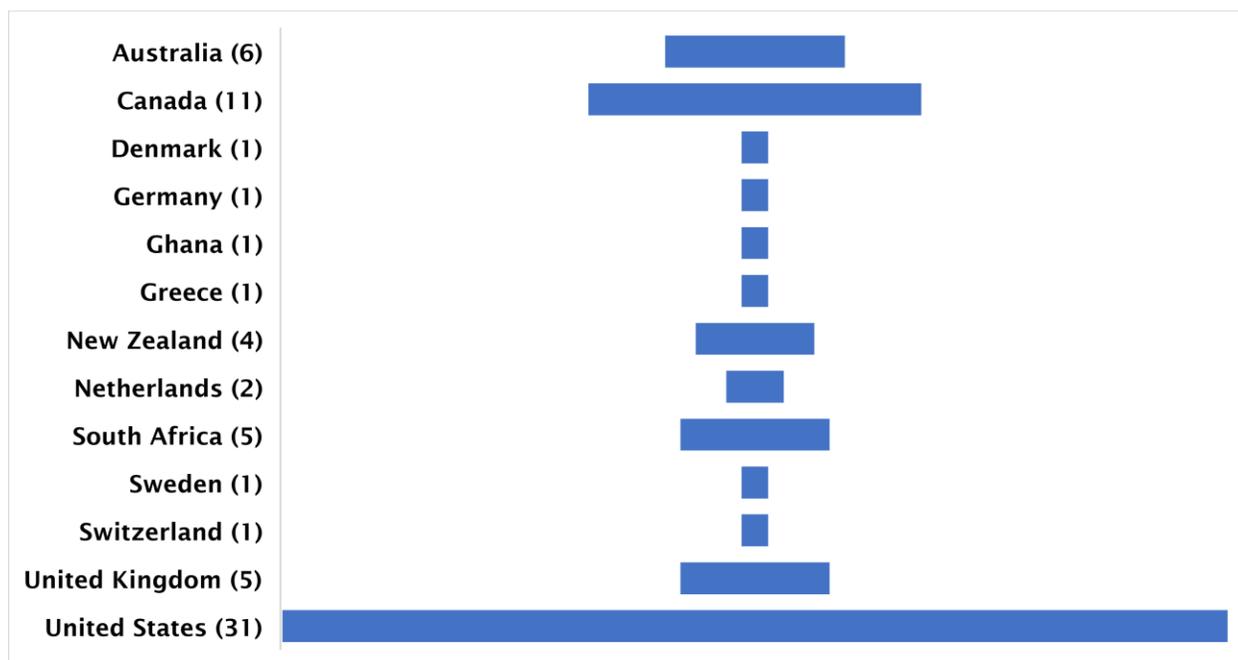
In the remainder of this chapter, I provide details for each of the three main methods of collecting data (i.e., the dissertations, questionnaire, and interviews) as well as an overview of the individuals whose participated. I close with a discussion of the limitations of the present study and a summary of the chapter.

## **Questionnaire**

Between May and September 2019, I circulated a questionnaire via Twitter and email listservs. The questionnaire served as a tool to explore how stakeholders perceived of and identified unconventional dissertations, and as a recruitment aid for the interview portion of my study. In this sense, the questionnaire provided to be a valuable tool. Responses shared by questionnaire participants offered a critical even if preliminary window into what may constitute an unconventional dissertation. Several respondents shared examples of unconventional dissertations, as well as their experiences with writing, supervising, or examining them. Seven individuals indicated an interest in being interviewed through the recruitment component of the questionnaire.

A total of 70 individuals from 12 countries responded to the questionnaire. Figure 3 shows a breakdown of participants' geographic locations, respectively. Of the 70 respondents, 21 individuals indicated they either wrote (and defended) or are currently in the process of writing/defending an unconventional dissertation, and 27 indicated that they supervise doctoral students in some capacity. Twelve supervisors indicated that they have either supervised a student who wrote an unconventional dissertation or are supervising a student who is in the process of writing an unconventional dissertation.

**Figure 3.** Geographic location of questionnaire participants



**Note.** Numbers inside brackets indicate the total for that region.

Opening questions focused on discerning how respondents identified and understood unconventional dissertation, as well as what terms they preferred to use (if any) to refer to these dissertations. Subsequent questions focused on respondents' experiences with unconventional dissertations (e.g., with writing and defending, supervising or examining unconventional dissertations). Respondents were also asked to provide any examples they could of such dissertations, as well as advice they might have for others who may be interested in writing an unconventional dissertation. A list of the questions can be found in the Appendices.

Were I to do this study again and use this questionnaire, I would make a few changes first. For one, I would ask respondents to identify their respective disciplines (the fact that I forgot to do this still haunts me). Second, at the time I developed the questionnaire, I referred to unconventional dissertations as "re-imagined dissertations" and, despite providing what I felt at the time was a good enough explanation for what I

meant by this term, some respondents seemed irritated or confused by the relatively unusual term. I think future iterations of the questionnaire would work just as well if I were to use “unconventional dissertations” instead. In addition, I think I would make more of a concerted effort to recruit participants across institutional and geographical locations (and disciplinary too, assuming I had that information). Even though it wasn’t my aim to use this questionnaire to draw any generalizable conclusions, I suspect that analysing responses across questions and participant groupings (e.g., institutional or geographical) likely would have generated some interesting insights that could have added more depth to this study. Finally, I also suspect that reducing the length and complexity of the questionnaire would be beneficial. To be fair, converting some of the long answer questions to short answer or Likert scale style questions would limit the level of detail respondents could provide, but it might also result in simplifying the questionnaire overall and result in fewer skipped questions.

## **Interviews**

Between 2019 and 2022, I conducted nine unstructured interviews with authors and/or supervisors of unconventional dissertations, each interview lasting approximately 45 – 90 minutes. Of this number, eight had written unconventional dissertations, and the ninth participant had supervised one. Participants were asked whether they preferred to be identified by their name, which meant I could also refer to their dissertations by name, or have their data anonymized, which I acknowledged would impact how I referred to their dissertations (e.g., in vague terms, so as to limit identifiability). Participants provided consent at the outset of the interview and indicated their preference regarding their identification. I made a point to return to this decision prior to the conclusion of the interview to determine whether participants wished to make any changes. Table 5 provides readers with an at-a-glance overview of the disciplines and locations for each participant.

### *Recruitment process*

Seven of the nine interview participants indicated a willingness and interest to being interviewed using the link I had provided in the questionnaire. These were Dr. Bray, Dr. Clarke, Dr. Freeman Jr., Dr. LaFollette, Dr. Richards, Dr. Thaiss, and Dr. Visconti. In order to be interviewed, participants needed to have supervised and/or written and defended an unconventional dissertation. In addition, I also invited three other authors of unconventional dissertations to participate in an interview about their dissertations, which resulted in an eighth participant, Dr. Sousanis. The final participant came about in a rather serendipitous manner—I had posted a few thoughts relating to unconventional dissertation on my Twitter account that had generated a fair bit of discussion in the summer of 2022. Dr. Borgo Ton, whose dissertation I had already added to my database of unconventional dissertations and analysed, was among the individuals that had responded to these Twitter posts. After a lively discussion over social media, we agreed to meet over Zoom to discuss unconventional dissertations some more. Much to my surprise and delight, Dr. Borgo Ton suggested that we turn the conversation into an interview and, after providing her consent, I began recording.

**Table 5.** Participants' experience with supervising and/or writing unconventional dissertations.

Name	Country	Discipline	Supervised an unconventional dissertation?	Authored an unconventional dissertation?
Dr. Thaiss	U.S.	English	x	
Dr. Freeman	U.S.	Education	x	x
Dr. Visconti	U.S.	English, Digital Humanities	x	x
Dr. Clarke	U.S.	Information Studies		x
Dr. Richards	S. AF	Psychology	x	x
Dr. Bray	CAN	Writing Studies		x

Dr. LaFollette	U.S.	English, Rhetoric and Writing Studies, Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies		x
Dr. Sousanis	U.S.	Education	x	x
Dr. Mary Borgo Ton	U.S.	English, Digital Humanities		x

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**Note on abbreviations in the above table:** S. AF stands for South Africa, U.S. stands for United States, and CAN stands for Canada.

In order to focus my dissertation and keep at a reasonable length, I opted to concentrate on developing profiles for six participants: Dr. Richards, Dr. Clarke, Dr. Bray, Dr. Freeman, Dr. LaFollette, and Dr. Visconti (See Table 6 for a summary of the unconventional aspects of participants' dissertations).

Why these six and not all nine of the participants listed in Table 5? I excluded interview data from Dr. Sousanis, Dr. Borgo Ton, and Dr. Thaiss for two reasons: 1) I interviewed Dr. Sousanis and Dr. Borgo Ton fairly late in my research process (July 2021 and May 2022, respectively), and 2) at this point, I had already decided to focus on the participants who had authored an unconventional dissertation. I do hope to include these participants in future publications, however.

### *Transcription process*

I met with participants over Zoom. I recorded the interviews and had them transcribed by a third party who agreed to keep the details of interviews confidential. I kept transcription conventions to a minimum, as I was mostly interested in *what* participants said rather than *how* they said it (after Swales, 1998/2016, p. 30). False starts and certain hesitations were removed to improve the overall readability of the text extracts I incorporated into my written accounts. I also adopted Swales's use of ellipsis points (. . .) to indicate when a word (or words) has been omitted and square brackets to indicate when a word has been added, "just like [this]."

**Table 6.** Summary of the unconventional aspects of interview participants' dissertations and dissertation macrostructures.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Institution &amp; Discipline keywords</b>	<b>Unconventional in terms of...</b>	<b>Macro-structure</b>
<b>Dr. Rose Richards</b>	Stellenbosch University (South Africa). Psychology.	Focus on lived experience with chronic illness (content), autoethnography (practice), inclusion of non-canonical forms of writing such as narratives (practice)	Traditional-simple
<b>Dr. Rachel Ivy Clarke</b>	University of Washington (U.S.). Information Studies, Library Science.	Analysis of artifacts using humanistic inquiry methods (practice), rejection of key philosophical tenets underpinning the discipline (content and practice)	Traditional-Simple
<b>Dr. Nancy Bray</b>	University of Alberta (Canada). Education, Interdisciplinary Studies, Writing Studies.	Inclusion of four manuscripts (non-canonical linguistic and textual form). Two manuscripts were published, one was under review, and one was publishable.	Manuscript-style
<b>Dr. Sydney Freeman Jr.</b>	Auburn University (U.S.). Education, Higher Education Administration and Leadership.	Inclusion of three publishable manuscripts (non-canonical textual form). Final chapter is not a conclusion: instead, it makes raw data available (non-canonical textual form, practice).	Hybrid complex/manuscript.
<b>Dr. Kristin LaFollette</b>	Bowling Green State University (U.S.). English, Rhetoric and Writing; Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies.	Art and art-making played central role in the inquiry and composing processes (practice, modality), as well as in enacting arguments (rhetorical aims and strategies).	Traditional-simple
<b>Dr. Amanda Visconti</b>	University of Maryland (U.S.). English, Digital Humanities, Critical Code.	A born-digital dissertation with no chapters that consists of non-canonical forms of scholarly communication (Linguistic and textual form, modality, rhetorical aims and strategies, and practice). Designed and coded a participatory digital scholarly edition (practice, content, linguistic and textual form).	Other.

### *Approach to analysis*

To analyse the transcripts of focal participants, I drew on key principles associated with thematic approaches to the analysis of qualitative data. A theme, as Braun and Clarke (2006) describe it, “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 83). Themes or patterns can be identified using top-down approaches, where a researcher attempts to account for themes using a “pre-existing coding frame” or their theoretical interests, or inductively (bottom-up), which is where a researcher attempts to allow the themes to emerge from the data as much as possible (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). Both and either of these approaches can be used, depending on a researchers’ aims.

In my case, I sought to strike a balance between an inductive and deductive approach to thematic analysis. I began by reading through the transcripts of several times, making note of recurring phrases and ideas. I then moved from codes to categories to themes and attempted to look across themes and interviews for patterns. This process helped me to distinguish key moments in participants’ accounts of their experiences with writing their dissertations. However, in textographies, written data and contextual or ethnographic data are meant to work together to create a broader picture more conducive to critical socio-rhetorical studies of writing. Therefore, while an inductive thematic approach was useful, a deductive or top-down approach to thematic analysis also became necessary, particularly since I also needed to maintain an appropriate focus on texts that is consistent with textographic approaches to research.

With that in mind, I set aside interview transcripts and returned instead to participants’ dissertations, analysing them using the lenses I describe in Chapter 3. From there, I moved between my analysis of the dissertations and the transcripts, this time narrowing my attention to moments that could help to further and deepen my analysis of the dissertations. For instance, I noted when participants described the contexts they wrote

within or the reasons they gave for why their dissertations ended up the way they did. I compiled the passages I identified from this phase with the passages I had noted during the inductive portion of my analysis. The combination of these two approaches to thematic analysis, alongside my analysis of participants' dissertations, helped me to generate accounts of participants' experiences that they feel represents their experiences.

Saldaña (2011) suggests that one of the best ways to ensure our interpretations of participants' perceptions are authentic is ask the participants themselves. To this end, I emailed participants drafts of their respective chapters to comment on prior to the submission of this dissertation for defense. All but one participant responded to these emails. Those who did return my emails responded positively to the drafts and some provided feedback that resulted in minor changes.

## **Dissertations**

Between 2019 and 2021, I collected and analysed 71 dissertations from a range of disciplines that included the humanities, education, STEM and the social sciences. To be included in the dataset, a dissertation needed to be post-defense and submission (i.e., the degree conferred).

Typically, it is recommended that researchers using a textographic approach gather samples of texts considered to be good examples of the genre (Paltridge, Starfield, Ravelli, & Nicholson 2012). In my case, I considered dissertations that passed defense to represent a good example of the dissertation genre.

Dissertations were considered unconventional if they met any of the following criteria:

1. Dissertation was profiled on a blog, website, or other form of report that marked it as unconventional
2. Dissertation was recommended by word of mouth

3. Dissertation was recommended by interview participants (i.e., their own, a colleague)
4. Dissertation was marked as unconventional by the dissertation author or by another dissertation author
5. Dissertation had an unusual macrostructure (e.g., one that hadn't previously been defined in the literature or one that has been recently identified as "new")
6. Dissertation included creative or atypical components (e.g., policy briefs, curriculum documents, video game, website companion, a digital literary edition, etc.)
7. Dissertation made use of unusual move structures, incorporated atypical modalities or noncanonical forms of writing, adopted an unusual approach to the research process, or otherwise might fall under one of the areas Tardy (2016) identifies in her meta-framework for genre innovation (see also p. 45, this dissertation)

A total of 51 dissertations met the above criteria and were deemed to be unconventional (You may [view the database here](#)).

I collected and analysed a large database for a few reasons. First, I was motivated by participants' suggestions that having access to such a thing would be a useful outcome of this research. For instance, Dr. Thaiss (Professor Emeritus of Writing Studies, University of California - Davis) had the following to say:

Well, I think one of the things [that] anybody who's interested in this would like to know is what's going on. . . How many other people are doing these things? Are there places in the world that are models for this kind of renovation—re-envisioning—of what could be possible? I mean, we're always looking for allies and compatriots and, you know, models. Yeah. (INT)

Likewise, Dr. Richards (Head of the Writing Laboratory, Stellenbosch University) said:

I'd love to see what you find because I'm always keen to see if there are new ways and if there's a pattern to this sort of thing. And yeah, I'd just like to know what you find.

As I start to supervise more, I'd like to feel that I could also help/allow my students to be themselves, be creative and so on. I mean, I was fortunate. I had a really good supervisor and I'd like to be a really good supervisor. And for me what that means, is also being open to the students trying things out and so on. (INT)

I expand further on the time I spent working on a publicly accessible version of my database in the next section.

Second, collecting and analysing dissertations informed my analysis and discussion of the six focal dissertations described in chapters six through eleven. In fact, preliminary analyses of the macrostructures of dissertations in my dataset let me to the realisation that I needed more tools to account for the range of ways dissertations could be unconventional, including those that had conventional macrostructures and, at the same time, unconventional components. Third, while I am not able to present a detailed analysis of every dissertation in my dataset, I hope to use this data in future publications. Finally, I am motivated to share this extended dataset with others because it is a resource I could have used in 2018-2019, when I was in the midst of conceptualising my doctoral dissertation research. Each of the dissertations in this dataset offers an alternative take on what it means to be unconventional, depending on dissertators' contexts.

#### *On the development of a publicly accessible database*

As I noted in the previous section, I was motivated to create a resource in response to participants' requests for access to examples of unconventional dissertations. I even attempted to make this resource interactive, tinkering with different web-based tools, such as Padlet, [Zotero Groups](#), [Scalar](#) (a multimodal web-based publishing tool [created by the Alliance for Networking Visual Culture](#)), Google Docs, Google Sheets, and Google Sites. In the end, I opted for the simplest option because it was the most likely option to succeed given my time and financial constraints—a refined version of the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet I created to collect and analyse dissertations. I uploaded and converted this

spreadsheet to a Google Sheet, and created a link for that made it viewable to anyone with the link (Note: I transitioned the database to a stable and public platform after my defense to help maintain public accessibility. It can now be found here:

<https://doi.org/10.25547/93ZF-H523>). I hope to explore ways to make the database truly public and truly accessible during my postdoctoral fellowship. In this regard, several questions will need to be considered. For instance: what responsibilities come with bringing a project like this into the open? Is this something I will sustain? For how long and at what cost? Here, “sustaining” might mean paying for the website that houses this resource or attending to the infrastructure that supports the resource, but it could also refer to maintaining the entries in the resource—the dissertation examples themselves. What's unconventional today may not be unconventional tomorrow. In an ideal world, I'd love to make this resource communal, but even communal resources still require caretaking by someone. Who will that person be?

### *Generating visual depictions of dissertations using artificial intelligence*

I spent so much time with the dissertations in my database that I began to develop an affection for them. They reminded me of little characters in a game, each one flitting about in my brain as I went about my grand research quest. As I note above, I labored to find a way to share these dissertations with the world in a way that I felt would highlight their similarities and differences. “*An Excel sheet won't cut it,*” I thought to myself—I wanted to create visual representations that could accompany the dissertations on slides, a website, in a publication, or elsewhere.

Finding ways to represent data is an integral part of the research process, regardless of the researcher. For me, it felt a bit more challenging than usual because I was attempting to represent a number of doctoral dissertations, and I wanted to go beyond capturing screen shots of title pages. I am a collage artist and poet and have enjoyed embedding both into my research process before. But creating collages for each of the



guide the AI to generate an appropriate image. Sometimes this was easy, like when I could use the titles of dissertations to help me generate the description. For instance, generating the image for Clarke's (2016) dissertation, "It's not Rocket Library Science: Design epistemology and American librarianship," was straightforward. I wrote "an academic painting of someone questioning rocket science in a library" and generated the image you'll find in Chapter 7, which focuses on Clarke's dissertation. But oftentimes it was difficult to generate an image that *evoked* a dissertation well enough to count it in. For instance, the title of Richards's dissertation ("You look very well for a transplant": Autoethnographic narrative and identity in chronic kidney disease, kidney failure and the life post-transplant) seems evocative enough—to a human. But DALL-E completely missed the *something extra* conveyed in the first half of Richards's title (e.g., "You look very well for a transplant").

I often needed to look-up the meaning of words or key concepts associated with a dissertation's topic in order to work out other ways to guide DALL-E to generate an appropriate image. For instance, Wagstaff's (2018) dissertation, which is entitled "The 'Objectivists': A Website Dedicated to the 'Objectivist' Poets," required me to have enough of a sense of what Wagstaff's dissertation was about before I could create an evocative description. In the end, I wrote "the letter A depicted in a precisionist art style." (The letter "A" is the title of a poem written by one of the Objectivist Poets, Louis Zukofsky.)

I may not have been aware of the pitfalls that could come with using DALL-E to generate images based on my descriptions, but it didn't take long for me to notice what Offert and Than (2022) refer to as the "durability of whiteness" (p. 3). Turning the notion of representation on its head, the authors write that the

precise problem with DALL-E 2 is that *it is far too representational*, relentlessly showing us the whiteness we wish we did not have to see. Indeed, the reason that bias is framed as a 'problem' is not because the model is making a statistical error,

but because it is portraying with devastating accuracy the whiteness that historically dominates Western visual culture. (Offert & Than, 2022, p. 3, italics my own)

For instance, when I asked DALL-E to generate a images of a doctoral student, 12 of the 16 images depicted a visibly white male, two depicted a woman of colour, one depicted a black male, and the final depicted a white woman. I didn't attach overt gendered or racial descriptors to the text I inputted either—the prompts were “a baroque painting of a doctoral student,” “a gothic painting of a doctoral student,” “a rococo painting of a doctoral student,” and “an American gothic style painting of an exhausted doctoral student drinking coffee.” Each round generated four images, and the ratio of white men to women and/or persons of colour was the same for each round (3:1). I also observed this bias when attempting to generate images for Freeman's dissertation (Chapter 9), which is titled, “A presidential curriculum: An examination of the relationship between higher education administration programs and preparation towards the university presidency.” If I wrote “Curriculum of a university president, oil painting,” or “a presidential curriculum, higher education, digital art,” all of the images that were returned depicted white men. Like Offert and Than (2022), I suspect Freeman wouldn't be surprised at this, since he notes in his dissertation that there is still some way to go when it comes to diversity among university presidents.

## **Chapter summary**

In this chapter, I identified my use of textography as my method and made the case for using this approach in a study of unconventional dissertations. I detailed the different methods I used to collect data, which included unconventional dissertations, transcripts from interviews with authors, and responses to questionnaire. I also outlined the work I put towards making the unconventional dissertations I collected accessible to others. In the next section of this dissertation, I turn to presenting and discussing some of the findings that arose from an analysis of the data I described here. We begin with Chapter 5, which

explores perceptions of unconventional dissertations from the vantage point offered by questionnaire respondents.

## **Section Two**

## Chapter 5: What is an unconventional dissertation?

*A colleague is supervising one of these, in Feminist Studies. Her student has written original poems and is weaving both images and more personal writing into her 'academic' text, as evidence and also as part of the narrative. I have also read dissertations that build the argument itself with multimodal resources, like textiles and artwork, and also images. These are not used in the traditional format but are actually creatively presented in ways that don't conform to the 'big book' thesis that is probably the most traditional format. I think a dissertation that challenges what counts as 'legitimate' writing, and argumentation, could be considered reimagined, because we have such narrow ideas about what good evidence is, or what the right kind of academic voice sounds like, and anything that makes us ask if this could also be an argument or a scholarly voice, even though this looks different and new is reimagining the old. . .*

— Graduate Supervisor (South Africa)

Thus far, I have described the key aims of the present study and have provided an account of the methods and sources of data I've relied on to investigate the notion of unconventional dissertations. More specifically, I wish to better understand what unconventional dissertations might be, as well as how authors of unconventional dissertations manage to bring them about. Currently, there is limited research available in this area (Anderson et al., 2021). This in turn presents difficulties for dissertators, supervisors, and other stakeholders who are concerned with countering tendencies to assume that the IMRD format typically associated with scientific reports ought to remain the default format for doctoral dissertations.

To help me address this interest, I conducted a textographic study that combined analyses of dissertations, interviews with authors, and questionnaire responses together to reach a contextualised understanding of the practices surrounding the production and reception of unconventional dissertations. This chapter begins with a consideration of how questionnaire participants describe their perceptions of dissertations that depart from conventions. Then, I extend this repertoire of responses by examining the meta-commentary authors use to signal the unconventional nature of their dissertations. While the number of dissertations I discuss in this section is small, I argue the process is still

valuable. Not only can it help to shed light on authors' perceptions of what is valued in their respective disciplinary contexts, it can also serve as a pedagogical aid. Meta-commentary (or meta-discourse) is a notable feature of dissertations, regardless of whether a dissertation is considered unconventional. It is one of the key strategies dissertation authors are expected to employ to help guide readers through the body of the dissertation, as well as its main arguments, outcomes, and contribution (Thomson & Kamler, 2016).

Like all dissertation authors, authors of unconventional dissertations will also need to make arguments, distinguish the contribution their work makes, and guide readers through their work. However, the unconventional nature of a dissertation may present unique difficulties for both readers and authors of these dissertations, thus, authors will need to figure out how best to employ meta-commentary in their situations. Thus, in addition to considering meta-commentary from different sources, authors of unconventional dissertations may find it beneficial to consider examples of meta-commentary from unconventional dissertations specifically. The chapter ends via a consideration of how Stewart (2015) repurposes conventions in unconventional ways, such as to highlight the limitations of conventions as well as what they imply for Indigenous scholars.

### **“The debate in my field would be what a ‘traditional dissertation’ exactly consists of”**

This section focuses exclusively on responding to the following overarching question and sub-questions: How do questionnaire participants (N=70) describe dissertations that depart from conventions? Does there seem to be a preference for a certain term or way of describing these sorts of dissertations? What do descriptions of unconventional dissertations reveal about conventional understandings of the dissertation, including its purpose and form? To do this, I home in on participants responses to three items from the questionnaire:

Q1 a. What terms do you use to describe dissertations that break with what is typically considered “traditional” with regards to format and/or content (e.g., dissertation as monograph or by publication)?

Q1 b. If you had to choose one term from your list above, what would your preference be and how would you define it?

Q2. In this questionnaire, I refer to dissertations that break with what is typically considered “traditional “ in terms of format and or content as “re-imagined” dissertations. You may have another term you prefer to use instead. In your experience, what constitutes a “reimagined” dissertation? Please feel free to reference any examples of dissertations and list any criteria that you feel relate to or helps you with your response.

While by no means definitive or generalizable, the variety of ways participants describe and understand “dissertations that break with what is typically considered ‘traditional’ with regards to format and/or content” suggests several insights that are informative to a study of unconventional dissertations. First, questionnaire participants frequently referred to the “manuscript-style” or “article-compilation” dissertation either by name or by using another term that matched descriptions of this dissertation (e.g., as found in Dong, 1998, or Paltridge, 2002). See, for instance, the following comment from a graduate supervisor situated in South Africa:

a PhD by publication, containing papers (co)written by the student, with a connecting narrative is considered non-traditional in my current environment, although they are becoming more common. (Graduate Supervisor, South Africa)

This comment reinforces common-sense understandings, at least from a genre-based perspective, that the degree to which a dissertation is designated as innovative or unconventional will depend on the context of the reader and the writer (Tardy, 2016). Here, I’m using the word “context” as shorthand to refer to a lamination of rhetorical, social,

temporal, historical, geographical, material, and relational layers or circumstances. In the above quote, the supervisor qualifies the “PhD by publication” as unconventional in their “current environment.”

Interestingly, despite being designated as an unconventional approach, which connotes novelty, the prevalence of the manuscript-style dissertation amongst participant responses could suggest that it is becoming increasingly common across several disciplines outside of the sciences. Thus, while it is important to underscore the takeaway that dissertations will vary depending on their contexts, it seems equally important to point out the ease with which questionnaire participants were able to name and describe the manuscript-based style of dissertation fairly consistently, which may be an early indicator that a certain level of stability could be attributed to this style of dissertation (see also Anderson et al., 2021). It may also suggest that some understandings about what constitutes an unconventional dissertation are shared across contexts. The assumptions that fuel these understandings are important to dig into because they have implications for the kinds of expression that are ruled out or endorsed (Giltrow, 2002, p. 190).

In addition to the manuscript-based dissertation, participants also regularly referred to dissertations that departed from conventions as “non-traditional.” This, in and of itself, is neither surprising nor remarkable—but it is useful. When describing “non-traditional” dissertations, participants frequently conjured up visions of traditional dissertations as a monograph or “big book” (Graduate Supervisor, South Africa) that follows a “traditional five chapter format” (Dean, Faculty of Arts, Ghana). As one professor in the United States puts it, traditional dissertations often comprise a “traditional research project presented alphabetically in chapters” (Tenure Track Faculty Member, United States). Rather than disparaging the traditional dissertation, participants’ comments on the whole tended to present it more simply as *the way it is*—as in, a generally accepted (textual) form of the dissertation. Many participants, however, noted a need to understand the contextual

factors surrounding the production and reception of dissertations, as well as how these factors enable and constrain departures from generally accepted traditions. A doctoral writing coach who works at a writing centre in the United States describes how the traditional-simple or IMRD dissertation would be considered unusual in their field:

My own field is ethnomusicology, where dissertations are expected to be written as monographs—basically, a good first draft of whatever book the doctoral candidate wants to eventually publish. I've never seen an intro-lit review-methods-results-discussion [IMRD] format for my field. Such a dissertation would most likely be unacceptable to a committee. The debate in my field would be what a 'traditional dissertation' exactly consists of. For example, maybe a 'traditional dissertation' has more reviews of literature than a published book would have because the doctoral candidate needs to demonstrate they are a 'good student,' and which a publisher would have them cut or substantially revise later. But other than that, the discussion would differ depending on the department's emphasis—whether the degree-granting department puts itself in an anthropological tradition (so less music notation and musical analysis, unless the cultural analysis calls for it) or musicological tradition (so more transcriptions of the music itself; more musical analysis; and more conversation with music scholars who have training in Western music). For other doctoral students I have worked with, they might describe their work as non-traditional and then [add in an] additional description of what it does look like, as appropriate to discipline or field, e.g., with autoethnographic components; ethnographic; narrative; components of action research (Doctoral Writing Coach, U.S.)

Another participant, this time from an Academic Librarian (also located in the United States) seems to agree in principle with the Ethnomusicologist's suggestion for an examination of the assumptions underlying what constitutes a traditional dissertation—or an innovative one, for that matter:

I dislike 'non-traditional' because I think many innovations have a clear tradition leading up to them (e.g., print scholarly editions have long been accepted as textual scholarship dissertations in English departments, which made it easier to argue for doing a digital edition)... similarly, Stephen Ramsay writes convincingly in *Reading Machines* about how literary digital humanities is just an extension of similar work done pre-computer. (Academic Librarian, U.S.)

At the same time, this participant also highlighted how

the point isn't to buck tradition, but to keep our eyes on achieving the goals of dissertating (and not assuming we all agree on what that is, e.g., showing ability to converse in an intellectual community, an awareness of existing literature, or an ability to mentor students in methods and formats of common usage) rather than to produce something that looks like other dissertations. (Academic Librarian, U.S.)

This participant raises important points that are echoed throughout questionnaire and interview data in differing ways: there is a certain amount of incrementalism that supports successful innovation ("many innovations have a clear tradition leading up to them), which is to say that collective and relationship efforts play a critical role in preparing the conditions for unconventional dissertations. This contradicts views of unconventionality as something intrinsic to an individual or individual text, and even arguably undermines other related notions that are understood in similar terms, such as originality or discovery. By surfacing the social and collective nature involved not just with unconventionality, but with writing on the whole, the potential for the dissertation to be a "vital site of inquiry and learning" is retrieved, as are opportunities for writers to "actively negotiate [the] complex identity struggles" involved in the process of completing a dissertation (Starke-Meyerring, 2011, p. 91). Questionnaire participants provided examples that highlighted a range of ways negotiations occurred. Interestingly, these examples also matched up with one or

more of the areas identified in Tardy's (2016) study of genre innovation in academic writing (See Table 7 for a few examples).

Thus far, I have focused on questionnaire participants' descriptions of dissertations that departed from conventions. Several examples were provided that reinforced understandings of writing as socially and rhetorically situated in contexts. At the same time, participants frequently referenced the manuscript-style (or 'article-compilation' format) dissertation as an unconventional dissertation and/or relied on 'non-traditional' as an umbrella term. Attending to participants' use of 'non-traditional' as a descriptor provided some insights into normalized assumptions regarding the dissertation's form, purpose, and assessment, as well as the range of ways dissertators might deviate from conventions. In the next section, I explore some of the meta-commentary authors of unconventional dissertations use to help them signal, acknowledge, or address the unconventional nature of their dissertations, drawing on the unconventional dissertations I've collected for the purposes of this study (n= 51). I then explore how one unconventional dissertation author (Stewart, 2015) intentionally uses conventions as a way to enact and support the intervention he aims to make in a predominately Eurocentric (settler colonial) discipline.

**Table 7.** Tardy's (2016) synthesis of areas or opportunities for unconventionality in academic writing

Area	Examples provided by questionnaire participants
Linguistic	<p><b>Writing Coach at a University Library (Switzerland):</b> "Choosing a somewhat diverging language style (e.g., uncommon self-reference such as 'let us')."</p> <p><b>Assistant Professor (United States):</b> Could be "written entirely in [a] First Nations language."</p> <p><b>Writing Centre Director (Canada):</b> "Highly personal prose or segments of text, non-standard use of English, syntax, punctuation, etc."</p>
Textual form	<p><b>Supervisor/Full Professor (Canada):</b> "Could be a creative work, a website/database with analysis, an autoethnography or narrative."</p> <p><b>University Librarian (Canada):</b> "Our institution refers to these as a dissertation by portfolio. Because these dissertations have various parts, it is difficult to refer to any of these parts as 'the' dissertation, (e.g., video dissertation)." For instance, the dissertation could contain elements "that already have names attached to them, like journal article, data set, video, exhibition, etc."</p>
Modality	<p><b>Graduate Program Coordinator (United States):</b> "Born-digital: conceived of as a digital text, never intended to be printed, that takes advantage of the multimodality available to digital projects."</p> <p><b>Head of Research Degrees (United Kingdom):</b> "Public Works degrees might include, for example, a set of documents that can include guidelines plans, drawings, publications." A "critical commentary" would accompany these materials.</p> <p><b>Teaching &amp; Research Academic (Australia):</b> "Not only comprises contain academic or scientific written text but also some kind of creative project. The creative project can be in the form of a poem, prose, installation, painting(s), video(s), or a performance such as dance, theatre, etc."</p>
Rhetorical aims and strategies	<p><b>Faculty (graduate, teaching in doctoral program, supervisor of dissertations, United States):</b> "You can have bits of personal narrative or vignettes along with more traditional data analysis and research."</p> <p><b>Supervisor (New Zealand):</b> "Some theses challenge that typical IMRAD structure. They may take structure and style from their topic, for example, if they are historians studying a particular movement. My favourite example is one structured like a medieval day book, with 26 chapters, each labelled with a theoretical term whose first letter follows on alphabetically from the first letter of the name of the chapter ahead."</p>
Practice	<p><b>Masters and Doctoral manager of the Faculty of Education (South Africa):</b> "Innovative in methodology and theoretical contribution irrespective if it is a monograph or dissertation by publication."</p> <p><b>PhD Graduate &amp; Assistant Professor (United States):</b> "My dissertation advocated for the use of art as a tool in writing studies scholarship and pedagogy and was a tangible representation of what the combination of art and writing can look like. I used collage as a research method and used my own original collage work and photography alongside the text."</p>
Content	<p><b>Direct[or] of a language program &amp; faculty (Greece):</b> "Anything where the benchmark of showcasing advanced knowledge/expertise in the discipline is held constant, but any number of acceptable ways to demonstrate that knowledge and understanding could be used." One example is the "cumulative portfolio" dissertation, which is "an ensemble of pieces of work including some original research that would reflect a 'deep dive' into the chosen facets of the discipline."</p>

### **Signalling unconventionality: “This dissertation does not. . .”**

Some dissertators signaled the unconventionality of their dissertations in the acknowledgements section by directly referring to the dissertation using words such as unusual, alternative, non-traditional, unconventional, and so on. For instance, Visconti (2015a) refers to the “unique format and methodology” of their dissertation in the acknowledgements section when thanking the committee for their “willingness to learn about, support, and refine” Visconti’s project, including its “unusual deliverables for a literature dissertation” (p. ii). Similarly, Freeman (2011) refers to his dissertation as “atypical” in the acknowledgements section:

My deepest gratitude and thanks belong to my dissertation chair, Dr. Frances K. Kochan. I am forever indebted to you for your guidance and support. Even when naysayers said I could not complete this type of atypical dissertation, you provided the expertise for this project to be completed. (p. iv)

Interestingly, this is one of the few—if not the only—times Freeman (2011) indicates that his dissertation is unconventional. Having interviewed Freeman, however, I know that the manuscript-based dissertation was unusual in his department at the time. I also know that Freeman needed to switch advisors in order to pursue this style, and that his second advisor (a former dean) had a bit of experience with supervising these kinds of dissertations. It’s possible that the combination of his advisor’s status, experience with supervising this type of dissertations, and the composition of the examining committee added up to create a situation where the manuscript-based approach to the dissertation was not a big deal, despite its “atypical” nature. Either way, as Kelly et al. (2021) suggest in their study of acknowledgements in doctoral dissertations: “Something happens in the *backstage* moment of writing the acknowledgement: As writers reflect on the contributions of others, they are telling an alternative story of the thesis’ completion” (p. 211). Note: A

more in-depth discussion of Freeman’s dissertation and our interview can be found in Chapter 9.

The abstract seems to be another favourite when it comes to drawing readers’ attention to the unconventionality of the dissertation. For instance, Capurro (2020) uses the abstract to highlight the unconventional (or “novel”) approach to research that was taken: “The research involved the development of a novel methodology, which I call *ethnography of risk*, that brings together hospital ethnography, in-depth interviews, and qualitative analysis of media coverage and policy documents” (p. ii, italics in original). Likewise, the abstract<sup>4</sup> for Carson’s (2017) dissertation suggests it will be unconventional, although there is nothing that indicates to readers *how* (spoiler alert: It takes the form of a hip hop album, and has since been published by the University of Michigan Press—see Carson, 2020):

Hip-Hop Studies, while pushing boundaries in some respects, particularly the intersections of many different disciplines, reproduces certain forms of—and assumptions about—knowledge production. Additionally, some conventions in the discipline and certain types of scholarly performances of Hip-Hop scholarship render blackness pathological. . . . ‘Owning My Masters: The Rhetorics of Rhymes & Revolutions’ serves as one of many possible explorations and analyses of this broader problem. (Carson, 2017)

Authors may also use the preface. Richards (2012), whose dissertation and interview I report on in Chapter 6 (“You can’t sound like Gene Kelly when you have an anonymous examiner”), introduces readers to her “more personal way of writing” using the preface (INT). Stewart (2015) uses the preface to signal what is unconventional about the

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<sup>4</sup> Note: The pdf copy Carson’s (2017) dissertation that I downloaded from Clemson University’s repository does not contain an abstract. Instead, the abstract I refer to here is found on the repository page/entry that houses information regarding Carson’s dissertation as well as the download link for the dissertation pdf file. Please refer to my references page for the link to the entry page and abstract.

dissertation by pointing out what readers will likely struggle with (i.e., the absence of certain conventions):

I will therefore gently ease the reader into my writing style. There will be challenges that most readers will face in reading this dissertation in terms of writing style, including format and punctuation, or lack thereof. The use of the Nisga'a language may also be a challenge for most readers. (p. vi)

Other ways authors address the unconventionality of their dissertation includes using chapter or section headings that appear early on in the dissertation's table of contents, thus serving as a sort of announcement, as illustrated by the following examples:

Introductory statement about the writing style (Richards, 2012, p.1)

Limitations of a non-traditional dissertation chapter (Bell, 2018, p. vi)

The Form of the Dissertation: Scalar (Dixon, 2014, p. viii)

For the Reader: The Way (Buchanan, 2020, p. vii)

In addition to announcing the unconventionality of the dissertation, the headings also correspond to pockets in the dissertation that are intended to pre-emptively address readers' potential concerns. Buchanan (2020), for instance, opts to address readers directly in a subsection of the dissertation entitled "For the Reader: The Way." In this section, Buchanan (2020) identifies the absence of a convention—specifically the "common structure" of dissertations—and, in so doing, draws readers' expectations out into the open. Given the possibility that readers may not be aware that they have expectations regarding the form of a dissertation, this seems like a particularly useful strategy (Paré et al., 2009). By telling readers what they cannot expect, Buchanan creates the space for telling readers what they can expect instead:

This dissertation does not follow a common structure often seen in the academy which includes chapters denoting a research question, the literature review, methodology, findings, implications and recommendations (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Rather, this dissertation, through a weaving of prose, poetry, figures, and art, reflects on what Leggo (2012) described as “research as searching” (p.10). (Buchanan, 2020, p. 3)

Of course, authors can and do vary how they address or signal the unconventional nature of their work across the entirety of the dissertation, for instance combining subtlety in the abstract with more direct discussion elsewhere. Visconti (2015a) indicates the “uniqueness” of their dissertation in their acknowledgments and opts for an indirect approach in the abstract to their dissertation. For example, towards the end of the abstract Visconti (2015a) indicates that the project explored three research areas, each framed by two questions. Here are two questions lifted from the third “research area”:

Can we separate the values of textual scholarship from the physical manifestations of these values? How might this clarification help us imagine new types of digital edition that hold true to those values? (Visconti, 2015a, Abstract)

In these questions, Visconti (2015a) asks whether the expression of scholarship can be something *other* than material and textual, or print-based, and if so, how these other expressions might be appreciated and valued alongside more conventional manifestations of scholarly communication. By asking whether the values that underpin textual scholarship might be applicable or transferrable to “new types” of scholarship, Visconti (2015a) is setting up to make a case for the value of their dissertation (which incorporates the creation of a digital edition) and the role it (as well as others) plays in efforts to clarify and (re)imagine what’s valued/valuable when it comes to academic scholarship—a topic that is explored in more depth in Chapter 11. Tran (2019) uses the dissertation’s abstract to introduce research questions that, similar to Visconti’s (2015a) approach, also direct readers’ attention to the multimodal focus and nature of Tran’s (2019) dissertation:

The research questions explored in this study are: what are the lived experiences of Ph.D. Education graduate students who created multimodal dissertations? What is my

lived experience as someone conducting a multimodal Ph.D. dissertation in Education? What do students understand to be the affordances and constraints of multimodal dissertations? What do I understand to be the affordances and constraints of my research process? And what are the implications of promoting multimodal dissertations in the social sciences? (Tran, 2019, p. ii)

By asking a question regarding the implication of “promoting multimodal dissertations in the social sciences” (Tran, 2019, p. iii), we are led to assume that such dissertations are not typical at the time of Tran’s dissertation. Thus, readers are left with an impression that evokes what *is* typical, and therefore conventional—monomodal, textual scholarship in Tran’s (2019) case.

In the previous section, I explored the descriptions questionnaire participants offered of dissertations that depart from conventions. Then, in this section, I highlighted some of the ways authors signal the unconventional nature of their dissertations. In the next section, I take a closer look at the meta-commentary Stewart (2015) draws on to signal the unconventional nature of his dissertation. I also consider how Stewart uses other tools alongside his meta-commentary, such as extra spacing, punctuation (or lack thereof), and the Nisga’a language to perform, enact, and explore his experiences with settler-colonialism, both within and outside of academic spaces, as well as the obstacles this can present Indigenous academics who wish to privilege Indigenous knowledges and, thereby, decentre settler-colonialism.

*“I will therefore gently ease the reader into my writing style”: Strategic appropriation as a form of resistance*

Like many of the other authors mentioned in the previous section, Stewart (2015) similarly flags the unconventionality of his dissertation strategies by indicating an absence of certain conventions in the dissertation’s preface. However, unlike the others, Stewart (2015) also makes use of *conventions in unconventional ways* to highlight their limitations

as well as the obstacles they can introduce for Indigenous academics who seek to centre Indigenous knowledges. For instance, Stewart comments directly on the limitations of “standard or conventional academic English” (p. xi), resists these conventions through the use of atypical spacing or omission of punctuation, and makes use of conventional academic English in a way that appears to make it intentionally feel intrusive. At times, Stewart also appears to avoid remedying tensions that arise between the use and disuse of conventions, as well as between the conventional and unconventional aspects of his dissertation. As such, I believe Stewart repurposes this tension in generative ways that allow him to meet other aims, mobilizing it, for example, as a metaphor and an enactment of the ongoing history of settler colonialism and Indigenous resurgence in Canada (cf. Hayden, 2016; Smith, 2012).

In the following passage, for example, Stewart (2015) draws attention to the typically unmentioned aspect of preparing and submitting a doctoral dissertation:

All research, writing and formatting was done by me as the author. All dissertation elements required by the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies at the University of British Columbia have been included in this dissertation. (Stewart, 2015, p. ix)

What stands out most to me about the above passage is the distinction made between the work done by Stewart as an Indigenous author and the dissertation elements required by the University of British Columbia’s (UBC) Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies. The “me as the author” is all but encircled, fortified by the protective full-stop offered by the period that follows the statement, and the statement about the “dissertation elements required by. . . the University of British Columbia” is located in a sentence that sits adjacent, but separate from the “me as the author” (Stewart, 2015, p. ix).

Prior to these two sentences, Stewart (2015) explains to readers how, in his “initial submission to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies,” he “privileged the Nisga’a

language” over the English translations for each word or phrase (p. vii), however it seems there was some disagreement about this practice and a request to place English translations before Nisga’a words or phrases. The convention of privileging English over the introduction of words or concepts from additional languages was problematic for a few reasons, notably: “English first changes the meaning: for example, using the word house for wilp deadens the meaning, and adaawak is a more complex idea than the English translation” (Stewart, 2015, p. vii). As such, Stewart (2015) writes, “out of respect to Indigenous ancestors, the Indigenous language should come first, followed by English” translations (p. vii). However, it seems that adopting this practice was at odds with another convention, that of being consistent:

In an attempt to be responsive to the request for consistency in the Preliminary page listings/headings, including the Table of Contents and the Appendices headings listings, I will follow the English [Nisga’a] format. In the main body of the dissertation however, I will use a Nisga’a [English translation] format. (p. vii)

Elsewhere, Stewart signals that he is mindful of the relationship between the writer and the reader (“it is proper protocol and a good relationship that I am trying to create here in this dissertation,” writes Stewart on p. vi), and acknowledges that many readers will face challenges owing to his use of the Nisga’a language, his “writing style,” and his use of “format and punctuation, or lack thereof” (p. vi). To address this, Stewart explains why it’s important for him to use Nisga’a, drawing on the United Nation’s Declaration of Indigenous Peoples to affirm his rights, as “a member of the Nisga’a Nation. . . to cultural expression” (p. v). He explains where in the dissertation readers can find a glossary of the Nisga’a words and phrases that are used, and writes that he “will be laax’algax [translating] every Nisga’a word and phrase used in this dissertation, in the spirit of reciprocity, into English” (Stewart, 2015, p. vi).

As Stewart alludes to in the above quote, the English translations of Nisga'a phrases are found between square brackets ([ ]), which dually function to amplify (or privilege) and protect the Nisga'a language by literally acting as containers for the English language. Further, Stewart's attempt to privilege Nisga'a as much as possible over the English translations (e.g., by placing the English translations in square brackets) lends the impression that it is the inclusion of English translations that is unconventional rather than the other way around.

As I hint at in an earlier, consistency is a common convention in standard academic English writing, particularly when it comes to spelling and defining words. But, in a deliberative move that simultaneously functions as a rhetorical device, Stewart (2015) demonstrates how prescriptive advice to remain consistent might not be well-suited to instances where the meaning of words can change, even when these words otherwise appear to remain the same. So, instead of writing:

story / chapter [adawaak]

or house [wilp],

Stewart writes:

adawaak [story / chapter]. (p. xi)

As well as:

adaawak [story or teaching]. (p. xi)

And:

adawaak [oral history / story / purpose]. (p. xxxi)

Readers might notice that adaawak is also spelled differently (e.g., as adaawak and as adaawak). This variation in spelling might be reflective of different values held by speakers of the Nisga'a language, as well as the ongoing legacy of settler-colonialism in Canada. The use of the forward slash is also intentional, functioning as what Stewart refers to as a "navigational aid" (p. xii). In this case, the forward slash ( / ) is intended to connect "words

of similar meaning / emphasis” (Stewart, 2015, p. xii). Stewart provides a chart in the preface that explains the use of this aid and others, such as the backward slash ( \ ) which is used to “emphasize incompatibility” or indicate when something is “considered grammatically wrong” (p. xii).

### *On the reception of Stewart’s dissertation*

In the preface of his dissertation, Stewart (2015) shares how he received an initial rejection from his institution’s ethics board because the application was written in a way that conformed with (and affirmed) Stewart’s experience and positionality. “The BREB [Behavioural Research Ethics Board],” he writes, “found the writing style of the original application to be deficient and questioned my writing ability and knowledge of English, suggesting that I hire an editor” (Stewart, 2015, p. x). Telling us more in an article published later about his experience, Stewart (2019) describes having to decide between to resubmit the application in standard edited academic English or to proceed anyway (without clearance). Between these two choice points, proceeding without clearance was the riskiest:

my supervisory committee met to discuss the options one option we discussed was not to make a submission to the behavioral research ethics board but for me to go ahead with my research and write up knowing full well that the faculty of graduate and postdoctoral studies would ask if I received approval from the research ethics board that was the most risky of options we discussed as there would be a high possibility that my dissertation would not be accepted for review by the faculty of graduate and postdoctoral studies concluding that the decision was mine as I was the one to be affected weighing the risks I decided to resubmit the application using standard academic conventions my application was approved without further delay

(Stewart, 2019, p.9)

As we will soon come to learn, Stewart is not the only dissertation author to decide that some conventions are just not worth risking the degree for. In fact, the next chapter will introduce readers to another dissertator who needed to decide whether introducing some levity into a review of the literature on chronic illness was worth the risk of being failed by an anonymous examiner.

Despite his initial rejection, Stewart's dissertation has since been received quite well. The statistics generated on the page that houses Stewart's dissertation in UBC's collection of theses and dissertations indicated that it has been downloaded over 11,858 times and viewed over 21,979 times (last accessed on January 19, 2022). To put this into perspective, I found just three other PhD dissertations at UBC completed in the same year (2015) and program ("interdisciplinary studies") as Stewart. Adding the total number of downloads together for *all three* dissertations brings us to a sum of 612, with an average of 204 downloads for each dissertation. Beyond page views and dissertation downloads, however, are the reactions from communities—Indigenous and otherwise. Reflecting on some the positive reception, Stewart (2019) writes:

the university examiner said when I read your dissertation it was like i  
was hearing my grandfather speak in the longhouse  
to myself I thought success to the professor I said  
t'ooyaksiy niin |thank you|

(Stewart, 2019, p. 3)

## Chapter Summary

This chapter began by exploring perceptions of unconventional dissertations from the vantage point of questionnaire participants. Then, I presented examples of some of the meta-commentary authors use to signal the unconventional nature of their dissertations, including the meta-commentary Stewart (2015) uses alongside other tools (e.g., punctuation) to enact the intervention he seeks to make in a predominately Eurocentric

(settler colonial) discipline. In the next chapter, we are introduced to the first of six profiles of participants and their dissertations. Like some of the authors whose dissertations I presented as examples in this chapter, Dr. Richards also makes use of meta-commentary or meta-discourse to “flag” the unconventionality of her dissertation.

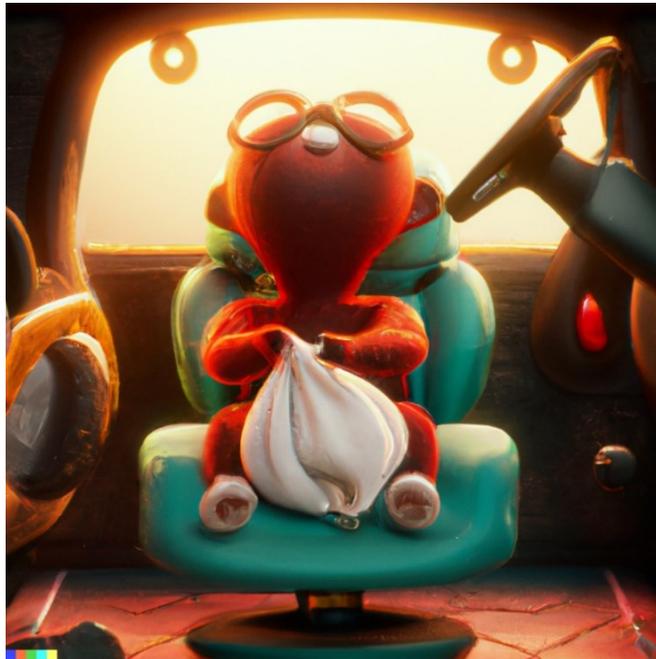
## Chapter 6: You can't sound like Gene Kelly when you have an anonymous external examiner

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>DR. ROSE RICHARDS</b> <b>YEAR: 2012</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>TITLE OF DISSERTATION</b> "You look very well for a transplant": Autoethnographic narrative and identity in chronic kidney disease, kidney failure and the life post-transplant</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>UNIVERSITY &amp; DISCIPLINE KEYWORDS</b> Stellenbosch University (South Africa). Psychology. Chronic Illness. Autoethnography.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>SUPERVISOR(S) OR CHAIR(S)</b> Dr. Leslie Swartz (Psychology).</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>UNCONVENTIONAL ELEMENTS</b> Uses auto-ethnography to study lived experience with kidney disease, kidney failure, and transplantation. Choice of topic and method challenges the epistemological and methodological orientations that underpin discipline. Use and study of narrative writing—"illness narratives"—also unconventional.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>MACROSTRUCTURE</b> Traditional-Simple.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>DATA COLLECTED &amp; OTHER NOTES</b> Interview transcripts (INT), dissertation (Richards, 2012). Main concern/risk: anonymous external examiners.</p>
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**Table 8.** Summary table for Dr. Rose Richards (2012).

## General overview and description

Dr. Richards successfully completed her PhD in Psychology at Stellenbosch University (S.A.) in 2012. Richards's dissertation, entitled "‘You look very well for a transplant’: Autoethnographic narrative and identity in chronic kidney disease, kidney failure and the life post-transplant," seeks to intervene in the heavily medicalized discourse surrounding kidney failure. Much of what is known and written on kidney failure is dominated by health care professionals writing for other health care professionals about patients. Advocating that the experiences and perspectives of patients themselves lend a different kind of knowledge that is urgently needed, Richards uses autoethnography to explore her experiences with "end-stage renal disease, dialysis, transplantation and the life after transplant" (Abstract).



**Figure 5.** For Richards's (2012) dissertation, I asked DALL-E to visualise a plush toy kidney getting out of a fancy car.

As far as Richards can tell, her dissertation was one of the first doctoral dissertations to use autoethnography in the department of psychology at Stellenbosch University, and in South Africa as a whole. The decision to draw on autoethnography as the

method led to other choices that were deemed unconventional, such as the inclusion of more personal, narrative forms of writing. Looking through the lens of Tardy (2016) suggests that the unconventionality of Richards's dissertation occurs at the practice and linguistic and textual form levels. That is, Richards utilizes an unconventional methodology and incorporates non-canonical forms of writing.

Richards's dissertation follows a "traditional-simple" dissertation macrostructure. Dissertations that follow this organizational pattern tend to report on a single study and are primarily unfold in an introduction, methods, results, and discussion (or IMRD) sequence (Paltridge, 2002)—although Richards's chapters are named in a more descriptive manner (see Table 9). In the next section of this chapter, I explore how the interview data revealed fascinating insight into Richards's negotiation of the unconventionality of her dissertation and the conditions surrounding its production and reception—bringing to relief the personal story that shadowed the academic story. I also explore how the decision to follow a more conventional macrostructure was a strategic attempt to counterbalance the unconventionality of Richards's dissertation with the institutional requirement that the dissertation be assessed by anonymous external examiners who may or may not be receptive to an unconventional methodology or non-canonical forms of academic writing.

**Table 9.** Chapter headings in Richards’s (2012) dissertation presented alongside a traditional-simple macrostructure.

<b>Richards’s (2012) chapter headings</b>	<b>Traditional-Simple</b> <i>One study, IMRD format</i>
Chapter 1: Introduction – borderlands, thresholds and the landscape of life post-transplant	
Chapter 2: The writing of illness – remembrance, remembering or something else	
Chapter 3: Autoethnography as methodology/metamorphosis /Métissage – writing in the third space	Introduction
Chapter 4: End stage renal disease or the birth of 548820 – “protracted	Methods
Chapter 5: Crossing over – the discursive (third) space of dialysis	Results
Chapter 6: Life after transplant – a strange sort of liminality, or “you look very well for a transplant”	Discussion
Chapter 7: Conclusion: inhabiting the littoral zone	Conclusion

### **Arriving at autoethnography and the dissertation, or “How do I tell my own story of this?”**

Something happened to me in my personal life, and this is the second sort of hidden shadow side of the story I’m telling you, so if I can just pause the story there and I’ll just backtrack to when I started university. I can now explain, that was my academic story, now there’s the personal story that lies beneath it. (INT)

We are about 10 minutes into our interview when Dr. Richards tells me she would like to “pause the story” so she can “backtrack” to when she began university (INT). It’s at this point that she indicates there are two storylines at play—the academic one, and the “personal story that lies beneath it” (INT). As I listen, she walks me through both storylines. At first, they appear to be separate but, like her dissertation, the personal and the

academic merge eventually. The interview, being unstructured, initially gives me the impression of being all over the place. But looking more closely reveals there is a sort of loose structure. There is the lead up to the dissertation—or, the “how I ended up with the topic that I did” (INT) part of the story. Then, there is the “how I ended up where I am now” (INT) part of the story, signalling the completion of her unconventional dissertation.

Between the two points lay, as Dr. Richards puts it, the “unconventional path” she took:

I took what I think is an unconventional path to where I am. First, I made an unconventional disciplinary jump and then I ended up researching something using a methodology that was considered unconventional, where I am anyway. It involved writing unconventionally and doing a lot of things that were, I felt, quite experimental and fun, but were maybe not more traditional. (INT)

In the above quote, Richards summarizes the three unconventional “jumps” that characterize her unconventional path. The first “jump” is a disciplinary one. While perhaps it may not seem all that unusual to a reader more familiar with universities in North American contexts, Richards explains to me how “jumping” disciplines is considered unconventional for someone in her context:

Richards: I was coming in, technically, to study in psychology at a doctoral level without any other psychology behind me.

Brittany: So, it sounds like you had to make a huge disciplinary jump, and it’s not typical to just be able to go right into a completely different discipline, without having any sort of background (?).

Richards: Absolutely. And especially because—it might be different where you are—at my university [Stellenbosch University, South Africa], people aren’t all that enthusiastic about interdisciplinary studies. They like you to house your study in a particular department. So, you wouldn’t do an interdisciplinary social sciences degree, you would be in psychology, or in sociology or whatever. . . .But it’s not like I had to

be a psychologist in order to do it. I just needed to be allowed to study in the department, to research in the department. . . . However, now I have the unique situation of constantly having to explain that though I have a PhD in psychology, I'm not a psychologist.

The second and third “jumps” relate to Richards’s choice of topic and methodological orientation:

I ended up writing—doing—my dissertation about my own experience of kidney disease. I brought in what I learned from other fields. What I ended up looking at was, ‘how do I tell my own story of this?’ In order to do it, I combined personal and academic writing, which is what you do with auto-ethnography. There are many, many other ways it could have been done. I used one [auto-ethnography]. (INT)

Richards uses the metaphor of a shadow to describe the “personal story that lies beneath” her “academic story” (INT). The personal is often obscured in academia, particularly in conventional academic writing practices that exalt the methods and styles of communication historically associated with scientific disciplines. In this narrowed arena, personal stories become hidden from academic view. For some, while this approach may bring with it a sense of safety, for others it can seem overly artificial.

While the metaphor of a “hidden shadow side” might signal something to fear, for Richards, it was more of an emancipatory discovery that brought a “voice” with it that “was never going to be silenced again” (Richards, 2012, p. xiii). Both in our interview as well as in her dissertation, Richards attributes the awakening of this voice to an experience she had while applying for a mortgage in South Africa, where it is not uncommon to require mortgage applicants to purchase health insurance. Here’s an excerpt from her dissertation:

I had taken out a mortgage on my house and had been offered health insurance as part of the agreement, which included property insurance and other things. To obtain

the insurance, which would have given me financial cover should I suffer from illness or injury, I had to undergo a series of blood tests. (Richards, 2012, p. xi)

Dr. Richards agreed to the tests and medical examinations. Much to her “absolute devastation” (INT), however, she learned that while the mortgage was approved, the health insurance was not:

I went through all of that, unsuspecting. And then I got the mortgage, but I didn’t get the health insurance that went with it. You had to have some sort of insurance policy in case something happens to you. But I didn’t get it and they wouldn’t tell me why. Then suddenly, to my absolute—it’s very difficult to explain—to my absolute devastation I realized it was my *transplant* that was the problem. They must have gotten my medical records and seen I had a transplant. (INT)

As an infant, Richards had sustained serious kidney damage and grew up with “impaired kidney function” that required careful monitoring and management (INT). By the time she was a first-year undergraduate student, however, she learned that her “kidneys were going to fail in the fairly near future” and that she required a transplant (INT). She went through the transplant process in 1991 and finished her undergraduate degree. By the time she had to apply for a mortgage in order to make repairs on the house she inherited from her mother it was 2007 and she had been working for some time in a writing centre. She tells me how, after the transplant, life just sort of “got on” in a “predictable way” until it didn’t anymore—until this “thing happened” (INT). In addition to being denied health insurance, Richards struggled to “get a straight answer” from anyone as to as to *why* she was denied—and it seemed as though no one was really willing to listen to her (“They didn’t want to hear my story,” INT).

In her dissertation, Dr. Richards shares the fear and shock that accompanied being told she was “suffering from several disastrous” but “unnamed ailments,” and that she

should “seek medical assistance as soon as possible” (Richards, 2012, p. xii). Elaborating further on this experience, Richards writes:

No one would tell me anything. They would not tell me what was wrong with my blood tests. They would not tell me if I were in immediate danger. All they would tell me was that I didn't qualify for health insurance. I was terrified. As an organ transplant recipient, the last thing you want to hear is that there is something wrong with your blood results – something so awful no one will discuss it with you or allow you any health insurance. Kidney function is monitored through serum creatinine. Blood tests tell you how well your transplanted kidney is functioning. (Richards, 2012, p. xii)

After re-taking the blood tests, however, Richards received results that “were perfectly normal, even for a ‘normal’ person” (Richards, 2012, p. xii). It took some time for the fear and shock to subside but when it did, she was so furious that she was “unable to speak” (Richards, 2012, p. xii). Feeling unable to speak, Dr. Richards decided she needed to write because it was “the only way” she could “relieve any of the pressure that was building up” (Richards, 2012, p. xii). Writing was a way she could care for herself, and it made her feel better. In her dissertation, Dr. Richards describes how her writing “gushed” out of her pen, ink pouring forth like water from “the breaking of a dam or levee”:

The pent-up feelings of nearly twenty years gushed out of my pen like the breaking of a dam or levee. I wrote about things I never knew I felt. It was as if I had found a secret self hidden inside me who had lived and experienced awful things without my knowledge as I went calmly about my day-to-day business for years. This being had escaped, had found a voice and was never going to be silenced again. (Richards, 2012, p. xiii)

As this was all going on, Richards continued to work at the writing centre where the team was undertaking an “educational biography” (INT) research project. This project focused on

“the routes people took to get to university,” as well as their perspectives “of their situation now” (INT).

Being involved in the educational biographies project was a pivotal experience for Dr. Richards, perhaps intensified because she was denied health insurance around the same time. Richards described her experience with the project to me as an eye-opening one that shifted the axis of her world in “magical” ways (INT). Richards shares how this onto-epistemological and methodological eye-opening unfolded in the following quote:

What was really interesting about this project for me was that it exposed me to the reality that you could research almost anything. Initially I had thought that you could only research certain things because I had taken a very traditional route in university. And I suddenly started to see, not only could you research almost anything, but you could theorize it in really exciting ways. And you could use methodologies that I didn't even know existed. So, it was like the scales fell from my eyes, but in a good way. It was a wonderful experience, because I suddenly realized the magical sorts of things you could research. (INT)

In addition to learning that there was a whole body of research “specifically about writing,” Richards also discovered there were various ways one could research writing (INT). Through her involvement in the educational biographies project, Dr. Richards stumbled upon auto-ethnography and realized that it described what she had been trying to do with her own writing (INT).

When Dr. Richards discovered that she was engaging in an auto-ethnography “of sorts” (INT), she brought her work to her colleague, Brenda Leibowitz, who took a look and introduced her to Professor Leslie Swartz, a professor in the psychology department at Stellenbosch University:

He [Swartz] took a look at my work and said, ‘This is great, have you thought about maybe doing it as a PhD?’ And I said, ‘Well no I haven't. Why would I want to?’

Somehow, he talked me into doing a PhD instead of writing an article or a smaller piece on it. So, [that's how] I ended up doing a doctoral dissertation. (INT)

At the time, auto-ethnography was neither widely recognized nor accepted in South Africa, Richards explains:

I know that auto-ethnography isn't a new concept. I think it's even become a bit more widely recognized, but [back in 2007-2008] it wasn't. In my country, that sort of thing [auto-ethnography] wasn't that well known back then. Even now it isn't really. We're a small country, and we're not particularly rich, so we do tend to kind of mainstream things because that's how you get funding and so on. (INT)

Despite this, Swartz was open to “experimenting” with methodologies and knowledgeable “about health and illness research, especially in psychology and allied sort of fields,” so it was a good fit in terms of the topic and supervision (INT). Richards said that, because of his background, Swartz foresaw a “big need for these types of narrative projects” (INT). In fact, she remembers him saying something to the extent of: “The wave is starting to crest with this type of research, and you want to be at the top of it.’ You know, sort of this research is becoming popular *now* basically” (INT).

Richards's (2012) dissertation research sought to intervene in a body of scholarship primarily overrepresented by medicalized perspectives by sharing “illness narratives,” or lived experiences with kidney failure and transplantation. These narratives were generated and gathered using autoethnography, which was quite unconventional, both in psychology at Stellenbosch University and in South Africa more broadly.

### **You can't sound like Gene Kelly & expect to get the degree: Navigating the local examination context**

The decision to use auto-ethnography shaped a number of choices Richards and her supervisor had to make, such as when to use narrative writing—or not, as the following interview excerpt illustrates:

Richards: I wrote what I thought was quite a cheerful sort of upbeat literature review and my supervisor, Leslie [Swartz], told me I couldn't use that tone. Especially when talking about subjects like chronic disease and terminal medical conditions and so on.

[Both Rose and Brittany laugh]

Richards: He described it—he said something like, 'You sound like Gene Kelly swinging around a lamppost in *Singing in the Rain*.' To this day, I still don't know what he means! I was just trying to introduce some levity into it to cheer us all up, but unfortunately it didn't quite work. (INT)

Initially, Richards hadn't wanted to write a literature review at all—she wanted to write her dissertation like a novel. But the assessment conditions combined with the timing, relatively new status of auto-ethnography as a method, as well as the disciplinary and departmental contexts at Stellenbosch University necessitated the adoption of a more conventional approach. Richards's dissertation would be evaluated by an internal (to Stellenbosch) examiner in a related but different discipline, as well as two external examiners who would remain anonymous until after the examination was complete. Because I was unfamiliar with the latter approach, I asked Richards if she could elaborate. She explained:

At my university, you and the supervisor draw up a list of several people who could be potential examiners, and then the post-graduate officer in your faculty actually arranges the examiners. So, you don't know who your examiners are going to be until they examine the thesis. Obviously, they can't be just anyone, they'll need to be able to examine the thesis. You also need to have one person from your faculty (but not your department) at your university, another person from South Africa, as well as one international person. (INT)

Because the practice of assessing dissertations in Richards's context included anonymous examiners, Professor Swartz shepherded Richards away from her "Gene Kelly" literature review and idea of writing the dissertation as a novel, seeing the risk to Richards as being too high to justify. Indeed, between the choice of research topic and research method, Richards's dissertation was *already* pushing the boundaries of scholarship considered more typical at the time for doctoral studies in psychology. In addition, Richards's choice of auto-ethnography warranted the use of different ways of writing (e.g., more "personal" forms), which might present an additional challenge if she happened to have an unsympathetic examiner. If the ways in which our social context(s) shape the decisions we make while writing, including what, how, and why we write, are difficult for us to pinpoint as writers, they can be even more challenging to identify as readers and researchers of writing. Yet Richards's dissertation and dissertation writing experience demonstrates how one practice—that of requiring an anonymous external examiner—provoked a series of decisions and responses that influenced the shape and feel of the final product.

### **'Flagging it as Scholarly'**

It doesn't feel like too much of a stretch to say that one of the biggest risks a doctoral student faces is failing the dissertation. It's unimaginable and perhaps not common, but dissertations can and have been failed before. Thus, most doctoral students will need to rely on their supervisors to help them avoid this unlikely (but hypothetically possible) outcome. Supervisors, then, will need to have a keen understanding of the conditions facing the student. If balancing the ways in which the dissertation adheres to conventions with the ways in which it departs is a duty that all supervisors arguably have, then working with dissertations that are notably unconventional—and assessed by anonymous examiners—adds another layer to this complexity. The following quote from our interview provides one example of this complexity in practice:

Dr. Richards: When I was conducting my research, and doing my writing and so on, I wanted to write my dissertation like a novel. Just to see if I could do it. Leslie [supervisor] kept cautioning me, saying, ‘I understand what you’re doing, and I think it’s fun. But remember I’m not going to be the one examining it. And you’re at the start of your career. You know, you want to get the degree.’

. . . .

Britt: How did that sit with you when he said that?

Richards: At first, I felt slightly irritated, because I thought, *well, can’t we just try it out and see how it works?* But Leslie said, essentially, ‘well you can, but are you going to risk your degree for it?’ So, I said, ‘Well probably not.’ Yeah. Then he said, ‘Well how about this, how about you do all the things that you want to do that you’ve discussed with me, but you frame it in such a way that it’s got the traditional chapters you would need in a thesis. And that you explain very clearly, for about a page or so at least, at the start of the dissertation what it is you’re planning to do and how you’re playing with structure and things like that.’ So that’s what I did. He advised me as I went along, telling me to ‘flag this, flag that.’ And so on, so it’s not too free-form and too playful. (INT)

In Richards’s case, Swartz’s concerns seemed to converge around the following questions: Will the average examiner know how to read a dissertation like this? Will they be able to recognize the ways in which it qualifies as scholarly and as a contribution to scholarship? And will they be able to recognize this dissertation as a dissertation? From Swartz’s vantage point as a supervisor (and quite likely experiences as an examiner himself), the dissertation needed to have obvious memory cue, or “flags” (INT), that an examiner could gravitate to. These flags would need to act as navigational aids that could support an examiner in reducing the complexity and difficulty of assessing Richards’s dissertation. Relatedly, controlling the flow of information and carefully attending to the manner in

which the unconventional was introduced, particularly by emphasizing what might be most familiar to an examiner in terms of their sensibilities surrounding a dissertation, was also crucial.

I found there were at least three main “flags” used by Richards and Swartz to mitigate the risk associated with pursuing an unconventional dissertation in light of an anonymous examination requirement mandated by the University. These were meta-discoursal, macrostructural, and metagenre awareness flags. However, while I’ve presented these flags separately here for ease, in reality the three most often appeared to work together in an interconnected manner—most likely due to the nature of writing. For instance, we can use meta-discourse to signal how a dissertation is structured (e.g., “This dissertation unfolds in the following way...”) and, in so doing, plant a macrostructural flag at the same time (e.g., the examiner picks up that the organizational structure of the dissertation follows a typical one, such as one where the introduction and methods chapters are followed by the results and discussion chapters—as Richards’s did). Further, by using metadiscourse to indicate how the text is structured more traditionally, the writer marks (or flags) the text in such a way that tugs on an examiner’s metageneric awareness—they are able to recognize the text in front of them as “a dissertation” by drawing on what they know about dissertations, as well as any experiences they’ve previously had with dissertations (as examiners, readers, writer, and/or supervisors) and, as a result, respond to it accordingly.

Following a more traditional structure and organization, Swartz reasoned, was one way Richards could “show other people that it [the dissertation] is scholarly” (INT):

He [Swartz] said, ‘Look, on a structural level you’re going to need to have chapters that are the types of chapters that you would have to have in a dissertation. Like an introductory chapter, a literature review, a methodology. Those are the things that will flag it as scholarly.’ He said, ‘I know that it’s scholarly, because I’ve walked this

journey with you. / understand how you think and why you're doing what you're doing. But you're going to need to show other people that it's scholarly. So, if they expect a literature review, you need to give them one.' You know, instead of cunningly weaving the literature in. (INT)

One of the first macrostructural flags readers encounter is the table of contents. Richards's table of contents runs about five pages long and provides an overview while hinting at some details. Figure 6 illustrates an example.

**Figure 6.** Overview of the introductory chapter to Richards (2012), taken from the table of contents (p. vi).

Foreword .....	xi
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION - BORDERLANDS, THRESHOLDS AND THE LANDSCAPE OF LIFE POST-TRANSPLANT .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1 Introductory statement about the writing style .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.2 Background.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1.3 Rationale: Challenges in writing about illness .....</b>	<b>4</b>
1.3.1 <i>The medicalisation of vulnerability .....</i>	<i>5</i>
1.3.2 <i>The need for an insider voice.....</i>	<i>6</i>
1.3.3 <i>Illness narrative and the need for a third space.....</i>	<i>7</i>
1.3.4 <i>Liminality in illness.....</i>	<i>9</i>
1.3.5 <i>Littorality and the third space .....</i>	<i>10</i>
<b>1.4 One form of littorality: Kidney disease and how we write about it.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>1.5 The focal issue of my doctoral research.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>1.6 Autoethnography as research design.....</b>	<b>17</b>
1.6.1 <i>Why autoethnography.....</i>	<i>17</i>
1.6.2 <i>How I am using autoethnography .....</i>	<i>19</i>
<b>1.7 Structure of chapters.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>1.8 How I am writing this dissertation.....</b>	<b>23</b>

Richards shares with me how she wanted to introduce readers to her “more personal way of writing right from the beginning” (INT). Originally, she thought she might use footnotes as a way to shift between these forms of writing. So, for instance, she “could have footnotes that would be either one narrative or the other” (INT). But, she says, Swartz suggested she not “do anything too eccentric” (INT). Thus, if attending to the manner in which the

unconventional aspects of Richards's dissertation were introduced was crucial, so was mitigating the amount or intensity of unconventionality present. As Richards's supervisor, Swartz's role in part required him to temper the unconventionality of her dissertation, particularly because neither of them wished to risk losing the examiner or Richards's chance at obtaining her degree—perhaps leading Swartz to err more on the side of caution. However, as much as graduating with a doctorate was a critical goal for Richards, it wasn't her sole motivation, which meant that erring too far on the conventional side chafed a bit. So, a compromise (in the form of a foreword) was struck:

What we compromised on, was that we agreed that I could use my more personal way of writing right from the beginning. So, I spoke openly in the first person. I laced it with emotional asides and descriptions and sort of humorous interjections. You know, I tried to make it more conversational and more playful in that way. (INT)

Here's how Richards's foreword begins:

A time comes when one can tell a story. It may be immediately after an event or it may take a long time for the time to be right. In my case it took me nearly 20 years and a series of unfortunate events to be able to start telling the story of my experience of Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD), End-Stage Renal Disease (ESRD), dialysis, transplantation and the life afterwards. Something changed to allow me to do this. What changed? Possibly me. Possibly having sufficient distance . . . . Possibly time and experience allowed an older me to have some points of reference to be able to explain or narrate some parts of the story. But I think it was largely fury. This is what set it off. This foreword is not the story itself, but the preamble to it and simultaneously, ironically enough, the sequel. A story is seldom linear. . . it is messy and recursive. . . . This is what I experienced when I wrote my story. I always seemed to be starting. And starting again. . . But let us not get ahead of ourselves and instead sustain that illusion of narrative, that one thing happened after the other. Let us pretend this really

is the beginning, because I need to show you where the story started for me. And it started long after I thought it had ended. To start this story properly I need to go back to an event in 2006, sixteen years after my transplant and 37 years after my kidneys were damaged by Haemolytic Uremic Syndrome (HUS). It happened like this... (Richards, 2012, p. xi)

The foreword serves a crucial role in Richards's dissertation. On the one hand, it provides space to enact a central argument of Richards's dissertation, which is that writing in a manner more traditionally associated with personal or narrative (rather than academic) writing disrupts a tendency of "illness" research to privilege doctors and their medical practices over the knowledge patients can bring "through their experiences of their own conditions" (Richards, 2012, p. 7). The argument for using narrative writing also forms one of the interventions Richards (2012) hopes to make with her dissertation—namely, that "illness narratives" are critical and necessary additions to the literature surrounding "illness" (Richards, 2012, p. 7). As Richards explains:

I was trying to shift the power from the more formal, distanced perspective to something a lot more personal, because I felt that was something that was missing from a lot of discussions about people living medical conditions. It becomes more about the medical condition than about the person. (INT)

On the other hand, the foreword also provides a "flag" for examiners. In English a "foreword" typically refers to a sort of introductory piece written for a book by someone other than the book's author (OED, n.d.). The foreword occupies a liminal space, where it functions as both *a part of* and *apart from* the body of work being introduced. By appropriating the idea of a foreword and putting it to use in her dissertation, Richards opens up a space in the dissertation that is both *and* neither. Using the space that the foreword provides, Richards is able to playfully suggest that a story—she doesn't use the word dissertation anywhere in the foreword—is about to come, leading the reader to

assume that the rest of the dissertation will proceed in a similar manner. While this might disrupt an examiner's metageneric expectations of a doctoral dissertation, the 'both and neither' space afforded by the foreword provides some safety in that it is and isn't (at least technically) a part of the dissertation. Thus, even if it appears at first to be a glitch, the presence of the foreword is a flag, one that tugs on examiners to temporarily pause and re-check their bearings—albeit not for long, because readers are then plunged, whether turning or scrolling to the next page, into a reassuringly familiar chapter (“Introduction”) with a sub-heading that reads, “1.1 Introductory statement about the writing style” (Richards, 2012, p. 1).

Both the introductory statement and the introduction as a whole contain a significant number of flags. The decision to frame the introduction this way was motivated by Swartz's concerns with whether an “average examiner” would know how to “read” Richards's dissertation:

Leslie [Swartz] said you can't guarantee the average examiner is going to necessarily know how to read it. They're not going to read it and understand you're using a certain theoretical approach unless you spell it out for them, and go, 'My theoretical approach is this...' Otherwise, they're not going to see it. It'll be too implicit. He was worried that those more scholarly things and the way in which some of my ideas are based in other people's scholarship—you know how you come from a certain perspective—may be lost.

He said, 'if you're using a methodology that people are not that familiar with here in our country, and it's already a philosophically complex methodology to use, then it's going to become almost invisible to them if you don't kind of spell out what the methodology involves. You can't just use the methodology. You'll have to problematize it and explain why you're using it.' (INT)

Richards's (2012) dissertation introduction is divided into eight main sections. Two of the eight sections are explicitly dedicated to explaining the way the dissertation is written. One of the sections provides a preview of chapter in the dissertation—a metadiscoursal and macrostructural flag that is typical for most dissertations. However, the chapter previews themselves also argue for the legitimacy of Richards's approach and are indicative of the “flag it as scholarly” strategy Swartz and Richards adopted. In our interview, Richards tells me that she knew she “was going to have to construct an academic argument about something” because “then it would have that quality in it, in some form, that a reader could recognize” (INT). Here's an example from her dissertation:

The literature review (Chapter 2) gives an overview of illness writing, with particular focus on writing about kidney disease. . . . I want to achieve two things in this chapter: an understanding of how . . . are treated as part of the experience of chronic and acute illness, and specifically how writers . . . address this. *This will go part of the way to explaining why I have decided to write about my own experience of . . . , and why I decided to do it in such detail. My research aims to continue the insider voice tradition, but to approach the telling of the story of kidney disease, dialysis, transplantation and life post-transplant from a theorised, academic view that recognises the complexities and implications of liminality for this condition. My literature review will show why this type of research needs to be done.* (Richards, 2012, p. 21, italics added)

Without knowing the conditions surrounding the production of Richards's dissertation, it would have been easy to miss the way in which it is unconventional. It's print-based, follows the five chapter format, and relies on a methodology that would appear to me to be fairly well established, albeit not necessarily everyone's cup of tea. However, the traditional, if not more conservative appearance of Richards's dissertation was a key part of the “flag it as scholarly” (INT) strategy laid out by Swartz.

While Richards relied on Swartz's ability to anticipate and navigate whatever risks might arise, she also partially attributes the success of her dissertation to Swartz's "reputation and standing" (INT). In our interview, she explained how, "because he was a professor in the psychology department, and in our country a very well-respected researcher" she thought "he got a bit more leeway than the average supervisor might have got" (INT). It also helped that Swartz was open to different forms of writing and experimenting with methodologies, and, at the same time, a highly prolific academic writer himself. Interestingly, when looking at Professor Swartz's university profile page, I noticed he recently completed a second doctorate, this time in creative writing—perhaps Richards's dissertation sparked something. In a recent email (September 18, 2022), Richards tells me that Swartz published the memoir he developed for the creative writing doctorate, and that she too is undertaking a second PhD in creative writing.

### **"How far can you push it before it breaks?"**

I actually found my dissertation really fun to write. It was playful. I loved seeing how one could twist and bend conventions, and yet still not quite break them. How far can you push it before it breaks? It's quite entertaining. How far can you push it, and still get it to count as academic writing? I found it very rewarding. (INT)

One of the fundamental questions underpinning the present study is, as Dr. Richards puts it so succinctly in the quote above, "How far can you push it, and still get it to count as academic writing?" Richards's case illustrates how there isn't one answer but several, each answer dependent on the contexts and conditions surrounding the production of the dissertation. Both the above quote and Richards's dissertation experience also underscore the push and pull dynamic so frequently reported in the literature on dissertation writing and genre change. As Paltridge and Starfield (2020) recently noted, "while doctoral theses, as with all genres, are dynamic and open to change, there are both choices and constraints

(Devitt, 2004) in terms of how they can be written” (p. 13). Continuing in the same vein, the authors add:

Choice and constraint, thus, need to be understood within the disciplinary context and expectations of the institution in which the thesis is being written. Both writing teachers and supervisors need to be aware of this so that they can advise their students accordingly in the writing of their theses and dissertations. (Paltridge & Starfield, 2020, p. 13)

Richards’s (2012) dissertation research sought to intervene in a body of scholarship primarily overrepresented by medicalized perspectives by sharing “illness narratives,” or lived experiences with kidney failure and transplantation. To achieve this, Richards relied on auto-ethnography—an unconventional method in psychology at Stellenbosch University, but also in South Africa more broadly. To temper the unconventional method selected, Richards’s supervisor recommended following a more traditional dissertation organizational style (IMRD).

## **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, we were introduced to Dr. Rose Richards who successfully completed her PhD in Psychology at Stellenbosch University (South Africa) in 2012. One of the first doctoral dissertations to use autoethnography in the department of psychology at Stellenbosch University and in South Africa as a whole, Richards’s dissertation sought to intervene in the heavily medicalized discourses surrounding chronic illness. Arguing that the experiences and perspectives of patients are missing—and therefore urgently needed—Richards focused her exploration on her experiences with end-stage kidney disease, transplantation, and life after the transplant.

I also explored the notion that dissertation authors may uphold some conventions in order to break with others. Stellenbosch University requires that doctoral dissertations are assessed by anonymous external examiners, which introduced the risk of being paired

with an examiner who might not be receptive to unconventional methodologies or non-canonical forms of academic writing. The unconventionality of Richards's dissertation thus presented the need to make some strategic decisions that included following an organizational pattern (or macrostructure) conventionally associated with the format of reports on scientific experiments (i.e., Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion—or IMRD). The next chapter, which considers Clarke's (2016) dissertation in Information Studies, investigates another strategic counterbalancing attempt.

## Chapter 7: What's my supervisor gonna do with a novel?

<p><b>DR. RACHEL CLARKE</b> YEAR: 2016</p> <p><b>TITLE OF DISSERTATION</b> It's not Rocket Library Science: Design epistemology and American librarianship</p> <p><b>UNIVERSITY &amp; DISCIPLINE KEYWORDS</b> University of Washington (U.S.), Information Studies, Library Science, Design.</p> <p><b>SUPERVISOR(S) OR CHAIR(S)</b> Dr. Allyson Carlyle (Information Studies).</p> <p><b>UNCONVENTIONAL ELEMENTS</b> Uses design thinking to challenge the philosophical tenets—that is, the ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological assumptions—underpinning the profession and discipline of librarianship. Advocates for the reconceptualization of the field of librarianship as a design-based field rather than a scientific one. Uses a critical inquiry approach more associated with the humanities (analysing artifacts using “close reading”).</p> <p><b>MACROSTRUCTURE</b> Traditional-Simple.</p> <p><b>DATA COLLECTED &amp; OTHER NOTES</b> Interview transcripts (INT), dissertation (Clarke, 2016), and other textual data including blog posts, research articles (e.g., Clarke 2018) and conference papers. Awarded the iSchools Doctoral Dissertation Award in 2017 and the Eugene Garfield Dissertation Award from the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) in 2018.</p>
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**Table 10.** Summary table for Dr. Rachel Ivy Clarke (2016)

## General overview and description

Dr. Rachel Ivy Clarke successfully completed her PhD in Information Studies at the University of Washington in 2016. Clarke's dissertation, entitled "'It's not Rocket Library Science: Design epistemology and American librarianship,'" challenges the view that American librarianship should be considered a social science and argues instead that librarianship has roots in design epistemologies that, if nurtured, would better suit the field particularly as libraries struggle to catch up to today's societal needs. Bringing together critical inquiry techniques from the humanities with elements of design thinking, Clarke examines three significant cases in library history to show how "much of librarianship aligns with fundamental epistemological approaches and tenets of design" (Abstract).



**Figure 7.** For Clarke's (2016) dissertation, I asked DALL-E to create a painting like image of an academic questioning rocket science in a library.

If Dr. Clarke hadn't volunteered for an interview, I doubt I would have located her dissertation on my own or known it was considered unconventional for her department. This is mostly because, to borrow from Tardy's (2016) analysis of genre innovation in

academic writing, Clarke's (2016) dissertation is unconventional at the level of content and practice—that is, her dissertation incorporates surprising or uncommon ideas and draws on an atypical or unusual research approach. On the whole, I tended to avoid explicitly assessing whether the “content” of a dissertation would be considered unconventional because, first, I reasoned it was unwarranted to expect I'd have the level of expertise required to make such an assessment. Second, I reasoned all dissertations ought to be considered at least a little unconventional in terms of content—given that a typical criterion for the dissertation is that of originality or novelty. However, Dr. Clarke did volunteer for an interview, which is how I learned that the unconventionality of her dissertation boiled down to two main things: she argued for the need to reconceptualise the field and discipline of librarianship as one that is design-based rather than science-based, and she utilized a research approach more closely allied with the humanities, despite the social sciences orientation of the department she was in.

On the whole, Clarke's dissertation follows a traditional-simple macrostructure, which means that it is organized into chapters that loosely follow the introduction, methods, results, and discussion (IMRD) format typically associated with conventional conceptions of the dissertation (titles for each of the chapters in Clarke's dissertation are provided in Table 11). It is print-based, mostly textual, and conventional in terms of linguistic and textual form—it's written in a manner that I would argue is fairly typical for academic prose. Yet, the conventional appearance of Dr. Clarke's dissertation is not what she originally wanted; it's just what ended up being the best choice or, in her words, “the right design solution . . . given the constraints of the community” (INT).

**Table 11.** Chapter headings in Clarke (2016) dissertation presented alongside a traditional-simple macrostructure.

Clarke's (2016) chapter headings	Traditional-Simple <i>One study, IMRD format</i>
Chapter 1 Introduction and Problem Statement	
Chapter 2 Literature Review and Project Rationale .	Introduction
Chapter 3 Approach and Activities	Methods
Chapter 4 Elements of Design Epistemology in American Librarianship	Results
Chapter 5 Discussion	Discussion
Chapter 6 Reflection and Recommendations	Conclusion
Chapter 7 Conclusion	

In our interview, Clarke explains to me how she needed to make a decision: she could either spend her time making an argument for why she should be able to do a different kind of dissertation and then, having made that argument, proceed to write the actual dissertation—or she could just focus on making the argument. She chose to focus on making the argument which, she tells me, in the end still required a lot of work:

I kept pitching what I thought were quite provocative ideas. I wouldn't say anyone negatively shut me down, like, 'that's stupid' or anything along those lines. It was more like, 'That's interesting. But it's going to take a long time, you're going to have to sell people on it, you're going to have to do a lot of work to sort of convince people.' And I think they felt, maybe, uncomfortable or unprepared to assess that kind of work, right? Like what is my advisor, who was very much in the social science tradition, going to do with a novel? She doesn't know what to do with that [laughs]. So, you know, for all of these ideas I had, for every single one, I had to make an argument for why this design perspective was the appropriate perspective. Finally, I talked to my

advisor and said, 'If I have to make this argument anyway, why don't I just make this argument my dissertation?' And she said, 'Yes, that makes sense. Do that.' (INT)

The dissertation Clarke completed still required "a significant amount of legwork to convince people," however, even though it was in her opinion a fairly typical dissertation (INT). She puts it this way:

I wrote a dissertation that I think in a lot of other fields would be perfectly normal. It's a very, sort of, typical critical analysis that you would see in a lot of humanities fields. It looks at artifacts, it analyzes, it does close reading. But in my school, it was kind of like, 'Woah!' (INT)

She concludes this part of our interview by sharing with me how "even though . . . in other spaces" her dissertation "would not be alternative at all, it was [still] kind of alternative in some ways" (INT), and that despite not being "as alternative" as she "originally, perhaps, would have liked," looking back, she is "glad" she "didn't have to do all the [extra] work" that would have accompanied the decision to pursue a more unconventional format (INT). Thus, Clarke intentionally limited the unconventionality of her dissertation to its content and approach, because the argument she wanted to make—that that the field and discipline of librarianship ought to be reconceptualised as one that is design-based rather than science-based—challenged the epistemological pillars the field relied on. Questioning why an entire field thinks of itself as a science strikes me as gutsy work for a doctoral dissertation... suggesting that the same field ought to think of themselves not as a science-based one but as a design-based one is downright brave.

Dr. Clarke came to her social sciences PhD with a humanities background (her undergraduate degree) and a professional master's degree (library science), which meant that she didn't have much in the way of formal "research training" (INT). However, feeling like somewhat of an outsider was beneficial insofar as it helped her to see what others were unable to. For instance, she seemed to be the only one asking questions like "why is

library science a science?” (INT). Originally, she explained to me, library science was known as “library economy” (INT). The shift in nomenclature happened around the second world war, when funding agencies began to earmark their resources for the sciences (including the information sciences). In response, the field and profession dropped the “economy” from their name and added “science.” In a strategic bid for “legitimacy as a profession and funding” (INT), affiliating with other science-based fields influenced other decisions such as how community members communicated their work to those outside of the field and in what way. Over time, this affiliation also came to influence how community members saw themselves.

Clarke’s decision to focus on arguing for reconceptualising librarianship as a design-based discipline rather than science-based discipline is one reason her dissertation was so successful. While she could have chosen to enact this argument using a different form, my understanding from our interview is that Dr. Clarke’s audience would have been likely to miss the argument if it was delivered using an alternative form, such as a novel or art installation which were two of her original ideas for her dissertation. This is why she said she would have needed to put in extra work to walk readers through the argument enacted via the form of the dissertation. When she realised how much work would be required to lay out an argument for adopting an unconventional epistemological approach and how much potential there was to lose readers based on this argument alone, it seemed that pursuing a more conventional route for the dissertation offered the best chances for success. In the end, this turned out to be correct.

## **The “tyranny of genre”? : Epistemological and Methodological**

### **‘Entanglements’**

*Many genres have an ancient lineage and predate their contemporary participants, who have inherited rather than designed them.*

—A. Paré (2014, p. A85)

In order to make the argument for an alternative epistemological framework, Clarke begins by tracing the evolution of how librarians know and come to know in the second chapter of her dissertation (“Literature Review and Project Rationale”). She points out how early librarianship “was not the library science of today, but a profession with more humanistic roots of reading and persuasive rhetoric” (Clarke, 2016, p. 8). Building from there, she writes:

Librarians didn’t know what the good books were through science—librarians didn’t conduct systematic studies. So how *did* librarians know? Like art and pornography, librarians presumed they would know it when they saw it. Librarians of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century relied on “a fixed standard in [their] minds” to guide their work in selecting, collecting, and providing materials. (Clarke, 2016, pp. 8-9)

As the profession became more established, Clarke notes how other factors came to influence its epistemological development. First, library education shifted from ad-hoc or “procedural training” to formalized education, specifically at the graduate level, following a resolution passed by the American Library Association (ALA) in 1948 calling for such a change (Clarke, 2016, p. 9). Second, by 1951 the ALA had decided to limit accreditation of library studies programs to graduate degrees, meaning institutions had to either already offer graduate level programs in library studies or go through the process of creating them in order to qualify. This had important consequences for the profession of librarianship. For one, the move to graduate level education helped to “legitimize [librarianship] as a profession, rather than a vocation” (Clarke, 2016, p. 9). But the move also meant relocating to more formal academic environments that were “steeped in science” Clarke, 2016, p. 10). This introduced a new hierarchy to the profession, where “scientific research and publication[s]” became valued over practice, despite the discipline’s historical emphasis on service and practice based work (Clarke, 2016, p. 10). As librarians moved into the field,

they brought these science-affiliated “epistemological understandings” with them, which in turn further codified the field’s “scientific identity” (Clarke, 2018, p. 255).

Clarke (2016) points out that while “scholars often argue about the nature and underlying philosophical and epistemological assumptions of library science, there have been “few since the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century [that] have approached librarianship as if it was not a science at all” (pp. 10-11). Thus, by the time Clarke stepped into her PhD program at the Information School (University of Washington), assumptions regarding what constituted writing in and for the library sciences had been normalized and circulated in the department for some time. These disciplinary assumptions about writing benefit from appearing obvious and common-sense to those steeped in them and include the yoking together (or entanglement) of research with scientific experiments and writing with published reports on scientific experiments. So, for instance, rather than being viewed as *one way* of presenting knowledge, the organizational pattern (or macrostructure) of a traditional scientific research article simply comes to be known as “the social science dissertation” or “the academic paper” (INT) over time, which also supports the codification of library science’s scientific identity, as the following interview excerpt illustrates:

[Going into the PhD] I didn’t have any research training. I had a creative writing background. So, in my first and second year as a PhD student, I’m trying to write these research papers where I’m trying to be all creative and have this anecdotal introduction and stuff. A faculty member sort of said to me—she didn’t come out and say, ‘you can’t do that’—but she said ‘you know the academic paper is a genre, and it has this structure...’ It was the social science structure: Introduction, lit review, methods, results/findings, discussion, and conclusion. (INT)

Of course, there is no single definition for what constitutes an “academic paper”; its meaning will depend on who is invoking the term and the context in which it is invoked. But, as the above quote illustrates, the idea of the “academic paper” is entangled with

assumptions regarding what the main purpose of writing an academic paper is (e.g., to communicate the outcome of a research project), what constitutes research (e.g., is it a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods project?), and the manner in which this communication should occur (e.g., organized using an introduction, methods, results and discussion pattern). Clarke's description of "the social science dissertation" is similarly tied to these assumptions (INT).

Entangled ideas about the "academic paper" or the "social science dissertation" can throttle attempts to draw on different ways of knowing that stray from the "social sciences tradition" (INT). In the following example, Clarke (2018) shares one such experience:

Traditional publication venues reject or chastise submissions for lacking scientific rigor. For example, a paper I was once assigned to review discussed a library's creation of a new database of mural art. Yet the paper was not published, because it did not demonstrate in a valid and reliable manner that the database had any sort of effect on patron use. This project, like many others in librarianship, was rebuked for being what has come to be colloquially known as 'how we done it good in our library': a project-based research attempt that merely describes how (and sometimes why) something was done. Such projects are not typically considered research because they do not meet traditional scientific criteria. (Clarke, 2018, p. 255)

From here, Clarke (2018) builds on this experience to further develop two of the main arguments she put forward in her dissertation: that there are alternative ways to engage in, represent, evaluate what constitutes "valid and rigorous" research—alternatives that are not rooted in paradigms related to the natural sciences—and that research through design (which she argues includes the "how we done it good" approach) is one such alternative (Clarke, 2018, p. 255). However, despite its hopeful tinge, the above excerpt also reveals the often hidden or obscured costs that can come with diverging from dominant understandings of "the academic paper," particularly since in this case the "how we done it

good” paper also represented a deviation from “traditional scientific criteria” (Clarke, 2018, p. 255).

### **Mitigating pushback and enabling legwork: A note on the stabilizing nature of ‘entanglements’**

*To argue against [the field and profession of librarianship as a science] basically brings up stuff like, ‘well if we’re not a science then we don’t qualify for this funding, we’re not legitimate, we’re not real research.’ There’s a lot wrapped up in that. There’s a lot of, sort of, professional identity. I have gotten some pushback, a little bit, on that.*

—Dr. Rachel Clarke (INT)

A discipline’s epistemological and methodological underpinnings are often deeply entangled with preferences for certain forms of writing and this entanglement serves an important stabilizing function for the discipline. For instance, traditional scientific research articles generally reflect “the scientific method and its positivist paradigm that values objectivity, empirical observation, and deductive logic” (Tardy, 2016, p. 51). However, these same stabilizing features can also lead to further difficulties for doctoral writers who want to “stray radically” from the scientific method or positivist approach to inquiry, particularly if straying from this approach necessitates a change in form—or if, as in Clarke’s case, the expectation that the dissertation will still follow the introduction-methods-research-discussion (IMRD) format that is associated with the scientific method (Tardy, 2016, p. 51). In Clarke’s writing context, the idea of the “academic paper” was conflated with the IMRD format of traditional science publications—a preference that might make sense if one is reporting on the results from a study. However, if writers wish to introduce alternative approaches to inquiry and knowledge, they often end up challenging genre conventions which can expose writers to further risks (Tardy, 2016). As Clarke notes in the opening quote above, “there’s a lot wrapped up in that” (INT).

In Clarke’s case, the unconventional epistemological view she adopted did originally pull her towards pursuing an alternative form for the dissertation. However, this pull was met with a counterforce—the stabilizing features mentioned above—which pushed her

back to the “traditional social sciences dissertation” (i.e., IMRD) format. This “pushback” didn’t necessarily *prevent* her from pursuing an alternative form for her dissertation, but it did discourage her:

Brittany: So, earlier you were sharing about how at first you were really trying to play with the product of the dissertation and that it wasn’t necessarily actively being discouraged, but it also wasn’t actively being encouraged either.

Dr. Clarke: Definitely not. I mean I *would* say it was discouraged, but it wasn’t discouraged in a fiercely negative way. It was like, ‘oh that sounds interesting, but here’s the realistic part...’

Britt: Yeah. So, what was that realistic part?

Dr. Clarke: Well like I mentioned earlier, you’d have to convince people. There’s a lot of legwork that would have to go into it. . . . So, something even more extreme would take *even more legwork*. (INT)

So, for example, in order to justify her choice to pursue an art installation for her dissertation, Clarke would have needed to argue for an unconventional epistemological view of library as a design-based field rather than a science-based one *and* create the art installation. However, opting for a form that stayed closer to the traditional “social sciences dissertation” meant less “legwork” because now she needed only to argue for an unconventional epistemological view, instead of “having to do *this* part [make the argument] in order to do *that* part [make the creative component]” (INT).

However, despite choosing to follow a traditional format, Clarke tells me that her dissertation still required a “significant amount of legwork”—something she attributed to her decision to draw on methods that were associated with the humanities: “I feel like, like I said, the dissertation I did had a significant amount of legwork to convince people that the humanities are valid” (INT). Dr. Clarke needed to grapple with the likelihood that her decision to challenge the epistemological pillars of her discipline using unconventional

methods would be destabilizing for readers, thus heightening the potential for eliciting their pushback. If she presented a dissertation that was too destabilizing, she risked having her work rejected. But, if Clarke presented a dissertation that was too stable—in other words, one that did not challenge the status quo—she risked losing touch with what made her argument important to her in the first place. One way she could circumvent this seemingly impossible obstacle was to meet readers’ needs for stability while, at the same time, challenge them:

No one was super weirded out, but I did have to do a lot of scaffolding in the document—like, ‘This is not a methods section, this is an activity section,’ or ‘This is what humanities research looks like, and I’m not looking for reliability and validity in the same way that a social science does. What I’m looking for here is to prove that my interpretation is novel and just by being novel it’s a valid interpretation.’ (INT)

While there are certain challenges presented by the entanglement of a discipline’s epistemological and methodological underpinnings with preferences for certain forms, Clarke points out that there are benefits to this too:

When I want to find the methods, I know exactly where they are, they’re not mixed in somewhere. And when I want to find the discussion, it’s not woven throughout. It’s in this one spot. (INT)

Clarke isn’t alone in this. The participants in Tham and Grace (2020) similarly noted how changes can lead to “frustration when reading,” especially when “guideposts” (which might be “verbal, visual, or interactive signals”) are missing, because not everyone has the time or energy to “grapple” with a “different” reading experience (p. 10). One participant noted how being “‘forced to interact with the text differently’ than traditional print articles can be a meaningful exercise. . . such experiences may be a luxury that scholars with little time and many deadlines could not easily justify” (p. 10).

Relatedly, realising that there was a “social science structure” to the dissertation proved to be quite helpful for Clarke, because it allowed her to wrap the unconventional aspects of her dissertation in a form of packaging that readers would be more likely to recognize:

It was actually really helpful because once she [a faculty member] kind of couched it [the academic paper] as a genre, I was like, ‘Oh! Every genre has its conventions, and it has its flags that are useful to a reader.’ . . . I was like, ‘I can write. I’ve written fiction. I’ve written sonnets. I’ve written haiku. I’ve written different genres and I can write the same topic in different genres, so I can write this genre.’ And that changed my life. That changed my whole program. I didn’t always love it, sometimes, like, the tyranny of genre. . . . But thinking about it [the dissertation] as a genre really, really helped me. And I think that thinking about the dissertation as a genre did help me, you know, to hold those hands that I needed to hold. (INT)

Thus, while the constraints introduced from the entanglement of the scientific method and the traditional scientific research article are referred to by Dr. Clarke using tyrannical terms in the quote above, they are also presented as helpful and even life-changing. Because of these constraints, Clarke was able to spot the places where readers were likely to feel destabilized and, therefore, put the “legwork” into building handholds, scaffolds, and other features that could provide some sense of stability for them. She tells me there are phrases I can look for in the dissertation that signal this legwork:

There are literally phrases in the document if you want to quote some of those [laughs], places where I had to take the committee and the readers through and say, ‘this is what this document is and here’s why it’s a valid approach.’ So, this is why even though I think in other spaces my dissertation would not be alternative at all, it was still kind of alternative in some ways. It was not as alternative as I had originally,

perhaps, would have liked. But looking back, I'm glad I didn't have to do all the work [laughs]. (INT)

Following Dr. Clarke's suggestion, I located some of the phrases that she mentioned were in the dissertation (i.e., Clarke, 2016). Here are a few examples:

Because research is about the creation of new knowledge, it too depends on design. In designing this investigation, I do not limit myself to any one single normative methodological approach. Rather, I propose a combination of research techniques that, in my opinion, best allow me to fully answer my research questions. (p. 41)

I have previously argued that . . . although it would be ideal to examine all of these examples in depth, every study must have some boundaries, if only for practical reasons of time and resource limitations. Therefore, I will select three prominent examples to investigate in depth. Criteria used to select examples include the following. . . (p. 45)

To ensure sources are explicitly documented in my own work, I use Chicago Manual of Style footnotes, which are appropriate when. . . . Such attention to reliability of evidence is key to composing a thorough and persuasive argument. (p. 56)

Each of the above excerpts are from the third chapter of Dr. Clarke's dissertation which, if following a typical traditional-simple dissertation macrostructure, would be where one would normally expect to find the methods. In a sense, this is true for Clarke's dissertation, even though the chapter is named "Approach and Activities." For instance, it is in this section that I am able to learn more about the research approach and tools that are drawn on. However, this section contains also quite a bit of discussion that Clarke would refer to as handholding, including "a whole section devoted to, you know, why this research is legitimate" (INT) as well as justifications for why constructs such as validity and reliability are not appropriate. In other words, there's a lot in this dissertation chapter about the approaches that *aren't* taken. Take for example, the following sentences:

Although I may refer to these examples as “cases,” I use this term in the loosest sense. They are not case studies in the traditional social science definition, although they do share some characteristics. . . . Instead, I draw on a more humanistic approach, often referred to as. . . . (p. 42)

Unlike a traditional scientific study, where analysis of data leads to a singular set of generalizable findings, the goal of this research is . . . . (p. 55)

Unlike traditional scientific research that aims to generate predictive theories and prove hypotheses, this line of research need not . . . . (p. 55)

By signalling what her research is *not*, Dr. Clarke simultaneously demonstrates an awareness and understanding of the conventions she has inherited while also positioning her research in a way that destabilizes them. She shared with me how this was harder than it might appear on the surface, because “a lot of disciplines” including hers “take their epistemological norms for granted” (INT). So, while authors might refer to constructs like reliability and validity in their writing, few would pause long enough to define them. This meant that in order for Clarke to critique these ideas and argue for their inappropriateness when it came to assessing her research, she needed to first define them which meant putting in some additional work “digging up a lot of references” (INT).

### **Scaffolding the writing process using mini-proposals**

Clarke’s advisor had her “write a two page prospectus” for each idea she had (INT). Her advisor said “Ok, for each idea that you’re thinking about, write me a prospectus that is two pages long, max. Not like a full literature review. Tell me your question, some suggested methods [etc.]” (INT). Clarke estimates that she “must have cranked out about a dozen” of these mini proposals. Typically, she would write “two or three at a time” and then meet with her advisor to discuss them. During these sessions, her supervisor would ask questions that essentially called on Clarke to justify her “design approach” (INT). She would leave these sessions to “percolate,” write “two or three more,” and then return to her

advisor's office to begin the whole process again (INT). She shared that eventually, this process led to an 'aha!' moment that culminated with the decision to focus on making an argument for design as a legitimate alternative framework:

I said, 'if I have to justify this for each and every one of these, can I just do *that* as my dissertation?' She [Clarke's supervisor] sat there for a minute—I think she literally pointed at me—and said, 'Yes. Do that.' I was like, 'Okay then!' And then I was off and running, because I had already started making the argument so many times. I already had the research. . . . I think part of me was good with the decision because I felt lighter. It was half as much work. . . (INT)

Once the focus of her dissertation was decided, Clarke wrote a 12 page proposal which, she tells me, is typical for a lot of the disciplines in the humanities. However, after receiving it, her supervisor said, "this is great, now go write me a three chapter proposal," which was more typical for the department (INT).

The intensive nature of the process leading up to the dissertation meant that the bulk of the writing for the dissertation was done by the time Clarke defended her proposal in the fall of 2015. And, because the bulk of the writing was already done, Clarke was able to defend her dissertation seven months later in the spring of 2016. This intensive process also meant that any concerns that were likely to be raised at the defense had already been addressed, so the defense was "more like a public talk rather than a defense" (INT). When I asked Dr. Clarke if she encountered any pushback at the defense, especially given her choice to challenge the epistemological pillars of her discipline using unconventional methods, she responded by saying:

I'm going to say yes and no. Like, I didn't encounter obstacles because I did that legwork. Doing that work [legwork] was more work, but when it came time for people to read my dissertation, nobody had any issues because I had laid that groundwork out. I think there may have been a couple people in the school, not people on my

committee or anything, that were like ‘What is this? This isn’t real scholarship.’ But I didn’t hang out with those people a lot. (INT)

### **“Do that when you have tenure”**

Before Clarke had made the decision *not* to pursue an alternative format, her advisor gave her some advice that, even today, still continues to hold some significance for her:

At one point I talked to my advisor, like ‘Oh, I want to put out an art exhibit that sort of addresses the questions I have,’ And I remember—because I tell this quote to a lot of people—she said, ‘that’s a great idea! Do that when you have tenure.’

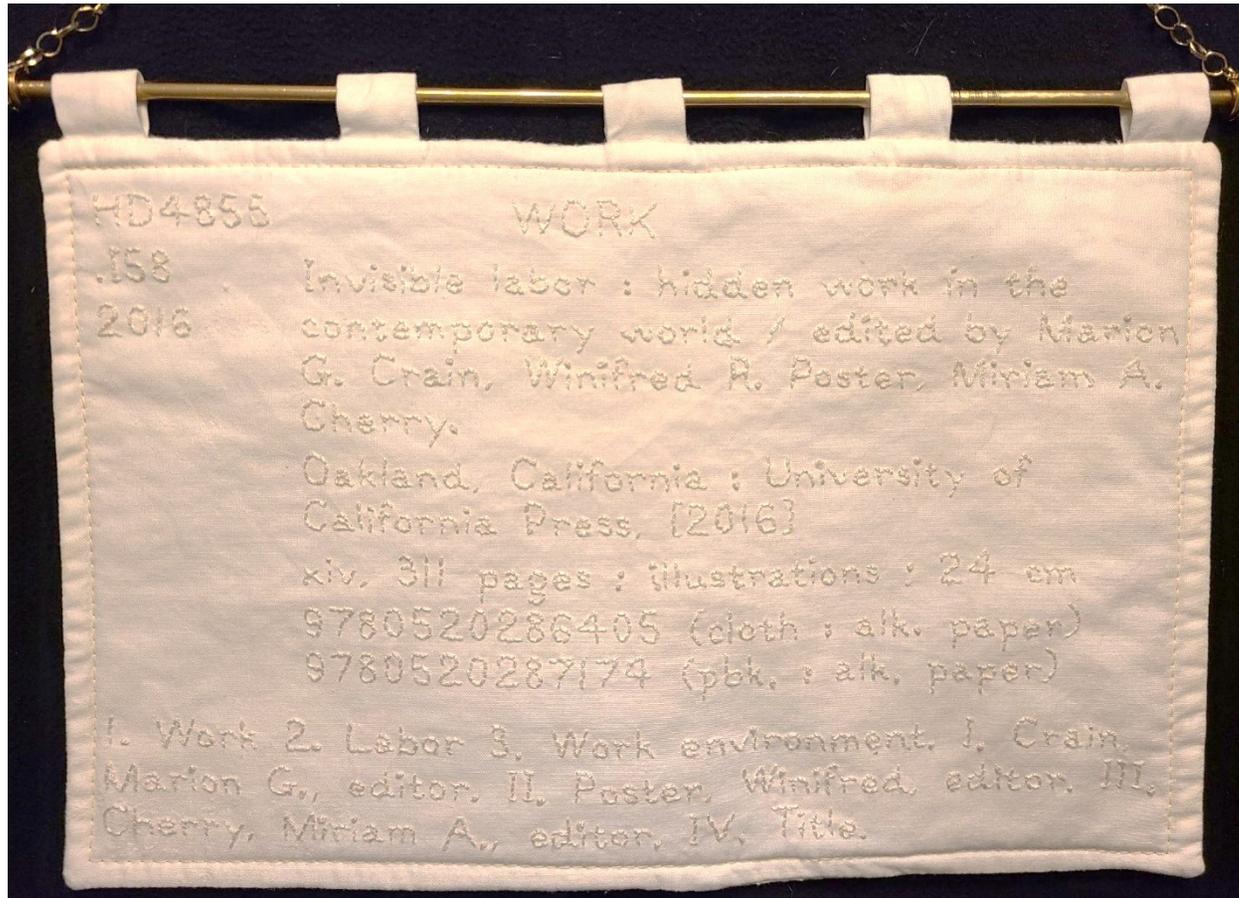
I actually appreciate that my advisor said that to me . . . . She wasn’t being flippant. . . . And I *have* been sort of increasingly pushing a lot of boundaries [since getting a faculty position]. I appreciate that what I was ultimately led to do has provided the scaffolding and foundation. . . . So, I don’t regret it. (Clarke, INT)

What I find interesting about this quote is that it could be easily framed as an example of a supervisory *faux pas*, especially because it seems to embody the idea of the kind of things doctoral writers are up against when it comes to wanting to do dissertations that are different. But Dr. Clarke specifies that in her case it was helpful advice based on the timing and atmosphere of the department as well as her goals as a student and professional. It was the advice she says she needed to hear, reminding me that not everyone can or will want to pursue dissertations that take on unconventional forms. When Dr. Clarke emerged from the process of writing and defending her PhD, her dissertation was nominated for three major awards in her field, and she had a job offer waiting for her from Syracuse University. She won two of the three awards—the iSchools Doctoral Dissertation Award in 2017 and the Eugene Garfield Dissertation Award from the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) in 2018.) Since graduating, she’s gone on to author a number of pieces that “push a lot of boundaries” (INT), including a textbook on design

thinking for the American Library Association (Clarke, 2020). She's also contributed an embroidered library catalog card to the "[Unseen Labor](#)" project, curated by Ann Kardos (See Figure 8; also, Clarke, 2022), which is more reflective of the direction she tells me she sees herself moving in (Personal Communication, August 25, 2022).

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we met Dr. Rachel Clarke, who successfully completed her PhD in Information Studies at the University of Washington (United States) in 2016. Like Dr. Richards, Clarke also makes strategic use of a conventional macrostructure (i.e., IMRD) to help her put forward a set of unconventional and challenging ideas that destabilize the epistemological pillars of her discipline. In this chapter, I shared with readers how I learned of a decision that Clarke had to make—one that ultimately took her away from her initial plan to write a novel or curate an art exhibit. Namely, Clarke shared how she could either spend her time making arguments on top of arguments for why she should be able to do a different kind of dissertation and then, having made these arguments, proceed to write the actual dissertation—or she could just focus on making the argument. In the end, she decided to focus on the argument, which still required a lot of work but was the right 'design solution' given her context, goals, and constraints. This chapter also dug into some of the ways in which disciplinary epistemological traditions may appear to be entangled with the form a dissertation takes, as well as how this entanglement is easily obscured by the language of "common-sense." In the next chapter, I explore how another participant—Dr. Nancy Bray—similarly began her doctoral studies with a desire to pursue a more creative alternative to the dissertation as well as how she also ended up with a sort of conventional and sort of unconventional dissertation.



**Figure 8.** “See What I Did There.” A photo of an embroidery of a library catalog card designed and stitched by Clarke (2022). Currently on display for the [Unseen Labor Project](#), edited and curated by Ann Kardos.

## Chapter 8: ‘Well, maybe you should have five or six manuscripts instead of four’

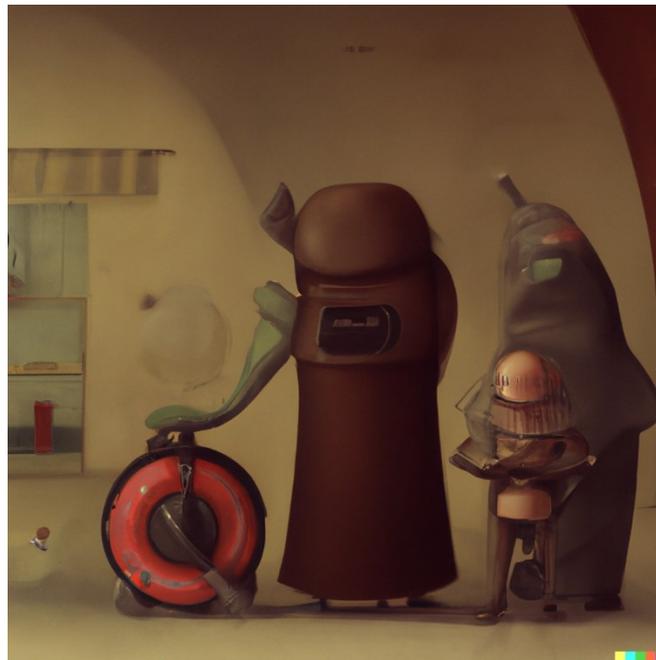
<p><b>DR. NANCY BRAY</b>  <b>YEAR: 2018</b></p>
<p><b>TITLE OF DISSERTATION</b>          Genre trouble: Composing the personal in academic and public writing</p>
<p><b>UNIVERSITY &amp; DISCIPLINE KEYWORDS</b>          University of Alberta (Canada), Writing Studies.</p>
<p><b>SUPERVISOR(S) OR CHAIR(S)</b>          Dr. Katy Campbell (Women and Gender Studies), Dr. M. Elizabeth Sargent (English and Film Studies), and Dr. Margaret Iveson (Secondary Education).</p>
<p><b>UNCONVENTIONAL ELEMENTS</b>          Inclusion of published and publishable pieces. A first for the department.</p>
<p><b>MACROSTRUCTURE</b>          Manuscript-style (two published, one under review, one ‘publishable’).</p>
<p><b>DATA COLLECTED &amp; OTHER NOTES</b>          Interview transcripts (INT), dissertation (Bray, 2018).</p>

**Table 12.** Summary table for Dr. Nancy Bray (2018)

### General overview and description

Dr. Bray successfully completed her PhD in Writing Studies at the University of Alberta in 2018. Bray’s dissertation is composed of four manuscripts in total: two that are published, one under review at the time Bray’s dissertation went to defense, and one in ‘publishable’ condition. In our interview, Bray described how the manuscript-based dissertation was still relatively new in her department—so new, in fact, that guidelines for

manuscript-based dissertations were released just three months prior to her defense. The idea to pursue a manuscript-based dissertation came to Bray by way of her husband, a professor who supervises graduate students in the sciences. Even though it seemed that the monograph style of dissertation was the only option available to students in Bray’s department, Bray says she was willing to bet that if she “published papers and put them in a dissertation,” the department “would have a hard time not accepting it” (INT).



**Figure 9.** For Bray’s (2018) dissertation, I asked DALL-E to generate an image based on the description, “If rhetorical genres were people, this one would be a mix of personal and academic pieces.”

Each of the manuscripts in Bray’s (2018) dissertation explore different facets of the ways in which “personal knowledge and experience are composed” in academic writing, if at all (p. ii). Three main questions anchor the four articles that comprise Bray’s dissertation:

How do academic genres open or close spaces for personal writing and shape who may access and experiment in these spaces? How do public genres such as online news reports and editorials recontextualize the personal when taking up a research article on climate change? How might personal writing facilitate communication on controversial issues such as climate change? (p. ii)

The first publication (Chapter 2, “Scenes from Graduate School: Playing in the Smooth Spaces of Academic Writing”) was published in the 2018 (Volume 28) issue of *Discourse and Writing/Rédactologie* (previously known as the *Canadian Journal for Studies in Discourse and Writing/Rédactologie*). This was a special issue edited by Dr. Cecile Badenhorst and I on innovative approaches to graduate development. Bray’s article playfully explores the struggles encountered by Bray when writing for “particular academic genres” (p. ii), and links aspects of rhetorical genre theory to Deleuze’s and Guattari’s concepts of smooth and striated spaces.

The second manuscript (Chapter 3, “How Does an Online News Genre System Take Up Knowledge Claims from a Scientific Research Article on Climate Change?”) was under review at the time of Bray’s defense but has since been published in the journal of *Written Communication* (volume 36, issue 1). This article explores how claims from a research article on climate change are engaged with by online news genres during a period of one year.

The third manuscript (Chapter 4, “Waiting to Be Found: Research Questions and Canadian National Identity in the Borderland”) was accepted for publication in *Rhetor* (the Journal of the Canadian Society for the Study of Rhetoric) and was published in 2021 (volume 8, issue 1). In this article, Bray traces the development of her interest in the potential personal narratives have as a tool for exploring what climate change means in a Canadian context.

The fourth and final manuscript (Chapter 5, “Epiphanies of the Ordinary: Personal Stories of Climate Change”) was a publishable piece at the time of Bray’s defense but has since been published in *Writing on the Edge* (volume 29, issue 1). Building on the groundwork laid in the previous chapter/manuscript, this manuscript similarly makes use of personal narratives about climate change in order to consider how climate change can be approached differently.

Bray’s dissertation follows a macrostructural pattern typical for manuscript-style dissertations, which are those that contain publishable, published, in-press, or accepted manuscripts as standalone chapters. Table 13 shows the titles for the chapters found in Bray’s dissertation, along with the status for each (published, under review, accepted, or publishable), compared to the macrostructure of the manuscript-style (or publication-based) dissertation as identified in the literature (e.g., Dong, 1998; Paltridge, 2002).

**Table 13.** Chart comparing Bray’s (2018) dissertation to the macrostructure of manuscript-style (or publication-based) dissertations.

Chapter headings and status of manuscripts from Bray (2018)	Manuscript-style macrostructure <i>May be any combination of published, in-press or accepted, or publishable manuscripts</i>
Introduction	
Scenes from Graduate School: Playing in the Smooth Spaces of Academic Writing (Manuscript 1, <i>Published</i> )	
How Does an Online News Genre System Take Up Knowledge Claims from a Scientific Research Article on Climate Change? (Manuscript 2, <i>Under Review</i> )	Introduction
	Manuscript 1
	Manuscript 2
Waiting to Be Found: Research Questions and Canadian National Identity in the Borderland (Manuscript 3, <i>Accepted for Publication</i> )	Manuscript 3
Epiphanies of the Ordinary: Personal Stories of Climate Change (Manuscript 4, <i>Publishable</i> )	
Conclusion	Conclusion

The unconventionality of Bray’s dissertation can be described as occurring at the level of linguistic and textual form, given the relatively novel and non-canonical choice to pursue a manuscript-based format (Tardy, 2016). However, as I explore in more detail in

the next section, one of Bray's examiners was unfamiliar with the format of the manuscript-based dissertation and found the shorter length of Bray's dissertation concerning. Some discussion ensued as a result of this concern regarding whether the addition of a literature review chapter ought to be required. Ultimately, Bray's dissertation was passed without revisions. However, this committee member's concern could suggest there is an additional dimension associated with the unconventionality of Bray's dissertation, especially since it seemed that the length of a dissertation was linked to the demonstration of expertise and depth of inquiry. Without talking to the committee member directly, it's difficult to know for sure, but Tardy's (2016) description of unconventionality at the level of practice is fitting (i.e., where the dissertator adopts a unique approach to "research methodology, design, or composing processes", p. 131).

### **The beginning of the end**

Brittany: Okay, we're recording. . .

Dr. Nancy Bray: I have so much to say. I don't know...

[Brittany: Where to begin?]

...yeah, because it's a topic that is close to my heart.

Brittany: Is there a sticking spot, a particularly charged thing, or an image that's coming back to you that feels like a place to begin?

Dr. Bray: I mean I guess I could start with what my intentions were when I started my PhD. That might be interesting... because I actually set out with the intention to write an alternative dissertation. (INT)

Dr. Bray tells me that "originally," when she started out, her dissertation "was going to be something much more alternative" (INT). But it was difficult for her to imagine how she could both study what she wanted to study and write an unconventional dissertation at the same time. In the end, the manuscript-style presented a way forward, as well as a

“compromise,” in that it was the only way Bray “could think of” that would “make everyone happy” (INT). Elaborating further, she explains:

It was hard to conceive of how I was going to be able to do it, I think too, with what I wanted to look at. . . . I had to wrestle with how I was going to choose a methodology that would let me write the way I wanted to write. In the end, the only way I could think of . . . was [to do] a publication-based dissertation because, I thought, well, then I can check off these things—at least there’s a bit of everything there. So that was the compromise. But originally when I started out, it was going to be something much more alternative than that. (INT)

During the interview, Bray explained how she entered her PhD in a “space” rife with opportunity and possibility, something she attributes to her serendipitous enrolment in a course on composition theory she attended while completing her second master’s degree in communications and technology (INT). This course, she writes in the introduction to her dissertation, played a significant role in helping her to see herself as a writer as well as a way she could “commit to returning to the university to do a Ph.D.” (Bray, 2018, p. 2). Regarding the latter point, she writes how she found herself “adding hearts and exclamation marks” in the margins of texts that “articulated dissatisfactions” and “limitations” with academic writing while also creating space for “personal writing at the university” (Bray, 2018, p. 1). This resonated with Bray in a profound way—she realised she shared similar concerns and that the texts gave her “hope that a different way of writing might be possible at the university” (Bray, 2018, p. 1). With the help of her instructor (who later also became one of her supervisors for her PhD), Dr. Bray (2018) discovered that she was “deeply (viscerally, catastrophically) interested in academic writing” (p. 2). She continues on to explain this almost electric tension, as well as the galvanizing character it lent to her scholarship:

What Dr. Sargent had seen and I had not was that my long standing troubles with academic writing might, in fact, provide the tension necessary for interesting scholarship. My relationship with academic writing has been problematic since my first Master's degree in Comparative Literature, an experience I discuss in-depth in the second chapter of this dissertation. My issue was basically this: I felt both that that something was missing from academic writing and that I was missing something about academic writing. . . . This tension dances throughout this dissertation. (Bray, 2018, p. 2)

Throughout her dissertation, although in some places more than others, Bray shares how her experiences with her first master's program "shattered [her] trust in the university" (Bray, 2018, p. 129). Reviewing her dissertation and the transcripts from our interview, I get the sense that Dr. Bray's choice to pursue the manuscript-style format for her dissertation provided her with a much needed opportunity to examine and make sense of these shards. Each manuscript offers a chance to explore variations on the same perspective—or different perspectives on the same issue, depending on how you frame it. These viewing spaces, whether smooth or striated, also "offer[ed] a place" for Bray (2018) to "work out" how her "academic work relates to the world," as well as how the world relates to her academic work (p. 129).

Our interview brought up similar concerns to those raised by Bray in her dissertation, including questions regarding the "types of writing and thinking [that] belong at the university," how the "boundaries of what belongs and what doesn't" are negotiated, as well as "what it might mean to shift these boundaries" (Bray, 2018, p. 2). Other important threads surfaced as well, especially those relating to belonging in the academy and the "rewards and costs of that belonging," as well as the link between belonging and "the constraints of academic writing" (Bray, 2018, p. 2). Writing on this in her dissertation, she voices some resentment for these constraints, feeling that her "inability to work within

them” meant she “could never be an academic’ (p. 2). Interestingly, as Bray shares in the following interview quote, these constraints were partly what motivated her to write a publication-based dissertation:

I felt like I needed to prove it wasn’t just because I couldn’t write in another way. I think I needed to feel that I had the street credibility, I guess, to then say, ‘Ok, now that I’ve shown you that I really can do this, I can go do whatever the hell I want.’ So, I think that was sort of what was motivating me. (INT)

However, while it might seem like her decision to pursue a manuscript-based dissertation was a result of internal pressures, I know from our interview that this would be a superficial interpretation. Throughout our interview, she described several competing demands and pressures (both internal and external) that pushed her in the direction of the manuscript-based dissertation. Here’s one example:

I actually set out with the intention to write an alternative dissertation. Because I had come through this convoluted path to the PhD, and I had studied alternative discourse, I was kind of in this space where this [writing an alternative dissertation] was going to be possible. I also had supervisors that I knew were open to this. I had written a master’s project that explored narrative, the blend of narrative and academic writing. So, I started out with that intention, and I think I sort of crumbled, a little bit, through the process. I sort of held my own, but I got worried at a certain point, I think. (INT)

### **“I felt like I was kind of shocking people”**

Part of the requirements for Bray’s degree included taking dissertation preparation courses in the department of secondary education during the first year of her PhD. She points to her experience with these courses as a particular striking point that pivoted her thinking around what was possible when it came to writing the dissertation:

It was clear to me that I was the only one thinking this way. In writing studies, it would be no problem, but I was doing an interdisciplinary PhD. So, I was also taking courses with secondary education and, as part of my coursework, I had to do the dissertation prep courses with that department. I was like this alien. So, I kind of got a little bit scared, I guess. I sort of backed off. (INT)

Elaborating further, she explains:

It was two courses. The first one was taught by a woman from language arts, so her speciality is language arts. The second one was taught by a man whose specialty is science—metacognition in science education. So, they came from really different disciplinary backgrounds and that certainly played a role in some of the discomfort I think I felt. . . . I was sort of coming in from a writing studies perspective and had spent 15 years outside of the university. So, I was coming to this with a sense of audience, right? And the one of the reasons why I wanted to do an alternative dissertation was that I wanted it to have a broader audience. So, I wanted it to be accessible. . . I had come to the PhD with those things in my head. And I was writing a PhD on academic discourse, right? So, I had come thinking about these questions, and thinking about the university and how the university could push forward these notions of knowledge translation and mobility and all those sorts of things like this. And I felt like I was kind of shocking people. (INT)

With a wry sense of humor, Dr. Bray tells me how she felt like she became “the really pain-in-the-butt student” because she kept asking questions and putting forward ideas that seemed to challenge everyone’s assumptions regarding academic writing and discourse (INT). For instance, she recounts how, after giving a presentation on academic discourse, another student in her class remarked “oh, I don’t really want to go after that” not because they thought she gave an impossibly great presentation, but because her presentation “totally challenged the idea of academic discourse” by suggesting there were other ways “to

get our message across” (INT). She described being left with “a very odd feeling,” explaining that she felt like she was “maybe pressing buttons” and “asking questions” that she shouldn’t be (INT).

Bray shared with me her memory of one class in particular from that session. Other professors from the department had been invited in to talk to the class “about the defense process and the whole idea of writing a dissertation” (INT). Describing these encounters as almost “antithetical” to how she understood and approached academic writing, she says she was “shocked that there was that sort of closed vision of what academic thinking and work was” (INT). To be fair, it wasn’t as though anyone in the department was explicitly saying Bray couldn’t write an alternative dissertation that blended personal and academic writing, alongside other forms of creative non-fiction (which was her original idea). If anything, she heard things more like “sure it’s possible to do an alternative dissertation, you just have to find committee members and an external examiner who are going to accept it” (INT). However, Bray felt that despite “talking the talk” and appearing “hypothetically or theoretically” open to an unconventional dissertation—at least “on paper”—it seemed more likely that, if faced with an unconventional dissertation, it would be challenged based solely on the “grounds of it being different” (INT).

As the dissertation preparation course continued to expose Bray to differences in attitudes and assumptions regarding academic writing, she also gradually became “really, really hyperaware” that “the notion of the dissertation” was “closely tied to methodology,” and that “the second you choose a methodology you are either opening up or closing down ways of writing” (INT). This entanglement represented another tension that Bray had to “wrestle with,” particularly because she struggled with figuring out how to do what she wanted to do (“look at how academic discourse gets pulled into the public realm,” especially related to the topic of climate change) and “write it in a way that [she] wanted to write it” (INT). She says that while she found a compromise in the form of the publication-

based dissertation format, she also “couldn’t see how to do it otherwise” (INT). When I asked her if she could tell me more about the connection she made between method, methodology, and the way she wanted to write, she responded with the following:

Dr. Bray: These are very closely connected things and I think if a university wants to be serious about alternative dissertations, this is the question. This is going to be the thing that has to be untangled. For instance, for one of my papers I basically did a content analysis. I traced the lines of a research paper as it went into the media, how it was covered, etc. So, I was counting, I had spreadsheets. I was looking at quotes and things like that. It was very text based research, and I’m not sure I could have written that in a creative way. This is where I think I started to get stuck, because if I wanted to do that kind of work, where is the place for creative writing in that kind of work? And the conclusion I came to was that there was no place for it. So, I put that aside for that paper. (INT)

Finding that it was difficult to conceive of a way to write creatively about her research (which was primarily text-based), Bray decided to let go of the intention she had originally begun her PhD with—that is, she put aside her desire to write an unconventional dissertation using different forms of creative non-fiction writing.

### **Impeded decisions, diverted visions, and other asides**

Although her decision to “put aside” her creative ideas was triggered by her participation in the dissertation preparation course, it seems important to note that it wasn’t as though the course was wholly or universally unhelpful—just that, for Bray, it represented “the beginning of the end” for her ideas regarding an “alternative dissertation,” especially because she couldn’t see how to fit her plans for her dissertation in the “boxes” or the “blocks” that were introduced in the course as the “foundations of the dissertation” (INT). These foundational building blocks, as they were introduced, seem to presume that writers will pursue a course of action typically affiliated with social scientific research

methods (i.e., identifying research questions, conducting literature reviews, identifying the method, and planning the research process). Again, as Bray is careful to point out, it's not as though she is unable to appreciate how approaching the dissertation in this way might be useful for some. Instead, it's the unchecked assumptions regarding how one ought to go about research that drive her to pushback. This is a point she returns to frequently throughout our interview as well as in her dissertation, which makes sense given the focus of her research. One example that appears in both her dissertation and our interview is with regards to the idea of the research question. In the conclusion to her dissertation, she writes:

As a doctoral student, I spent a lot of time thinking about the purpose and form of my dissertation project. Throughout this process, it became apparent to me that . . . I could not follow some of the standard approaches to dissertation writing. I could not see how I could write research questions, choose a methodology, create a research plan, and yet still write in the way that I wanted. Parts of this process seemed to impede or divert my vision before I had even started writing.

When we ask students to write research questions at the very beginning of a project, we are also telling them something about the nature of academic research: we are telling them successful research answers the questions are formulated before writing and research take place and that we move from question to answer in a straightforward and linear manner. I do appreciate that this structure does help students to find their way through complicated projects, and it can be a productive heuristic in many cases. I have followed this structure in places in this dissertation...

(Bray, 2018, p. 125)

In the above quote, the role the dissertation preparation course played in diverting or impeding Dr. Bray's "vision" is backgrounded—visible only to those who have insider information. The following quote from our interview offers adds another layer:

[The prof] was really pushing us to get a research question. . . . I really had a lot of trouble wrestling that to the ground... even the need for a research question, you know? I even asked—I really was a pain in the butt—why do you need to start out with a research question? I understand that for [some] people this process is really important, and I can tell you what my research questions were too. But I could have also done this in a completely different way. . . more sort of inductive and sensing my way [in]to it. (INT)

The above quotes, taken from her dissertation and our interview, underscore, I think, the intense power that ideologies about writing have when it comes to shaping dissertations (and writing curricula). Doctoral education seminar rooms are interesting mixes of material and immaterial spaces, both fixed and liminal, where different cultures (of thought, but also of backgrounds) come into contact with each other (cf. Pratt, 1998). These contact points leave impressions, some more welcome than others, and each impression is mediated by a confluence of factors including the positionalities of those involved.

Our interview brought up similar concerns to those raised by Dr. Bray in her dissertation—although, in our interview, we take a deeper dive into how these concerns functioned more like pressures or forces that led to the shape her dissertation took. These pressures or forces related to the path Bray took to her PhD program, which included significant time spent outside (or adjacent to) academia as well as a second master's degree and the location of her “home” department in secondary education. In turn, this affiliation with the department of secondary education introduced the requirement of two dissertation preparation courses, both geared to doctoral students studying secondary education. The curriculum for these courses included exposing students to the “foundations of dissertations” (INT). During her time in these courses, Dr. Bray became increasingly conscious of a noticeable difference in terms of how she thought about academic writing and how those in the department of secondary education conceived of it.

As all of this was happening, she grappled with broader questions that intertwined with writing and belonging (“do I belong at the university?”) as well as the risks and benefits associated with belonging (Bray, 2018, p. 2). So, while she expressed some resistance to the unexamined assumptions regarding what research and writing is (and could be), at the same time she also felt like she had something to prove:

I guess I wanted to be respected and I wanted to be thought of highly. So, I made the compromise [to write a publication-based dissertation]. In the end, I did write one paper that was really traditional, but the others are not. So, as far as compromises go, it probably wasn't such a bad one. But it [the course] certainly did change my vision of the whole project. (INT)

Interestingly, she shared with me that this feeling of having something to prove had nothing to do with her supervisors—in fact, they tried to encourage her to go easier on herself. She expands on this in the following interview excerpt:

My supervisors were always open to alternative discourse, like always. And that was why I chose to work with them. So, this was not anything in any way that came from them. In fact, they tried to convince me not to do some of the things I ended up doing. It was a different type of pressure. It definitely came from this sense that maybe I was going too far. Or, that I was being so obstinate because I couldn't actually do the regular work. (INT)

As the above quote, and others referenced throughout this chapter, Bray wanted to be “respected” and “thought of highly”—something that most doctoral students likely relate to.

The idea to write a publication-based dissertation came about in a mundane, everyday life kind of way for Bray speaks to other important but often obscured dimensions of the doctoral writing context, such as those ones that relate to doctoral writers' bodies, geographies, affects, and so forth (Burford, 2017a; Hopwood & Paulson, 2012). When Bray started her PhD, she “had been reading some alternative [arts-based] dissertations” in

education from the University of British Columbia, but she says that it was ultimately her husband that inspired her to consider the publication-based dissertation (INT). She elaborates on this further:

I also had one clear inspiration that came through in the end: my husband is a scientist, and in his discipline, students *only* write paper-based dissertations. That's all they write. They don't write lengthy dissertations at all anymore. So, there was that playing in the back of my head. I could just sort of see that this was the way that I could just finish this sucker off, you know, and get through it. Because I knew that if I had to write a complete paper for each chapter, and try to get it published, it was going to force me to get through this. (INT)

Listening to her husband navigate through the dissertation process with his students gave Bray confidence that, if she “published papers and put them in a dissertation,” the department “would have a hard time not accepting it” (INT). So, without any real guidelines to go off of, she basically adapted the model she learned from her husband's experience with supervising students:

I basically wrote exactly the same as what his students write. They do an introduction, which pulls all the papers together and introduces everything. Then, there are three published papers—or I don't think they all *have* to be published per say. I just know from talking to him that he likes to go into the defense having at least one published, though having two published would be fantastic. Having three published is pretty rare just because of the timeline. Then there is a conclusion at the end. So, that's what his students are writing. (INT)

Having three supervisors—two on the verge of becoming emerita and the other, a dean of one of U of A's faculties—also helped to bolster Bray's confidence:

Not only did I have two supervisors who were at the end of their career, but I also had a supervisor who had significant institutional power. I think I knew that she had my

back, and that she would do what she had to do to [in order to] make sure that the form wasn't going to be something that was problematic. (INT)

However, despite this, Dr. Bray still encountered resistance to her dissertation at her defense—something that came as a “huge, huge, huge shock” to all of them (INT). The next section focuses on examining this resistance from Bray's point of view.

### **Resistance at the defense**

The guidelines for manuscript-based dissertations couldn't have arrived at a better time. They were made available just prior to when Bray would have needed to submit her dissertation if she wanted to defend by March and meant that she had more institutional backing behind her decision—something neither she nor her supervisors expected would be needed but nonetheless “turned out to be a very good thing” (INT). She prepared the defense copy of her dissertation according to the guidelines which included minor details, like ensuring references were included at the end of each chapter, and addressed more important concerns, such as “how the paper-based and traditional dissertation are different” (INT). She brought a physical copy of the guidelines to her defense, which also turned out to be a good idea, since she found she had to use them to argue that her dissertation “met all of the requirements for the paper-based dissertation” (INT).

Almost all of the resistance she said she encountered was related to the fact that one of the examiners hadn't examined a manuscript-style dissertation before. Reflecting on the situation in our interview, she says that the examiner “really didn't like the paper-based dissertation format—it was the first one they'd ever examined, the first paper-based dissertation they'd ever seen” and that they “had real difficulties with the format, mainly the length” (INT). She thinks this was likely because the examiner was used to “300, 400, 500 page education dissertations,” given that their main criticism was that her dissertation was “way too short” (INT). Reflecting on it further, she added

I just think they felt uncomfortable, because it didn't meet what they had expected to see in a dissertation. I think that . . . I mean this examiner had particular genre expectations, and I think for them, the genre of the dissertation is this thing that is detailed and lengthy. It goes into lengthy types of descriptions that show how you've spent these years researching—We actually had a conversation about this during the defense. The examiner asked me something along the lines of 'can you tell me about why this is so short? You've probably written a master's thesis that wasn't much shorter than this.' So, I explained the paper based dissertation, and said how in other fields it is really common. But then they said, 'well that would make sense in science because they do all this lab work.' And I thought, 'Hmm... I live with a scientist... and no.' Though, I wasn't necessarily able to articulate it. . . at the time. But this examiner had the sense that, as a humanities PhD, the dissertation had to be much longer because the bulk of our work was engaging with texts, whereas a science PhD could be much shorter because the bulk of the work was some non-textual thing.

Britt: So how much time, you feel, did you spend on defending the form of your dissertation at your defense versus the content, if at all?

Dr. Bray: I think all of their questions were related to the form. This examiner was very perturbed by it.

She said that there had even been "some discussion among the examining committee around whether to require" her to add a "literature review to the dissertation, which would have been another huge piece" (INT). When I asked her why, she said that she thought it was because this examiner made a connection between expertise and the inclusion of a literature review:

I think it is just that, for this examiner, there was a sense that the dissertation needed to include evidence that I knew all of these things, that I wasn't an expert unless my writing showed the breadth of my knowledge, that deep literature review. (INT)

However, Bray explains, the nature of the manuscript-based dissertation presents some important conflicts in this regard: “in the process of publishing these pieces, it was always the literature reviews that got cut, you know? Those were the parts of all three of the major papers that got revised and edited down” (INT). In the end, the examiner signed off on Bray’s dissertation without requiring revisions. Ironically, it seems that knowing that Bray “maxed out the journal word limit” for “every single paper”—was what helped the examiner make their final decision, as the following excerpt illustrates:

From what I gather, what helped the examiner relax/change their mind/question themselves was hearing me say that for every single paper. . . . I was erasing down to get the paper just one word under the word limit. So, I actually couldn’t have written more. In a paper-based dissertation, I couldn’t have written more. (INT)

On a more humorous, yet thought provoking note, she ends by adding:

I had already included four papers as opposed to three. One was really short, so we wanted to include a fourth one. And this person said, ‘Well I think it should be five or six papers.’ It still makes me laugh. I wonder how they feel about it now. (INT)

While she doesn’t mention anything about this to me, I wonder how much her supervisors needed to advocate for her dissertation behind closed doors, and what would have happened had she not had the guidelines with her that day.

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter introduced Dr. Nancy Bray, who completed her PhD at the University of Alberta (Canada) in 2018. Bray began doctoral studies with a wish to pursue a more creative alternative to the conventional ‘scientific report’ style dissertation (i.e., one following an IMRD organizational method). Like Dr. Richards and Dr. Clarke, Bray wrote a dissertation that was sort of conventional and sort of unconventional. However, unlike Richards and Clarke, Bray opted to pursue a manuscript-based dissertation, which was still relatively new in her department and perhaps explains why an examiner found the shorter

length of Bray's dissertation disconcerting. In the next chapter, I present another manuscript dissertation, this time in the field of higher education administration and management by Dr. Sydney Freeman Jr.

Like Dr. Bray, Freeman also chose to go the manuscript-based route, which was relatively unconventional in his setting at the time. However, unlike Bray's dissertation, Freeman's dissertation follows an organizational pattern that is unusual in the sense that it does not appear to have been identified elsewhere in the literature on dissertation macrostructures. This suggests that an additional macrostructure is needed to characterize dissertations like Freeman's. Building off of the hybrid manuscript macrostructures reported on in Anderson et al. (2020) and Anderson et al. (2021), I propose the possibility of a "hybrid complex/manuscript" macrostructure—where a dissertation reports on multiple studies in a modified IMRD format and contains published or publishable material (in whole and/or in part). The chapter begins with an overview of Dr. Freeman's dissertation, which consists of an introduction, literature review, methods, three stand alone (publishable) manuscripts presented in separate chapters, and a final chapter that consisted of raw data and analysis ("data review" chapter) rather than a conclusion. The remainder of the chapter focuses on the supervision of unconventional dissertations—a central aspect that was brought to light by Freeman during our interview.

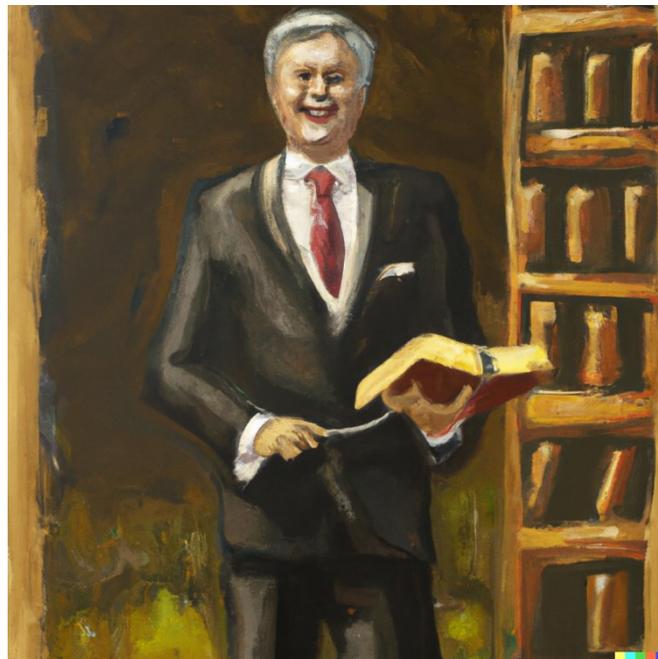
## Chapter 9: ‘So that we are all on the same page’ – On being strategic in planning for success.

<p><b>DR. SYDNEY FREEMAN JR.</b> YEAR: 2011</p>
<p><b>TITLE OF DISSERTATION</b> A presidential curriculum: An examination of the relationship between higher education administration programs and preparation towards the university presidency.</p>
<p><b>UNIVERSITY &amp; DISCIPLINE KEYWORDS</b> Auburn University (U.S.). Education, Higher Education, Education Administration and Leadership.</p>
<p><b>SUPERVISOR(S) OR CHAIR(S)</b> Dr. Frances K. Kochan (Educational Foundations, Leadership and Technology).</p>
<p><b>UNCONVENTIONAL ELEMENTS</b> Inclusion of published or publishable pieces.</p>
<p><b>MACROSTRUCTURE</b> Hybrid complex/manuscript.</p>
<p><b>DATA COLLECTED &amp; OTHER NOTES</b> Interview transcripts (INT), dissertation (Freeman, 2011), journal article (Freeman, 2018), and other samples of writing (e.g., emails).</p>

**Table 14.** Summary table for Dr. Sydney Freeman Jr. (2011)

## General overview and description

Dr. Sydney Freeman Jr. successfully completed his PhD in Education (Higher Education Administration) at Auburn University (U.S.) in 2011. His dissertation, entitled “A presidential curriculum: An examination of the relationship between higher education administration programs and preparation towards the university presidency,” focused on university presidencies in an effort to improve the effectiveness and experiences of future university leaders. His dissertation walks readers through a range of aspects related to presidencies, including how individuals enter into the profession, what sorts of career education and training trajectories they arrive with and/or make use of, and their experiences with professional development. Although the manuscript-based dissertation was relatively unusual in his context at the time, the journey was relatively straightforward for Freeman— despite having to find another advisor as well as another member for his committee. He partially credits his second advisor, Dr. Frances K. Kochan, for his success.



**Figure 10.** For Freeman’s (2011) dissertation, I asked DALL-E to create an oil painting of the “curriculum of a university president.”

**Note:** It seems that DALL-E makes some devastatingly accurate assumptions when gender or race is not specified (Offert & Than, 2022, p. 3; see also, [Chapter 4](#)).

Not only was Kochan an advocate of manuscript-based approaches to the dissertation, having successfully supervised several dissertations of this type before, she had just stepped down from her role as Dean for the College of Education at Auburn University. Describing his experience with pursuing the manuscript-based option in an auto-ethnographic article, Freeman (2018) points out that his advisor’s “institutional credibility” probably persuaded any hesitant committee members of Freeman’s capacity to produce “a high-quality dissertation” (p. 281). Thus, while not a strategy per se, being “*deanish*” (INT) and well-versed in the process of guiding students through manuscript-based dissertations certainly helped things along for Freeman.

In addition to his supervisor communicating his plans and aims to his committee, Freeman further articulated to committee members how adopting an unconventional approach to the dissertation closely aligned with his goal of securing a tenure-track position:

I had spoken to other Black faculty from other institutions that shared with me the importance of having publications to go on the market for a job. So, I felt like I was behind the eight ball. So, I said, ‘Let me do something like this to at least kind of get me going.’ . . . Prior to then, when I was going through my master’s program, I was just concerned about being an administrator. But the more research that I was doing, I was finding that there was a preference for those who had gone through the faculty route. I said ‘Well, wow. I probably just need to get this part done early. What are the things that I need to do to prepare to be faculty also?’ So, in my doctoral program, I focused a lot of what are the things that will prepare me to be a faculty member. One of those main ways was the [manuscript-style dissertation] route.

(INT)

Freeman persuasively argued that completing the doctorate with three publishable manuscripts more or less ready to be submitted meant he would be in a much better

position to enter the job market—particularly in terms of sending those manuscripts off for review. And this in turn, he believed, would significantly increase the probability of successfully achieving his goal. In the end, he was correct—in the three short years following his graduation, he secured an associate professorship, which he explains is unique in that it meant he skipped over serving first as an assistant professor (Freeman, 2018). He attributes this success in part to his decision to pursue the manuscript-style dissertation because it gave him an opportunity “to learn how to develop various types of articles in a rigorous, safe, and supportive environment” (Freeman, 2018, p. 284).

Freeman describes his dissertation as one that follows a manuscript-style format, which in his context refers to a dissertation organized around at least three publishable manuscripts acting as standalone chapters. (Note that this understanding is different from Dr. Bray’s manuscript-based dissertation, which consisted of two published manuscripts, one under review, and one that was publishable.) Although manuscript-based dissertations were not unheard of at the time in Freeman’s department, they were still relatively uncommon. A review of Tardy’s (2016) proposed areas where genre innovation might occur in academic writing would suggest that the unconventionality of Freeman’s dissertation can be mainly described as occurring at the level of linguistic and textual form.

Studying the table of contents for Freeman’s dissertation reveals that it contains seven chapters (three of which are publishable) and is just over 400 pages long. The remaining four chapters consist of the introduction, literature review and methods, and a “data review” chapter. This chapter contains raw data, coding schemes, and other related material. Other than being the final chapter in the dissertation, the data review chapter is not otherwise written or positioned in any way that resembles a traditional conclusion, so it would not be fitting to refer to it as such. The organization of Freeman’s dissertation, in terms of chapter titles and status of manuscripts, is shown in Table 15. At 24 pages long, Freeman’s table of contents also strikes me as being unusual both for its length and level

of detail. Opting for a detailed list of contents could serve both a practical and persuasive function: Practical, in that readers are introduced to the content as they scan through the list, thus preparing them for what to expect, and persuasive, in that the exhaustive level of detail provided in the list of contents also makes an argument for the level of detail (and perhaps rigour) one can expect from the dissertation.

Writing on the narrative potential of the table of contents as a para-text, Lethbridge (2022) suggests that while a table of contents does serve the utilitarian needs readers have when it comes to navigating their reading experience, it also *structures* their reading experiences in specific ways:

While the list of contents improves accessibility, it also points in very specific directions and in this sense . . . pre-structures the reading experience by focusing on certain aspects and not on others. (p. 154)

Because manuscript-based dissertations were still relatively new in his department, Freeman's committee members would have been more familiar with the organization of a traditional-simple dissertation (i.e., the introduction, methods, results, and discussion) typically associated with reports on empirical research and would have likely expected to see this organization in some way. This might explain why Freeman opted to use conventional chapter titles for the first three chapters in his dissertation (Introduction, Review of Literature, and Methods), as well as why he opted to include "Manuscript 1 . . . , 2 . . . , 3 . . ." in the titles for the middle chapters (See Table 15). The titles of the chapters would serve as visual flags for readers, helping to orient them, at a glance, to the conventional and less conventional aspects of Freeman's dissertation.

**Table 15.** Chapter titles and status of manuscripts in Freeman’s (2011) dissertation.

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Introduction
Review of Literature
Methods
Chapter 4. Manuscript 1: University Presidents’ Perspectives of the Knowledge and Competencies Needed for Executive Higher Education Leadership (Publishable)
Chapter 5. Manuscript 2: Academic Pathways to University Leadership: Presidents Descriptions of their Doctoral Education * <i>Publishable</i>
Chapter 6. Manuscript 3: Towards a Theory of Higher Education Leadership Development (Publishable)
(Data Review)

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Note: Although situated at the end of Freeman’s dissertation, the final chapter (“Data Review”) serves less as a conclusion and more of an opportunity for readers to dive into the data and analysis

### **Accounting for an unusual macrostructure: Hybrid Complex-Manuscript?**

Manuscript-based dissertations typically include published or publishable manuscripts that act as standalone chapter. However, while Freeman’s dissertation includes publishable material, it also bears some similarity to the macrostructure of a traditional-complex dissertation. Both traditional-complex dissertations and Freeman’s dissertation report on several studies in a modified IMRD (introduction, methods, results, and the discussion) format, contrasting with “traditional” or “traditional-simple” dissertations which typically reports on one study and are primarily organized into five chapters that follow an IMRD format (Paltridge, 2002). Despite this similarity, it would be inaccurate to describe Freeman’s dissertation as a traditional-complex dissertation because traditional-complex dissertations do not include publishable or published material. Table 16 illustrates how a traditional-complex dissertation might be organized in comparison to the organization of Freeman’s dissertation.

**Table 16.** Chart comparing Freeman’s (2011) dissertation to the macrostructural organization of a traditional-complex dissertation.

Freeman (2011)	Traditional-Complex
Introduction Review of Literature Methods  <u>Manuscript 1:</u> University Presidents’ Perspectives of the Knowledge and Competencies Needed for Executive Higher Education Leadership <i>*Publishable</i>  <u>Manuscript 2:</u> Academic Pathways to University Leadership: Presidents Descriptions of their Doctoral Education <i>*Publishable</i>  <u>Manuscript 3:</u> Towards a Theory of Higher Education Leadership Development <i>*Publishable</i>  (Data Review)	Introduction  Literature Review (Optional) Methods Study 1 Study 2 Study 3 Discussion  Conclusion (Optional)

**Note:** Although situated at the end of Freeman’s dissertation, the final chapter (“Data Review”) serves less as a conclusion and more of an opportunity for readers to dive into the data and analysis

However, recent studies of the macrostructures of education-based dissertations completed by Anderson et al. (2020) and Anderson et al. (2021) have identified two additional dissertation macrostructures that are worthwhile considering. The simple/manuscript hybrid macrostructure blends the format of a traditional-simple structure (with its IMRD chapter structure) but contains published or publishable material either as standalone chapters or as sections within chapters (Anderson et al., 2020). Dissertations with topic/manuscript hybrid macrostructures were those that contained chapters covering aspects of a given topic and also included published or publishable material, again either as standalone chapters or as sections within chapters (Anderson et al., 2020). Table 17 compares the organization of Freeman’s dissertation to that of the simple/manuscript hybrid identified in Anderson et al. (2020).

**Table 17.** Chart comparing Freeman’s (2011) dissertation to the macrostructural organization of hybrid simple/manuscript dissertations (Anderson et al., 2020; Anderson et al., 2021).

Freeman (2011)	Hybrid simple/manuscript
Introduction Review of Literature Methods	Introduction
<u>Manuscript 1</u> : University Presidents’ Perspectives of the Knowledge and Competencies Needed for Executive Higher Education Leadership * <i>Publishable</i>	Methods *
<u>Manuscript 2</u> : Academic Pathways to University Leadership: Presidents Descriptions of their Doctoral Education * <i>Publishable</i>	Results 1 * <i>Published</i>
<u>Manuscript 3</u> : Towards a Theory of Higher Education Leadership Development * <i>Publishable</i>	Results 2 * <i>Contains published material</i>
(Data Review)	Discussion
	Conclusion

Unfortunately, the organizational pattern of Freeman’s dissertation is more typical of a traditional-complex dissertation (one that reports on two or more studies in a modified IMRD format), which means that neither the simple/manuscript nor the topic/manuscript hybrid format would function as accurate descriptors. To my knowledge, a complex/manuscript hybrid macrostructure has not yet been identified in the literature. Regardless, I’d like to volunteer Freeman’s dissertation as an example of a complex/manuscript hybrid macrostructure, which I suggest is one that reports on multiple studies (in a modified IMRD format) and contains published or publishable material either as standalone chapters or as sections within chapters (see also Table 18).

**Table 18.** Proposed macrostructure for hybrid complex/manuscript dissertations.

Hybrid complex/manuscript <i>Multiple studies, follows modified IMRD format, chapter                  contain published or publishable material (can be in whole or                  in part)</i>
Introduction (Literature review)
Methods
Study 1 (Published/Publishable)
Study 2 (Publishable/Published)
Study 3 (Publishable/Published)
Discussion *(Can contain published material)
(Conclusion)

**Note:** Brackets indicate optional elements. Material may be published, in press, or under review, or it may be publishable. Material may also include excerpts from published, in press, or under review manuscripts (as per Anderson et al., 2020).

**No clout, no ‘diss’ – notes from a former dissertator turned supervisor**

As much as I was interested in learning about Freeman’s experience with writing and defending his dissertation, I tended to gravitate to his experience with being a supervisor—likely because the topic of supervision and supervising unconventional dissertations was something we dwelled on for a significant portion of our interview. As I alluded to earlier, Kochan was Freeman’s second supervisor. His first supervisor, Freeman speculates, likely perceived the unconventional decision to pursue a manuscript-based chapter as one requiring more time and effort than the supervisor could afford. However, speaking from his own experience as a supervisor, Freeman mentioned that while there may be some additional work involved with supervising unconventional dissertations, “it’s not rocket science. . . it just takes a little more energy to get through it” (INT). In the remainder of this chapter, I highlight the aspects of our interview that relate to Freeman’s experiences as a supervisor and share some of the writing examples Freeman generously “donated” to me to help provide a sense of some of the work that might happen behind the scenes when it comes to supervising an unconventional dissertation. Then, to round out Freeman’s

experiences, I bring in a broader range of perspectives drawing on responses from questionnaire participants.

One of the first things Dr. Freeman does is ask students to write a miniature proposal that outlines the topic and the format—nothing more, just “here’s what I want to do... I would like to do a manuscript dissertation” (INT). In a sense, the mini-proposal serves as a synopsis of a longer, more formal dissertation proposal. However, because the mini-proposal is short and focused, and explicitly states the student’s intention to complete a manuscript-based dissertation, prospective committee members know that “this is the direction we’re going to go” (INT). This can be particularly helpful in circumstances where committee members may not receive a detailed proposal until later in the dissertation process.

Freeman shared an example of a mini-proposal with me. In looking at it, I am reminded of the short proposals I have written in the past when applying for graduate research funding. It’s one page long, not including references, and begins with a statement about the broader context surrounding the project. Then it moves toward outlining the main issue that the project aims to address or resolve, all while referring to the relevant literature. Whereas the first paragraph is quite broad, the second paragraph narrows in on the specific focus of the project, the main concepts or theories that will be used, and the significance these theories/concepts have. The third paragraph is admittedly what first grabbed my attention when I opened the document, no doubt due to an intentional choice on the part of the writer (or supervisor). This paragraph is entirely bolded and italicised, and states:

I propose doing a manuscript dissertation centered on the theme of \_\_\_\_\_ among \_\_\_\_\_.

The document would consist of three independent peer-reviewed articles employing a different methodological approach. Potential research topics include:

- How do \_\_\_\_\_ cultivate \_\_\_\_\_among \_\_\_\_\_?

- How do \_\_\_\_\_ identify and hire potential \_\_\_\_\_?
- How does the \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_ affect the development of \_\_\_\_\_?

(Excerpted from a mini-proposal, shared with Freeman’s permission)

Describing what happens next, Freeman says:

We send that to potential committee members. So, I’ve already made initial contact with these potential committee members, but I want the student to contact them and share, essentially, ‘Here’s my topic. Here’s what I want to do. Is this something that you would be willing to serve on my committee about?’ (INT)

Then Freeman follows up by emailing each member separately. In that email, Freeman explains what a manuscript-based dissertation is, shares an article he wrote on the process (Freeman, 2018), and asks the prospective committee members to bring questions or concerns up with him directly. After members have committed to serving on the committee, Dr. Freeman emails the committee as a group. He was kind enough to share an example of this email with me. The email opens with a broad statement that confirms committee member’s agreement to participate and offers a preview of the email’s contents:

Dear dissertation committee members,

Thank you so much for your willingness to serve on \_\_\_\_\_’s committee and your willingness to approve them to advance to doctoral candidacy. In this email I will provide you with a proposed summary of next steps towards completion of his degree. However, I will provide some background context so that everyone is on the same page. (Sample of email, shared with Freeman’s permission)

Perhaps most importantly, the “background” provided by Freeman in the email is intended to reiterate that the student plans to pursue a manuscript-based approach to the dissertation. This part is crucial, Freeman tells me, because committee members need to understand that if they are not comfortable with this approach, then this might not be the committee for them:

It's very clear—"here's my philosophy on it." So. . . [this is] one of the things that you may want to take away from this—the chair needs to be very clear about their idea of what the dissertation is, and what they're expecting. . . [also] there may be individuals that may not be as comfortable with that, so they may not be the ones you want on the committee. (INT)

I found two examples of how Freeman words this in his email to committee members. The first, found in the "background" section of the email, is written in bold and italicised:

As you probably have ascertained from the dissertation proposal that he sent each of you, he is interested in completing a manuscript dissertation. It is a dissertation style that allows a student to complete 3-separate peer-review article length chapters in lieu of a traditional findings chapter. To get a better sense of this approach please feel free to review this article (attached).

(Sample of email, shared with Freeman's permission)

Freeman refers committee members to an article he authored in 2018, entitled "The manuscript dissertation: A means of increasing competitive edge for tenure-track faculty positions." This article combines an autoethnographic account of Freeman's dissertation writing experiences with a review of the literature, arguing for the usefulness of the manuscript-based dissertation as a viable option for students.

The second example is found towards the end of the email, before the closing remarks. It is introduced as a "note" and also written in bold and italicised:

Note: It is my goal to ensure that we are always, respectful, collegial, and supportive to both \_\_\_\_\_ and each other through this process. I would ask that if there are any major concerns throughout the process that you would notify me first. I have seen and been in situations where I and students were blind-sided by concerns of committee members, but it was only brought up at the defense. It is my philosophy that if the committee members have major concerns with a student's work, these

should be resolved prior to a proposal of dissertation defense. Minor and clarifying questions should be the types of questions posed at defenses. I say this so that we all are on the same page. (Sample of email, shared with Freeman’s permission)

It is crucial, Freeman shares with me, that committee members understand your “overall philosophy of the dissertation process” in order to avoid being “taken by surprise” at the defense (INT). Elaborating further, he says:

I’ve gone through dissertation processes where people are taken by surprise at the actual defense. . . .where a committee member will say “Why are we even doing a manuscript?” I haven’t had that experience yet. But I’ve seen professors, you know: “Why are we doing it this way?” or “Why are we using this methodology?” And I’m saying, if you have a major fundamental question about the dissertation, you bring that up with me prior to [the defense]. We’re not playing those games. (INT)

This is an approach that Freeman has found effective, one that committee members seem to appreciate as well:

Early on my current dean said, ‘Oh, so I read from his mini proposal that he wants to do a manuscript dissertation. Can you tell me more about this? I’m supportive of it. I know just a little bit about it, but could you tell me more?’ So, it allows them to bring up concerns at that earlier stage rather than saying he’s developed three chapters of a dissertation and then one of the committee members has a strong objection to it. And then he or she is frustrated, and then I’m frustrated, like, ‘why didn’t they say this before?’ So that’s been the approach that I’ve used. (INT)

This approach is echoed in many of the responses from participants in my questionnaire. For instance, a supervisor and full professor at a Canadian university had the following to offer:

I think you need to bring other committee members on board early – maybe give them examples of the kind of work the student is trying to do, and demonstrate that other

scholars find this work acceptable and of high standard ... make sure that committee members have a clear idea of what the work consists of, and offer them models of work done by other scholars that you like. (QUES)

A faculty member who teaches and supervises doctoral students in the U.S. responded in a similar way, underscoring the need to “pick a committee who is supportive” and to “talk about the merits of the project. . . . up front rather than partway through. . . nobody likes surprises.”

The desire to avoid surprises came up frequently in questionnaire responses, as did the need for supervisors to be brave. A sessional instructor at a Canadian university (who also wrote an unconventional dissertation), suggested that bravery and advocacy are essential for supervisors:

Be brave and advocate for your students. I think that it is hard for academics to see the bigger social picture, something that I do understand given the nature of the job. But the genres we use in academia should ultimately reflect our purposes as academics, and as many more PhD graduates are leaving the university, we should rethink the genres we write and the nature of the programs we offer. (QUES)

Another questionnaire participant, this time a supervisor and director of postgraduate studies at a university in the U.K., likewise shared how supervisors need “to be brave” and be prepared to “defend the difference” to their “institution and colleague” (QUES). This is easier to do, this participant noted, if supervisors have examples from their “institution and further afield” (Supervisor & Director of postgraduate studies, U.K, QUES). A supervisor at a South African university agreed with this—similarly noting in their questionnaire response the importance of bravery as well as the value in locating examples when it comes to supervising an unconventional dissertation. They elaborate on the importance of being able to demonstrate that “your student is part. . . of a knowledge community that is global and vibrant” and that they are not “just trying to do something new” simply because the

student “doesn’t want to write a long thesis or do the traditional thing” (QUES). This supervisor also emphasizes the value in reading “about other cases in which PhDs like this have been created and submitted” (QUES) suggesting that there is

research in fields like the visual arts and queer studies about different kinds of dissertations, especially in the global North. These studies, and the dissertations they write about, can be used as evidence with hesitant or oppositional committee members, to show them that arguments and knowledge can be made in a range of creative ways. . . You can show that these are ways of making knowledge that challenges exclusion of different kinds of voices, texts, forms of knowledge and so on, and connect this to larger projects many universities are having to become involved in, such as widening access, decolonising knowledge and knowing in the university, and increasing social inclusion and social justice. (QUES)

In addition to anticipating and pre-empting potential obstacles at the committee level, supervisors would do well to look out for possible institutional barriers that could come up, as this questionnaire participant—a PhD student in the U.S.—suggests:

Advocate for students, even when they don’t ask. There are many institutional barriers, and you can help students by being proactive and researching how the student’s plans might come into conflict with institutional rules. When special infrastructure is required (e.g., research participants, digital platforms) for the project to launch, set deadlines early. Consider helping students prepare for these hurdles with an independent study while the student is still in coursework. (QUES)

The last point, which brings us to the end of this chapter, comes from a questionnaire participant who is a graduate supervisor in the U.S. Writing from their vantage point as a member on a dissertation committee, they share:

One current PhD student wanted to do the diss as collection of publications, but the more senior members of her committee said ‘no, that’s not what we do in our

department' (I was on the committee but not chair). I think the student would need the backing of her advisor and probably examples from peer departments at other universities (to supplement other fields/departments at the same university) to argue for doing this. Old timers in our department at least drag their feet at anything different from how it's been done for the last 30+ years, so the student will need ample support to argue for changing practice. (QUES)

Continuing on, they write

The supervisor needs to be convinced that the alternative approach is a better way to structure the diss than the traditional way. In the case of the above student, I think her supervisor was quite hands off and didn't really talk with the student before she presented her plan to write [an article-based dissertation], and so they couldn't work together to argue for the student's plan. I think it also helps to have concrete examples from the specific field—I know plenty of people in the sciences who do the articles-as-diss approach, but not in our specific field. We are kind of stuck between social sciences (where articles would be really useful for graduates applying for jobs) and humanities (where a single book would be a more appropriate post-graduation publication, which would mean the more the diss could look like that, the better). (QUES)

Through this quote, and others like it, we are given more insight into the role a supervisor can play in contributing to the success of an unconventional dissertation.

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter began with an overview of Dr. Freeman Jr.'s dissertation, which consisted of an introduction, literature review, methods, three stand alone (publishable) manuscripts presented in separate chapters, and a final chapter that consisted of raw data and analysis ("data review" chapter) rather than a conclusion. Manuscript-based dissertations were relatively unconventional in Freeman's setting at the time. I also

explored how Freeman’s dissertation follows an organizational pattern that is unusual in the sense that it does not appear to have been identified elsewhere in the literature on dissertation macrostructures. This suggests that an additional macrostructure is needed to characterize dissertations like Freeman’s. Building off of the hybrid manuscript macrostructures reported on in Anderson et al. (2020) and Anderson et al. (2021), I propose the possibility of a “hybrid complex/manuscript” macrostructure—where a dissertation reports on multiple studies in a modified IMRD format and contains published or publishable material (in whole and/or in part).

During our interview, Freeman identified supervision as an aspect that was central to unconventional dissertations. Because of this, I returned to questionnaire data to consider the ways in which this aspect surfaced across participants’ responses. Thus, the remainder of the chapter focused on bringing these responses together with excerpts from emails to committee members and other experiences shared by Freeman during our interview. The approach Freeman says he adopts when supervising unconventional dissertations stems from the desire to avoid encountering situations like those described above. Communication, clarity, and ensuring committee members know what to expect are three key aspects of how Freeman advocates for supervisees. In addition, Freeman ensures that committee members have ample opportunity to raise “fundamental question[s]” prior to supervisory meetings or the defense because “playing. . . games” is something he has neither the time for nor the interest in (INT). Other strategies included securing a supportive committee and similarly dealing with committee members’ concerns in a proactive manner.

Some important caveats remain, however. One primary caveat relates to the nature of the examination situation. In many doctoral programs outside of the United States, examining committees often include an examiner who is considered external to the university. In my case, for instance, the external examiner must be distanced from me (I

hear the phrase “at arm’s length” frequently used to describe it). And in South Africa—at least at the time that Dr. Rose Richards, another interview participant, defended her dissertation—the identities of the examining committee are kept from both the supervisor and the candidate. As I showed in Chapter 5, the context of Richards’s examining situation meant needing to make principled choices regarding which risks to take, which to mitigate, and which to avoid entirely. Thus, dissertation committee and examination policies will play a role in influencing the potential available to a dissertator who is interested in pursuing an unconventional dissertation. At the same time, even in contexts like the United States, where examining committees may be the same as the advisory committee, dissertators still face resistance and obstacles. For instance, Dr. Freeman’s first supervisor refused to supervise a manuscript-based dissertation. Freeman was fortunate in two ways: he was clearly able to articulate to committee members how pursuing the manuscript-based dissertation aligned with his career goals and another faculty member with experience and “clout” was available and willing to step into a supervisory role. Freeman’s experience is unfortunately not unique. The next chapter explores the role that institutional policies play in shaping unconventional dissertations by focusing on a case where the main obstacles were experienced *after* Dr. Kristin LaFollette successfully defended her unconventional dissertation.

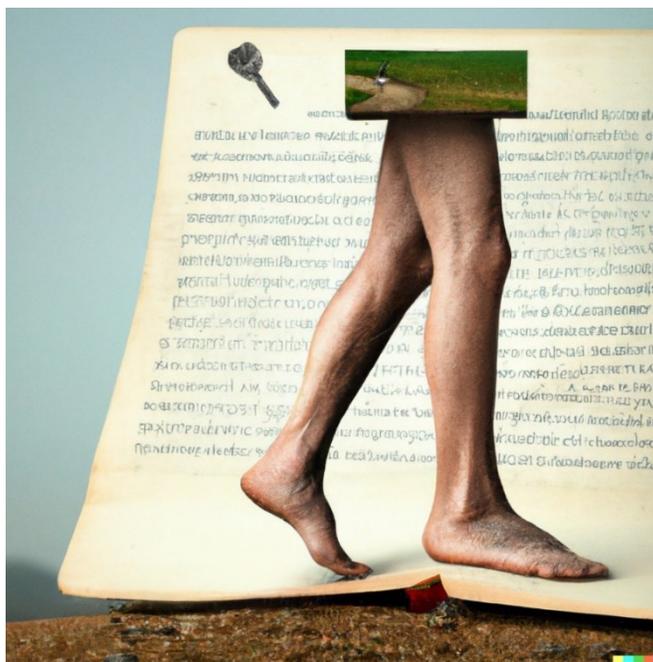
## **Chapter 10: When the Electronic Thesis Committee consists of one person with the power to delay your graduation**

<p><b>DR. KRISTIN LAFOLLETTE</b> <b>YEAR: 2019</b></p>
<p><b>TITLE OF DISSERTATION</b> The queer art of writing: (re)Imagining scholarship and pedagogy through transgenre composing</p>
<p><b>UNIVERSITY &amp; DISCIPLINE KEYWORDS</b> Bowling Green State University (U.S.). English, Rhetoric and Writing Studies; Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies.</p>
<p><b>SUPERVISOR(S) OR CHAIR(S)</b> Dr. Sandra Faulkner (Director and Graduate Coordinator; Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program), and Dr. Sue Carter Wood (Director; Rhetoric and Writing Studies Graduate Program).</p>
<p><b>UNCONVENTIONAL ELEMENTS</b> Inclusion of art.</p>
<p><b>MACROSTRUCTURE</b> Traditional-Simple.</p>
<p><b>DATA COLLECTED &amp; OTHER NOTES</b> Interview transcripts (INT) and dissertation (LaFollette, 2019).</p>

**Table 19.** Summary table for Dr. Kristin LaFollette (2019)

## General overview and description

Dr. Kristin LaFollette successfully completed her PhD in English, Rhetoric and Writing Studies (Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies) at Bowling Green State University in 2019. In her dissertation, LaFollette brings together queer and arts-based method/ologies to draw readers’ attention to a range of ways teachers and scholars can reimagine their pedagogical and writing practices.



**Figure 11.** For LaFollette’s (2019) dissertation, I asked DALL-E to “imagine a collage grows legs and appears to walk off of a page.”

More specifically, however, LaFollette is interested in “transgenre” composing and the implications it can have for pushing back on normative conceptualizations of academic writing. Ultimately, one of the aims and key interventions she seeks to make with her work is to show readers what they have to gain by composing, researching, studying, teaching, and assigning texts that move past an exclusive reliance on alphanumeric print. To do this, she interviewed five writing scholars who were (or had been) an English professor during their career and had published transgenre work. Transgenre work, as it is broadly defined by LaFollette (2019), refers to “work that crosses the boundaries of traditional genres,”

although the focus of LaFollette’s dissertation is more specifically on transgenre work that blends art and writing, or image and text (Abstract). An analysis of the interview data was combined with the analyses of other materials, including key artistic work and literature, and pedagogical resources gathered and/or created by LaFollette (2019) for a writing course “with a queer theory theme” (p. 78). The bulk of the dissertation focuses on communicating LaFollette’s critical reflections, garnered from teaching the writing course, alongside key findings from the interviews and an analysis of notable artistic work. Embedded throughout the dissertation is LaFollette’s own artwork, which consists mainly of photography and collages that use images and text.

Although generating artwork as part of an inquiry process was not necessarily unheard of in LaFollette’s department, centering art pieces in terms of both their creation and inclusion in the dissertation was relatively uncommon. For example, LaFollette used her art to enact arguments, represent her findings, reflect on and synthesis her experiences, as well as a tool for teaching writing (see also Table 20 for a summary of other ways LaFollette’s dissertation was unconventional).

**Table 20.** Areas of unconventionality in LaFollette’s dissertation (adapted from Tardy, 2016, p. 131)

Linguistic & Textual form	One of the chapters in the dissertation uses LaFollette’s photography to displace the centrality of text. The writing in this chapter is relegated to footnotes.
Modality	The artwork she created plays a central role in LaFollette’s dissertation.
Rhetorical aims and strategies	“a big part of my argument in my dissertation is . . . that [art] is a good tool for writing pedagogy because it helps us teach our students about rhetorical decision making and rhetorical thinking.” (INT)
Practice	“I decided to do between four and five collages for each chapter. So, collage as method, for me and my project would be I’d do the writing and then I would say, ‘Ok. So now I’m doing a collage to be representative of this research I just did.’ I would pull out an important data point from a particular section and make a collage . . . that would be representative of that.” (INT)

Reflecting on the role art plays in her dissertation, LaFollette shared with me how she has “a whole section in the dissertation about why” she was motivated to integrate art:

One of my entire chapters focuses on using art as a tool in teaching writing. And one of my arguments there is that collage is a good choice for that [teaching writing] because it’s something that students who maybe feel like they don’t have a lot of experience with art or they feel vulnerable creating art, collage might seem like a more approachable artform for them, because you can create a collage with materials that already exist, essentially. (INT)

Despite the unconventional use of artwork, LaFollette’s dissertation is primarily organized into chapters that follow a traditional-simple organizational structure (Paltridge, 2002; See Table 21 for a comparison between the organization of a traditional-simple dissertation and LaFollette). While we didn’t spend a lot of time discussing the overall organization of her dissertation during our interview, I do know from LaFollette that her committee did not have a lot of experience working with projects like hers and, although they were nevertheless supportive, they seemed to struggle at times with figuring out how best to advise her. It’s possible that they, like the supervisors we were introduced to through Richards and Clarke, intentionally or unintentionally pushed LaFollette towards a more traditional organizational structure given the degree of unfamiliarity they were presented with. Perhaps, when faced with an overwhelming unfamiliar project, steering candidates towards a well-established organizational structure is one strategy supervisors use to re-establish some stability.

**Table 21.** A comparison between the organization of a traditional-simple dissertation (Paltridge, 2002) and LaFollette’s dissertation.

LaFollette (2019)	Traditional-Simple <i>One study, IMRD format</i>
Chapter 1: Intersections Chapter 2: Methods and methodologies for exploring the queer art of writing Chapter 3: Transgenre composing and scholars as makers of creative-critical work Chapter 4: A transgenre approach to composition pedagogy Chapter 5: Synthesis (a collection of photographs and words) Coda	Introduction Methods Results Discussion Conclusion

LaFollette’s dissertation is organized into six chapters (the titles for each are shown in Table 21). The first chapter blends together an introduction and review of the literature, and the second chapter describes LaFollette’s research approach. The third and fourth chapter focus on reporting and discussing the findings (or analog). The fifth chapter is what LaFollette described in our interview as a photo essay—the written text is peripheralized via the use of footnotes in order to allow photographs to dominate each page. There are twenty-four photographs and footnotes in total. A discussion is carried out through the footnotes, in which LaFollette summarizes her main findings, their implications, and offers further suggestions for readers who want to incorporate her recommendations into their pedagogical and scholarly writing practices. The final element in the dissertation is the Coda, which, as LaFollette explained to me in our interview, isn’t a chapter per se:

The context essay, then, was just a way for me to articulate my own rhetorical choices and rhetorical thinking. . . . I called it a coda, because in art, literature, and music, the final part of a work is called a coda. So, I had chapters one through five, and then I had the coda. (INT)

LaFollette’s case brings an important point to the fore when it comes to using a macrostructural lens in an analysis of dissertations (unconventional or otherwise). While unconventionality can and often does show up at the level of structure, ultimately there are a range of ways a dissertation might be unconventional. LaFollette’s case also underscores the importance of pairing textual analyses with the gathering and analysis of contextual data. If what doctoral writers know about writing a dissertation involves bringing together different dimensions of rhetorical, formal, process, and subject-matter knowledge (Tardy, 2009), then doctoral writers will also need to draw on these same dimensions to identify and explore the range of potentials that are available to them for pushing the boundaries of the dissertation in their context (Tardy, 2016).

During our interview, LaFollette shared how, on the whole, her committee was quite supportive. It wasn’t until after the defense, when she went to submit her dissertation and apply to graduate, that she encountered major roadblocks that related to the formatting of the dissertation. If LaFollette adhered to the dissertation formatting guidelines *exactly*, she risked undermining her argument. At the same time, she risked graduating if she didn’t adhere to the guidelines set out by the Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Committee. In the end, and not without significant effort, LaFollette was able to find a satisfactory middle point. The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to examining how LaFollette handled this impossible decision.

### **“It’s not allowed”: The power of ordinary formatting guidelines**

Brittany: It sounds like really where you were experiencing that strong pushback. . . was after the defense, [at the institutional level,] with regards to formatting.

Dr. LaFollette: Correct, yes.

Brittany: But you were able to work around it for the most part. But if someone else didn’t have the amount of time and energy that you happened to have, they may not have been able to.

Dr. LaFollette: Yes. I would agree with that. The other part of it is too, is that I added this whole other piece of labour on top of [writing the dissertation]. . . . 20 pieces of artwork. So, you have to have perseverance in terms of adding another thing to the project—[it’s] not just writing a dissertation, [it’s also] using art making as a way of creating the dissertation. Then, you also have to be willing to navigate obstacles that are still in place because of the way the traditions have played out over the years, and we haven’t necessarily moved past ideas of what a dissertation should look like. I would definitely say if someone was going to . . . do something non-traditional, to just be prepared for extra labour and extra obstacles, for sure. (INT)

Dr. LaFollette successfully defended her dissertation, which blended more typical forms of academic inquiry and writing with visual modes of representation (such as collage and photographs), in 2019. During our interview, she shares how she ran into a bit of pushback over how she used certain theories in her work but, on the whole, her committee was quite supportive. It wasn’t until *after* she defended, when she went to submit her dissertation and apply to graduate, that she encountered major roadblocks:

LaFollette: I would say the roadblocks that I encountered weren’t necessarily with my committee, the roadblocks that I faced were essentially with my university.

Brittany: Institutional?

LaFollette: Yes, exactly. (INT)

In addition to the artwork LaFollette embedded throughout her dissertation, she decided to make the last chapter of her dissertation (the “synthesis wrap-up chapter”) a “photo essay” (INT). Her primary supervisor, Dr. Sandra Faulkner, was supportive of this choice but did voice some concerns relating to the size of the file:

The thing that we tried to figure out then was, “how are we going to make this work? Because if you add all of these photos in here, it’s going to make your file size gigantic.” That was another thing, Sandra was the only one to keep bringing this is

up, and she was right to because it did end up being kind of a problem in the end.  
(INT)

At the departmental level, LaFollette explained to me, there were few expectations regarding what the dissertation had to be: “I don’t even think we had departmental expectations about the formatting—I mean you had to have a certain number of pages and a certain number of chapters” (INT). “But,” she said, “the overall formatting” of the dissertation was “determined by the Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Committee” which was housed in Bowling Green’s library. It’s not obvious, just from looking at the PDF version of LaFollette’s dissertation, how much of a struggle it was for her to get there. While formatting the dissertation is something those with a “normal or traditional dissertation project” likely “wouldn’t have to think about,” LaFollette admits to being surprised by the difficulties she encountered in this regard, despite being forewarned by one of her supervisors (INT). Few, if any, participants in my study discussed what happened *after* defending the unconventional dissertation—probably because so much time and effort is dedicated to the process of bringing the unconventional dissertation to fruition, which includes grappling with the risk it may not be passed by an examining committee. However, LaFollette’s case suggests the importance of considering what happens or has to happen *after* the last person leaves the defense room and the lights are turned off:

I went to a workshop that showed us how to format everything, how to get everything ready for submission. I submitted it. They came back with like four pages of edits that I needed to do in order for it to be acceptable to be uploaded. [This] was right before I was leaving to go to a conference and the day after I was getting back from the conference, I was leaving for a job interview. So, it was just at the worst possible time.  
(INT)

Describing the more technical side of creating an unconventional dissertation, LaFollette also noted how the edits flagged by the Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Committee were often reflective of the limitations of Microsoft Word:

Microsoft Word is not very conducive to creating a project like this, especially one that needs to follow the very specific formatting guidelines set in place by my institution. I had a really hard time inserting the images and getting them to stay where I wanted them to stay. Adding captions—oh my goodness—all of this stuff was a headache. Trying to create the art and trying to get it into the document itself... I created all of these collages by hand and then I had to then figure out how I was going to get them on to the computer because I realized the paper was too big for my scanner. All of these random things added up—things you wouldn't have to think about with a normal, or I guess traditional, dissertation project. (INT)

LaFollette's collages, for instance, are sized the way they are because "that was the only way Word would accept them without trying to add more text on the page or move text around" (INT). Because of this, there was "very little room left" for captions—and captions were one of the things the Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Committee "had issues with" (INT). However, the Committee functioned at times in ways that would appear consistent with efforts to gatekeep academic knowledge production, albeit in less obvious but nonetheless insidious ways:

They had issues with the way some of my images were vertical and had writing on them that was horizontal. They said that it was not allowed, that I had to flip the image. And I'm like, 'No, it's supposed to be that way.' The lady literally looked at me and said, 'It's not allowed.' And that was like... oookay... (INT)

It wasn't made clear to LaFollette why this wasn't allowed. To be sure, it might not even be clear to the librarian why having images that are vertical and have horizontal writing on them are not allowed, but there is a good chance that there a history lurking behind the

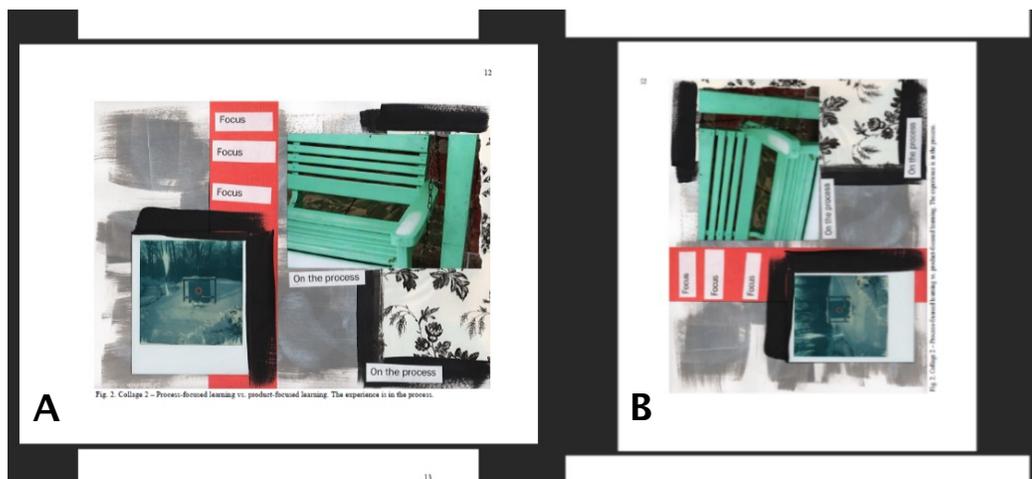
decision. Out of a desire to learn more, I tried to locate Bowling Green’s formatting guidelines for dissertations, however the guidelines were updated fairly recently (January 2022). Still, scanning the guidelines was an informative exercise, as it seems that the requirement for rotating tables or figures hasn’t changed. I found the following:

If sizing is a determining factor, tables or figures may require landscape placement on the page. *These pages should be rotated so that the text is consistent with the portrait style pages*, including the page number. (p. 6, my emphasis)

There is no explanation provided as to why, although it seems plausible to imagine that at least one reason for the choice is to ensure the ‘readability’ of the dissertation, which could be taken as code for privileging print-based understandings (and experiences) of writing—in the sense that rotating LaFollette’s collage meant aligning the text in the collage so that it appeared congruent with the text of the dissertation (read left to right, in portrait mode). Because there was text (and only because of this), the formatting guidelines and preference for prioritizing text superseded the creator’s artistic decision, literally imposing a viewing position on both the artist and the reader/viewer and, possibly, changing or altering the meaning that is being conveyed. To show how a seemingly benign requirement to rotate an image has consequences for the way in which that image is received (and therefore, the meaning that is conveyed), I’ve taken a screenshot of a collage from LaFollette’s dissertation and presented it, first, as it appears in the PDF of LaFollette’s dissertation and, second, as it might have appeared if it were rotated (Figure 12).

The main difference between the images, at least my viewing opinion, is that the text does not dominate the view in the second shot like it does in the first one (where it is horizontal). My eyes land on the images and see the vertical text as part of the image (perhaps even as “an” image if that makes sense). Whereas with the first screenshot, my eyes land on the text in order to read it.

**Figure 12.** The same collage rotated two ways (LaFollette, 2019, p. 12).



**Note:** The image on the left (A) is of the collage, as it currently appears in LaFollette’s dissertation. The second image on the right (B) shows how the same collage might have appeared if it weren’t rotated.

LaFollette did attempt to resist some of the changes, and used the arguments she made in her dissertation to justify her resistance, but says it wasn’t easy:

The final version you see now, I mean for the most part, is what I wanted it to be because I really made a lot of arguments when they would say things—like, “Well did you look at my dissertation? Because the whole point is like we need to reimagine these ideas that we have about writing is.” (INT)

She says that she gave up on some of the “fights,” however, because she was “running out of time” (INT). Formatting the dissertation according to the guidelines took about a month longer than LaFollette anticipated, and she was preparing to start a new job. But, as she explains in the following excerpt, making the requested changes to her dissertation wasn’t actually an option if she wanted to graduate:

They would not upload it without that. You could not graduate if your formatting did not [meet the requirements], even if your dissertation was done and defended, and your paperwork was signed. If they did not upload it because of formatting problems, you didn’t graduate. So, they were very serious about this. It was very stressful. It

probably took me at least a month from the first time I submitted the project to when I was actually able to push it through, because they had so many suggestions. (INT)

For LaFollette, it was the experience of what came *after* the defense, leading to the uploading her unconventional dissertation, that she says showed her how “we have a really long way to go, in terms of what we consider to be valuable work” (INT). While some of the other participants in this study have shared their experiences with needing to navigate extra decision points that appeared to require an impossible choice between retaining their argument (and, possibly, the point of their dissertation) or graduating, this tension was almost always at the interface between writing/creating the dissertation or defending it (i.e., at the level of the supervisor or committee). But, as LaFollette’s experiences suggest, even with a supportive committee, something as commonplace as the formatting guidelines put in place by an Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Committee can constrain and inhibit a doctoral writer who wishes to pursue an unconventional dissertation. Thus, even at the broadest level, attitudes about what the dissertation is (or ought to be) can function like a rubric, influencing the shape a dissertation takes. While research is still catching up in this regard, a recent study completed by Anderson and Okuda (2021) on the variation in dissertations at a Canadian university over a 50 year period lends some support here. In particular, the authors note how the “impact of institutional forces on the ability to use certain dissertation macrostructures and collaborative authorship practices” became “increasingly apparent” over the course of their study—however, they also note how unpacking this impact in terms of the influence that institutional policies have on “dissertation decisions” is difficult (Anderson & Okuda, 2021, p. 8).

Likewise, some scholars have noted similar difficulties to the ones LaFollette describes as having encountered. Shirazi and Zweibel (2020), for instance, note that “dissertators who include images as core arguments in their papers have found that the university formatting regime (which may insist that images be separated from the main

text) effectively destroys their intent” (pp. 1125-1126). And while the “imposition of strict formatting requirements for dissertation deposit is part and parcel of the doctoral degree-granting process,” Shirazi and Zweibel (2020) importantly point out how “there is little discussion” of how these formatting guidelines “might better serve the research community” (pp. 1125-1126). Likewise, Masure (2021) critically interrogates the “presentation standards” associated with dissertations in France, positioning their own dissertation as an enactment of a counter-response (p. 187). Wondering about the affordances that a digital dissertation might bring, Masure (2021) writes:

One can therefore wonder about the persistence of A4 and PDF formats at a time when knowledge is mainly carried out on the Web and with half of the views coming from mobile phones. It seems clear that understanding digital culture and web languages would be positive contributions to a PhD. While HTML was originally created in 1993 to describe and share scientific documents, why do so few (French-language) PhD theses deal with the possibilities of the Web? What could provide a rethinking of the modes of writing and knowledge transmission? (p. 188)

As Masure and others (Bazerman, 1988; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993; Finger & Kuhn, 2021; Kaufer & Geisler, 1989; Orlikowski & Yates, 1994; Paltridge & Starfield, 2020—to name but a few) have discussed, shifts in technology have often brought about shifts in writing and texts, as well as the standards and rules governing their production and use. For instance, the authors point to the shift towards longer doctoral dissertations, after the introduction of typewriters, carbon paper, and inexpensive paper, as but one example (Finger & Kuhn, 2021). Thus, while “institutions of higher learning should not abandon standards,” they would do well to “acknowledge the fact that these standards are not immutable, nor ideologically neutral” (Finger & Kuhn, 2021, p. 4).

## Chapter Summary

Thus far we have examined dissertations that, although unconventional in their own contexts, are still recognizable as dissertations. The next chapter focuses on a dissertation (Visconti, 2015) whose degree of unconventionality defies available frameworks for describing dissertations, notably frameworks for describing the macrostructures of dissertations. It begins much like the others in this section, in that I start off by describing Visconti's dissertation, including the elements that makes it unconventional. Then, I turn to discuss the insights that arose from my failed attempt to engage in a macrostructural analysis. In so doing, I share some of the hazards that can come with applications of this form of analysis, particularly if the assumptions that undergird macrostructural analyses are allowed to remain invisible and unchecked. This chapter is partly a report on findings and partly a segue into a discussion of the potential benefits that can come from drawing on other frameworks for analysing dissertations, namely those suggested in the research literature on visual and performing arts dissertations. As such, this chapter ends by introducing the value of attending to the rhetorical functions of the dissertation, thereby setting the reader up to transition into a broader discussion that includes revisiting some of the strategies deployed by dissertators in the visual and performing arts to construe a relationship between two seemingly incompatible components of their dissertations (Ravelli et al., 2021; Ravelli et al., 2013).

## Chapter 11: ‘Capturing the nebulous’ and making it count

<p><b>DR. AMANDA VISCONTI</b>  <b>YEAR: 2015</b></p> <p><b>TITLE OF DISSERTATION</b>          “How can you love a work, if you don’t know it?": Critical code and design toward participatory digital editions</p> <p><b>UNIVERSITY &amp; DISCIPLINE KEYWORDS</b>          University of Maryland (U.S.). English, Digital Humanities, Critical Code.</p> <p><b>SUPERVISOR(S) OR CHAIR(S)</b>          Dr. Matthew Kirschenbaum (English).</p> <p><b>UNCONVENTIONAL ELEMENTS</b>          Borne-digital dissertation with no chapters. Consists of several components that include research blog posts, a white paper, a public repository of design and code (GitHub), and a methods “manifest” (also on GitHub) .</p> <p><b>MACROSTRUCTURE</b>          Other.</p> <p><b>DATA COLLECTED &amp; OTHER NOTES</b>          Interview transcripts (INT), dissertation (Visconti, 2015), email exchanges, blog posts, media interviews (e.g., Canadian Association for Graduate Studies, 2019).</p>
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**Table 22.** Summary table for Dr. Amanda Visconti (2015)

## General overview and description

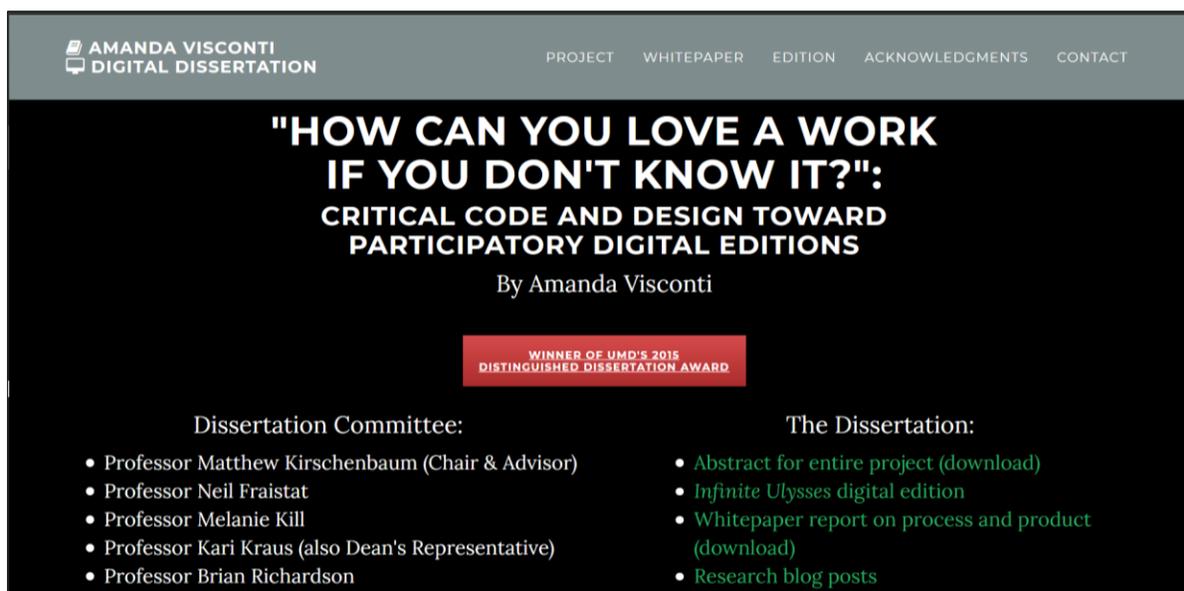
Dr. Amanda Visconti successfully completed their PhD in English (Digital Humanities) at the University of Maryland in 2015. Visconti's dissertation, entitled "'How can you love a work, if you don't know it?': Critical code and design toward participatory digital editions," won the 2015 Distinguished Dissertation Award from the University of Maryland in recognition of its unusually original and significant contribution. Bringing together a variety of components that include a from-scratch creation (from code, that is) of a digital literary edition of Joyce's "Ulysses," Visconti's dissertation enacts a "speculative" response to a question that asks, "what if we build a digital edition and invite everyone?" (Visconti, 2015b). Underpinning this question, Visconti writes in their dissertation abstract, are broader questions that get at the core of what it means to create academic scholarship, as well as the ways in which academic scholarship is often tied to specific (read: alphanumeric print) materializations.



**Figure 13.** For Visconti's (2015) dissertation, I asked DALL-E to visualise a photograph of James Joyce working behind a computer in a Dublin coffeehouse.

While focused on the process and key decision moments behind coding and designing a digital literary edition of a classic, Visconti’s dissertation project also importantly opens up space between the values that drive academic scholarship forward and taken-for-granted assumptions about the ways this scholarship is manifested. In addition to designing and coding the digital edition, Visconti also conducted user testing and analysed analytical data taken from the back-end of the digital edition’s website in order to think more critically about overall design, functionality, and engagement potential of digital editions.

**Figure 14.** Screen shot of Visconti’s (2015) digital dissertation website.



Like many other universities, graduates from the University of Maryland are expected to deposit their dissertations or theses to the institutional repository prior to graduating. These institutional copies serve as a record of work completed for the degree and, in most cases, represent the final version of a dissertation or thesis. However, Visconti’s institutional copy is unusual in this regard— it is *not* representative of the dissertation. The institutional copy (or, perhaps “record” is more apt) of Visconti’s dissertation is five pages long and contains a title page, abstract, acknowledgements, and table of contents. The table of contents has one listing in it: the acknowledgements. The

abstract points to Visconti’s (2015) dissertation website (shown in Figure 14; shown also in Box 2), which “serves as the container for all pieces of the dissertation” (Visconti, 2015b).

**Box 2. The different components that make up Visconti’s dissertation**

Visconti, A. (2015). *“How can you love a work, if you don’t know it?”: Critical code and design toward participatory digital editions* [Doctoral Dissertation Website]. University of Maryland. <https://dr.amandavisconti.com/>

Visconti, A. (2015a). *“How can you love a work, if you don’t know it?”: Critical code and design toward participatory digital editions* [Institutional Copy/Record of Dissertation]. University of Maryland. <http://hdl.handle.net/1903/16580>

Visconti, A. (2015b). *“How can you love a work, if you don’t know it?”: Critical code and design toward participatory digital editions* [Infinite Ulysses Participatory Digital Edition]. Amanda Visconti’s Doctoral Dissertation Website. <https://dr.amandavisconti.com/> and <http://infiniteulysses.com/>

Visconti, A. (2015c). *“How can you love a work, if you don’t know it?”: Critical code and design toward participatory digital editions* [White Paper Report]. Amanda Visconti’s Doctoral Dissertation Website. <https://dr.amandavisconti.com/>

Visconti, A. (2015d). *“How can you love a work, if you don’t know it?”: Critical code and design toward participatory digital editions* [Research Blog Posts]. Amanda Visconti’s Doctoral Dissertation Website. <https://dr.amandavisconti.com/> and <http://literaturegeek.com/tag/dissertation/>

Visconti, A. (2015e). *“How can you love a work, if you don’t know it?”: Critical code and design toward participatory digital editions* [GitHub Repository of Design and Code]. Amanda Visconti’s Doctoral Dissertation Website. <https://dr.amandavisconti.com/> and <https://github.com/amandavisconti/infinite-ulysses-dissertation/>

Visconti, A. (2015f). *“How can you love a work, if you don’t know it?”: Critical code and design toward participatory digital editions* [Manifest of Dissertation Methods, also on GitHub]. Amanda Visconti’s Doctoral Dissertation Website. <https://dr.amandavisconti.com/> and <https://github.com/amandavisconti/infinite-ulysses-dissertation/blob/master/About%20the%20Dissertation/MANIFEST.md>

**Figure 15.** List of references for each of the components that comprise Visconti's dissertation.

### **“Just sort of evolved this way”**

Dr. Visconti didn't intend for their dissertation to end up having the structure it did, it just “sort of evolved” that way as a result of the writing process and negotiations that took place between Visconti, their supervisor, and members of their committee (Personal Communication, May 2019). However, attending to the specifics of Visconti's story helps to shed light on why it is structured the way that it is. First, Visconti produced and included forms of writing that are not traditionally associated with prototypical understandings of the dissertation. This resulted in different “pieces,” or components, and an absence of chapters. Second, Visconti's committee formally evaluated the dissertation based on the *entirety* of Visconti's “scholarly effort” (Canadian Association for Graduate Studies [CAGS], 2019). This is highly unusual because traditionally, only the “proto-monograph” (conventional book-length, print-based dissertation) tends to be evaluated (CAGS, 2019). The traditional emphasis on evaluating the written text (the “proto-monograph”) in digital humanities often means that doctoral candidates who create non-prototypical texts (such as the participatory digital edition in Visconti's case) are also expected to engage in additional work. Depending on the size of the candidate's digital project, this can create an unsustainable workload that leaves the candidate with a choice—either do double the workload or cut the digital component. But Visconti wanted the whole process to count, not just the deliverable (Personal Communication, May 2019). This was one of Visconti's goals from the outset, but because participatory digital editions were still relatively unheard of in their department, Visconti needed to forge a path that would make achieving this goal possible.

The path Visconti took is interesting to me as a researcher of doctoral writing, because in addition to a physical path (i.e., to the Library or Dean's office), they also created a path using writing. I think of this sort of path-making as *rhetorical wayfinding*—“rhetorical” in the sense that writing is used to bring about some sort of social action, and

“wayfinding” in the sense that it can refer to the finding of one’s way through material and immaterial landscapes via the use of cues. For instance, Visconti worked with their supervisor to write a “summary statement,” which consisted of two paragraphs, one that outlined their vision for the project (in lay terms) and one on how the proposed project qualified as scholarship. This summary statement was shared with the Dean of Graduate Studies. Visconti also wrote frequent blog posts on the history of coding as scholarship right up to their prospectus<sup>5</sup>—a short essay that is similar to a dissertation proposal that explains what you want to do (and when) and is distributed to faculty for comment. Visconti also worked closely with the librarians at the University of Maryland to figure out what was needed, so that the local requirements to submit a record of the dissertation for the institution’s repository were met. In addition, Visconti sent weekly or bi-weekly emails to their supervisor throughout the dissertation process. These emails served as a report on the work Visconti was engaging in, but they also served an important purpose in terms of maintaining an audit or accountability trail.

Dr. Visconti looked to other disciplines (notably, from math and studio art) to highlight a range of what could be acceptable in terms of dissertation outputs, as well as the qualities of a dissertation and what it can (or might) do. This brought about the idea of creating a white paper (Visconti, 2015c) and a manifest (Visconti, 2015f). Both were framed as tools and opportunities to help Visconti “teach and communicate” their knowledge to others, as well as to “help others both understand and advocate for unusual shapes of work as scholarship” (Personal Communication, August 2021). This latter point is especially important because, as Visconti elaborated during our interview, without better ways to say “this *is* scholarship,” writers may find themselves feeling as though they “always have to

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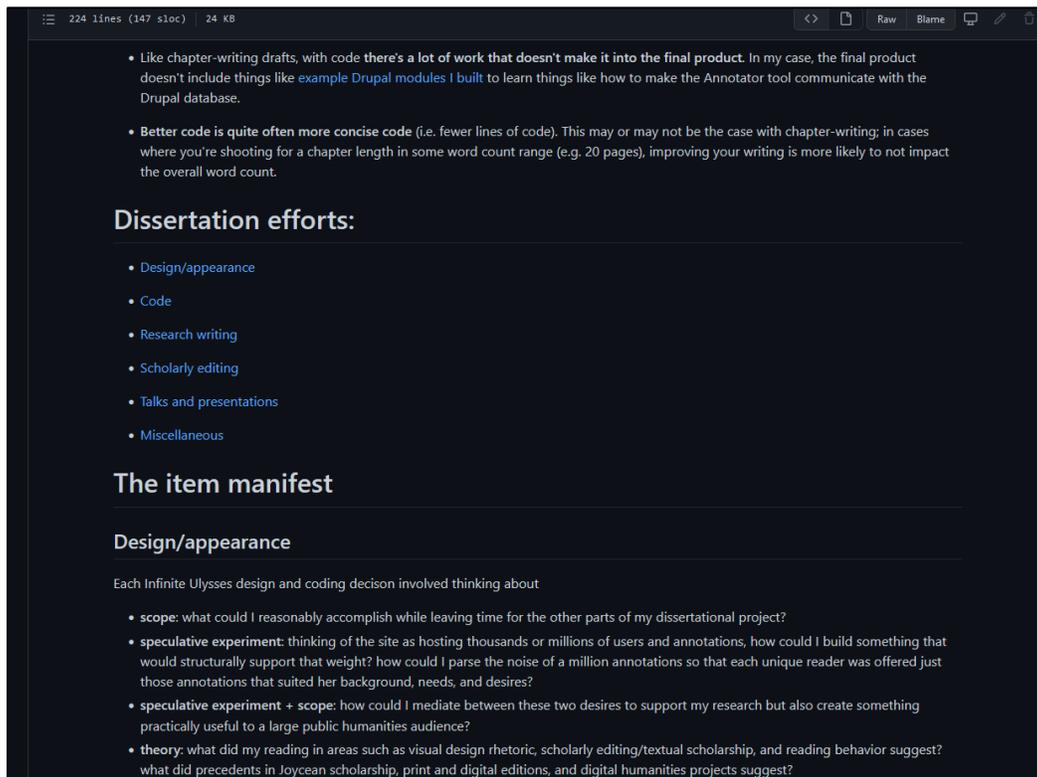
<sup>5</sup> At the time of writing, I was able to access Visconti’s prospectus on GitHub, via [https://github.com/amandavisconti/infinite-ulysses-dissertation/blob/master/Miscellaneous/Prospectus/AmandaVisconti\\_DissertationProspectus.pdf](https://github.com/amandavisconti/infinite-ulysses-dissertation/blob/master/Miscellaneous/Prospectus/AmandaVisconti_DissertationProspectus.pdf)

defend” their work, which often gets in the way of getting any actual “scholarship done” (INT).

The white paper—a longer paper that built on the prospectus Visconti wrote—was also meant to support committee members with envisioning what the dissertation project consisted of, as well as to document all the thinking, labour, and inquiry that went into the project. In addition, Visconti used the white paper (as well as the manifest, albeit to a differing degree) to explain technical components, document borrowed or repurposed code (a form of a scholarly citation practice) regardless of whether the code made it into the project or was left behind, describe decision-making processes, and explain how technical challenges were navigated. For instance, Visconti (2015c) describes the decision-making process around the creation of avatars for the digital edition users:

Choosing the look of user avatars raised questions of author attribution, diversity, and power hierarchies. I knew I wanted annotation authors to have their names noticeably attached to their annotations (something creators of content on other such sites have complained about), and I wanted readers to feel like there were other readers preceding them on that page—not just by random-sounding usernames, but by some representation of diverse faces. A solution and a problem came in the form of a set of beautiful sketches of the characters in *Ulysses* created by *Ulysses Seen* artist Rob Berry and generously shared with the site. (p. 52)

Meanwhile, the manifest—which calls to mind a document that lists the contents of a ship, therefore making it a fitting term for the piece—lists the different elements of Visconti’s scholarship on GitHub, a website primarily designed for and dedicated to the sharing, development, and maintenance of software and code (See Figure 16 for a screenshot).

**Figure 16.** A screenshot of a portion of Visconti’s (2015f) manifest, available on GitHub.

Describing the manifest in an email, Visconti wrote:

I think the manifest also helped capture the more nebulous ways I participated in scholarly conversations through the dissertation process—things like blogging, tweeting, invited talks, teaching etc. that made up a picture of how ready I was to fully participate in the post-doctoral-level scholarly conversation. Rather than being a checklist of these, it was kind of a way to package those all, and then talk about that kind of public scholarly involvement more broadly, rather than as e.g., a tweet-by-tweet analysis of what I posted. (Personal Communication, August 2021)

The purpose behind the manifest, according to Visconti, was to help others not only “understand and engage” with Visconti’s work, but to also help “solidify exactly what the committee would be evaluating” or not evaluating, for that matter (Personal Communication, August 2021). For instance, Visconti didn’t want committee members to

evaluate “the substance of the seed annotations” they made on *Ulysses* (Personal Communication, August 2021). Elaborating further, Visconti (2015c) explains:

*Infinite Ulysses* hinges on the ability of readers to annotate the text as they read it, plus use a variety of other features dependent on the presence of socially authored annotations. When a reader “annotates” my digital edition, they highlight a section of the literary text, then type in a comment about that highlighted text. This annotation can then be displayed in the margins of the text, dependent on how a reader has used the filter and sort tools for annotation display personalization. . . . So that readers on the beta site were not working from a blank slate, I seeded the site with over 200 annotations on the . . . first two chapters, plus 30 broadly useful tags that mark annotation topics such as advanced vocabulary, foreign languages, and references to Joyce’s biography. (p. 13)

While the manifest was originally developed by Visconti as a way to demonstrate how they were (already) enacting different scholarly values and activities, Visconti says that ultimately “a lot of folks, including folks not doing digital dissertations, could benefit from this kind of guide” (Personal Communication, August 2021). Visconti says this is because the manifest isn’t just a list of “pieces to evaluate,” it should also include “showing some of the less quantifiable scholarly activity that adds to your argument that you are ready to fully participate in a scholarly conversation” (Personal Communication, August 2021). Elsewhere, Visconti (2015c) suggests “justifying the format of your work” as a “useful thought exercise,” one they’d “recommend to every dissertator (really, to any scholar)” (Visconti, 2015c, p. 111).

### **Unconventionality can’t really occur across all domains – or can it?**

Conventional socio-rhetorical theories of genre suggest that, while variation is a critical feature of all genres, equally critical to a rhetorically sound definition of genre is a degree of sameness—thus lending some insight into why dissertations can depart from

conventions on one level while embracing them on another. However, the borne-digital nature of Visconti's dissertation, combined with the development of a digital literary edition and inclusion of multiple component parts rather than chapters, lends an initial impression of being innovative across *all four* of the domains suggested by Tardy (2016) in Table 23. But, if "deviating too far" from conventions—as Tardy (2016) writes—can put a text at risk of being "perceived as unsuccessful or even as a different genre entirely" (p. 39), the existence of Visconti's dissertation begs some important questions, perhaps all of which can be summarized as "how?"

Research on innovation and intentional unconventionality in academic writing points to the important role that expertise and knowledge plays in *both* the production *and* reception of a text (e.g., Tardy, 2016). For example, writers need to accurately gage which conventions they can depart from or resist while ensuring the success of their work. These decisions will be influenced by a writer's understanding of their audience, and will include a need to gage the values, expectations, and expertise held by different members of the audience. From this perspective, then, unconventionality is positioned less as something that is inherent to an individual and more as something that requires relationship(s) to exist. Unconventionality and innovation, in other words, is not something that exists in a vacuum. It is something that requires an *other* (i.e., readers) to witness, if not recognize, the innovation for what it is. For example, in an effort to make this less abstract and provide some concrete examples, Visconti's supervisor, Dr. Matthew Kirschenbaum, wrote "one of the first hypertext dissertations back in the 90's" (INT). Three of the four other members on Visconti's dissertation examination committee have textual and digital studies listed as their research expertise (Dr. Neil Fraistat, Dr. Melanie Kill, and Dr. Kari Kraus). The fourth member, Dr. Brian Richardson, brought expertise in post-1900 British and Irish literature. (Note: All of Visconti's committee members were at the University of Maryland.) Thus, while committee members may have not necessarily had previous experience

advising and evaluating dissertations *exactly* like Visconti’s, their collective expertise and experience would have undoubtedly prepared the ground for a more favourable reception.

**Table 23.** Mapping Visconti’s dissertation onto the areas of genre innovation suggested by Tardy (2016)

Area	Explanation (Tardy, 2016)	Examples from Visconti (2015)
Linguistic & Textual form	Unusual word choices; non-canonical grammar forms; mixing of linguistic codes; unconventional move structures	Designed and coded a web-based digital literary edition; Used other non-canonical textual forms (e.g., blog posts, a white paper, a “manifest”)
Modality	Integration of unconventional modalities; use of an uncommon modality for that genre	Use of blog posts, GitHub (public repository of code), a white paper, <i>not</i> using chapters or bringing the different pieces together into one manuscript.
Rhetorical aims and strategies	Unconventional use of stance or engagement markers; use of rhetorical appeals uncommon to the genre	Some of Visconti’s dissertation blog posts incorporate unusual methods of engagement, such as memes and videos.
Content	Incorporation of unusual or unexpected ideas	Created a participatory digital edition in part as a commentary on and exploration of the limits of scholarly textual and print biases.
Practice	Unique approaches to research methodology, design, or composing processes	Designed and coded a participatory (publicly accessible) digital edition. Blogged on process throughout and made blog posts one of the components of the dissertation.

It is also plausible that committee members’ shared interest in (and experience with) digital and textual studies contributed to a heightened awareness of the manifold ways in which scholarship can manifest and, possibly, also to a sensitivity to the debates surrounding digital scholarship as a whole (e.g., its value, legitimacy, potentiality, etc.). In addition, Visconti’s committee members were all from the Department of English at the University of Maryland. This is important to know because, as Visconti (2015c) indicates in

their white paper, their project is “not much different from the previously accepted practice of producing a scholarly edition, complete with commentary and editorial apparatus, as a dissertation” (p. 111). So, while at first Visconti’s dissertation appears to innovate across all possible domains, the tradition or convention of producing a scholarly edition is brought forward enough to aid readers’ recognition. By advancing the idea of the scholarly edition first, readers/audience members are introduced to a way of doing scholarship that is likely already familiar to them. From that familiar place, readers are better able to grapple with Visconti’s transformed or re-imagined scholarship.

### **Repairing a textualist orientation**

Up until this point, I’ve mainly focused on describing Visconti’s dissertation and the ways in which it is unconventional. I’ve suggested that while Visconti’s dissertation radically departs from the other unconventional dissertations I’ve introduced in previous chapters, it nonetheless taps into a long-standing (albeit re-imagined) tradition of the scholarly edition. As Berkenkotter and Huckin (1993) persuasively argue, “No act of communication springs out of nothing” (p. 492). Indeed, even when texts appear to be radically different, as in the case of Visconti’s dissertation, they still can still be expected to “build on prior texts and text elements” in a mix of ways (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993, p. 492). By placing the creation of a scholarly edition of a well-known literary work at the centre of the dissertation, Visconti retained a strongly held tradition as well as some of the “norms, values, epistemologies, and ideological assumptions” associated with this particular tradition (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993, p. 498). At the same time, Visconti’s dissertation also unsettled these assumptions in significant ways. For instance, introducing a participatory element to the process of creating the edition pushed back on ideas that scholars ought to be the only ones creating scholarly editions, which in turn also created opportunities for decentering knowledge, power, authority, and legitimacy.

My examination of unconventional dissertations thus far has shown that unconventional dissertations are not *convention-less* dissertations. Instead, they represent a careful and strategic balance between following conventions some ways while departing from them in others. Put again another way, the success of an unconventional dissertation relies “on a delicate balance between the inertia of the past and the drive to change it” (Kaufer & Geisler, 1989, p. 289). In fact, given expectations that doctoral dissertations make an original or novel contribution to knowledge, one might argue that the success of all doctoral dissertations hinge on this balance. Kaufer and Geisler (1989) speak as much for dissertation as they do for novelty in academic writing when they write that:

Contributions that respect the past with too little change become tired and predictable, the worst implications of Kuhn’s normal science. Conversely, contributions that push change with too little rootedness are likely to remain unclassifiable rather than revolutionary. (p. 289)

And while conventions *may* manifest through textual features, it’s crucial to counter-act tendencies to conflate the two. Textualist understandings of the dissertation tend to over-emphasize the configuration of features or components, or the collection of texts that comprise a dissertation (see page xxii in Artemeva & Freedman, 2015, and page 16 in Miller, 2016, for a brief discussion of textualist treatments of genre). Those who uncritically adopt this view, whether overtly or otherwise, are prone to mistakenly assume that the features and components of the dissertations they’ve come into contact with—perhaps over the course of supervision or committee work—are generalizable; or, indeed, represent the genre itself, when in fact genres are not reducible to their constituent parts any more than humans are to their organs (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993; Miller, 2016). Similarly, when subject to strict textualist understandings, a macrostructural analysis simply cannot account for Visconti’s dissertation. It does not follow the organizational pattern characteristic of a traditional-simple dissertation (introduction, methods, results,

and discussion, or IMRD). It includes different materials that are meant to stand on their own, doesn't report on more than one study in a typical sense, and doesn't follow a modified IMRD, which means neither the traditional-complex nor the topic-based macrostructures can account for Visconti's dissertation; topic-based dissertations typically include an introduction and a series of chapters that are organized according to the topic under examination (Paltridge, 2002).

However, as the remainder of this chapter will soon show, when an analysis of the components or features that comprise Visconti's dissertation is paired with a consideration of the social and rhetorical functions that lie behind them, new insights are revealed. By prioritizing the action(s) Visconti's dissertation orchestrates over textualist taxonomies of formalized conventions, the remainder of this chapter heeds Miller et al.'s (2018) advice that we "use genre to make underlying rhetorical considerations more readily available" (p. 273)—particularly if we wish to realize the potential that a "more critical genre studies" can have for aiding students and scholars alike in not only observing "how genres shape their perceptions and actions but also change or resist genre's ideological pull" (Devitt, 2015, p. 390). Relatedly, the remainder of this chapter attempts to repair understandings of dissertation macrostructures that are at risk of becoming overly textualist in an effort to support scholars across the disciplines who desire to examine the "ethics. . . power relations, privileges, enactments, [and] responsibilities" of "current practices and technologies," as well as "their consequences" (Miller et al., 2018, p. 275).

### **Reviving the use of macrostructures**

Macrostructures are one of the many strategies writers rely on to help them organize information, create a sense of cohesion across ideas, and reduce or filter out unnecessary complexity (van Dijk, 1980). With the use of macrostructures, writers can organize complex information together into more digestible chunks and relate sections or parts of a text to its whole. Without macrostructures, we might be able to make individual

links between a large number of “information units,” but we would struggle to assess how these pieces fit together, “thus rendering the retrieval and use of complex information ‘unthinkable’” (van Dijk, 1980, p. 14). This is because, according to van Dijk (1980), macrostructures help us handle large, complex quantities of information by reducing it into more cognitively manageable terms. For instance, we can observe how, in the following example provided by van Dijk (1980), there are connections between each sentence:

John was ill, so he called the doctor. But the doctor could not come, because his wife wanted to go to the theater with him. They were playing Othello, which she thought they could not miss because Shakespeare is one of the few dramatical authors who...  
(p. 40)

However, despite these connections and the sense that there is a logical progression, “somehow, as a whole,” the above example (borrowed from van Dijk, 1980) lacks coherence: “It jumps from one topic to another without any orientation except for linear, pairwise connections between the facts” (p. 40). In other words, discerning the meaning of a text requires something more than simply combining the meanings of its individual sentences. Thus, a writer is able to provide a summary of a text thanks in part to the “reductional” and “organizational” functions that macrostructures play (van Dijk, 1980, pp. 14-15). Likewise, readers are able to understand that the information units in one piece of writing add up to a summary of another piece of writing in part due to the presence of macrostructures in the text.

The concept of macrostructures carries useful implications for researchers. For one, it can shed light on “how social contexts and communities shape writing practices and decisions” (Anderson et al., 2020, p. 3), because the notion of macrostructures suggests that the meaning of texts cannot be adequately described via a focus on sentences alone (van Dijk, 1980). For another, the notion of macrostructures implies that while there is a considerable cognitive dimension involved with comprehending and making use of written

texts, there is also a social aspect that influences how writers determine the organization and shape of their texts (van Dijk, 1980, p. 2). While the overall structure or organization of a dissertation is only one of the many kinds of macrostructures a researcher could consider (indeed, van Dijk's work on macrostructures goes beyond the organizational patterns of texts), the organizational pattern of a dissertation can be a telling place to begin.

### *The symbolic potential of dissertation macrostructures*

Dissertation writers and their supervisors, to some extent, need to have a sense of the social or consensual stock of knowledge, particularly if dissertators want to be able to claim that their work is novel, original, or makes a contribution (Kaufer & Geisler, 1989). That is, they'll need to represent what they think "everyone knows" (Kaufer & Geisler, 1989, p. 290). Writers develop a sense of who "everyone" is, as well as "what" everyone knows, through "their social networks and by reading literature" (p. 290). Even then, what 'everyone knows' will differ:

Writers in the same community commonly differ in their internal inventories of 'what everyone knows' because they join in different networks, read different texts, and come to different synthetic constructions of their experiences. (Kaufer & Geisler, 1989, p. 290)

This is why Kaufer and Geisler suggest that writers "must often persuade their readers in the very points of consensus they ultimately wish to break" (p. 290). In other words, in addition to subject-matter expertise, dissertation writers will also need to develop expertise on the prototypical dissertation conventions they wish to depart from. However, dissertators themselves may at the onset have limited knowledge of these conventions as well as limited access to examples of departures from these conventions. In this case, supervisors or members of the committee may point out certain conventions they're aware of. In chapter 6, for example, we were introduced to Dr. Richards's supervisor, Dr. Leslie

Swartz, who underscored the importance of showing “people” that Richards understood “what a traditional thesis is supposed to look like” (INT). Swartz also suggested Richards consider doing something a little “less adventurous” with her dissertation (while still retaining “an element of that adventurousness”) so that she could “look like [she] can speak the language of academia while still playing with it” (INT).

Like other writers, dissertators and their supervisors (to varying degrees) base their macrostructural choices on the belief that other dissertators or supervisors would make similar decisions if faced with a similar-enough situation. Over time, this perception can become a part of the social stock of knowledge that dissertators, supervisors, and committee members draw on to rationalize preferences for certain “processes and representations” (van Dijk, 1980, p. 2). To extend this line of thinking further, given enough time, a dissertation’s macrostructure could also become symbolic of a stock of knowledge. That is, a dissertation’s macrostructure may itself function as a claim regarding what it is “everyone” knows. For instance, in the above example, there may be something about demonstrating both the structure and knowledge of a “traditional” dissertation (one that follows an IMRD organizational pattern) that symbolizes, at least in Swartz’s view, the discipline’s social stock of knowledge.

Therefore, the kinds of persuasive acts Kaufer and Geisler (1989) mention as necessary may have well be dealt with before dissertators begin writing their dissertations (during advisory meetings, for instance). In other words, the consensus they wish to depart from—the conventions they wish to break—may have already been established, debated, and perhaps even approved before the dissertation actually takes a form (or forms). Dr. Visconti describes meeting with faculty deans, academic librarians, and committee members prior to completing the dissertation. During these meetings, Visconti worked with others to identify and respond to issues as they arose. Visconti still needed to spend a fair amount of time establishing the rationale for their chosen approach, but they were able

to do this using their research blog to record and reflect on their process. In addition, Visconti's committee consisted of experts known for their experience with multimodal and digital forms of writing, thus likely accumulating a very different social stock of knowledge than members of Dr. Clarke's advisory committee who struggled to "grok" Clarke's project even after she shared a draft of a three-chapter proposal:

They [the advisory committee] said 'this looks great. This looks interesting, blah, blah, blah. We don't have any problems per se with it. We just can't grok it. What is it going to look like when it's done?' (INT).

It took four chapters and a conventional dissertation macrostructure for Clarke's committee to say "okay, I get it. I get what you're doing here" because something finally "clicked for them" (INT).

When writing is disconnected it from its rhetorical functions and 'situated localities,' or framed as a 'non-question,' rhetorical understandings of the dissertation can flourish (Starke-Meyerring, 2011; Swales, 2004). The features of dissertations and the rhetorical functions and purposes that led to the rise of these features are no longer in question because they can no longer be seen. In an effort to retrieve the rhetoricity of dissertations, the next section presents some of the rhetorical functions that have been identified in the literature.

### **Retrieving rhetorical functions**

In their study of visual and performing arts dissertations, Paltridge, Starfield, Ravelli, and Tuckwell (2012) and Ravelli et al. (2021, p. 226) found that core rhetorical functions typical for the dissertation genre were all present in the written components of V&PA dissertations (e.g., connecting to a body of literature, drawing in/on theory, demonstrating the contribution, etc.—see also Starfield, Paltridge & Ravelli, 2014). More specifically, Ravelli et al. (2021, p. 226) found that the V&PA dissertations they studied commonly fulfilled four core rhetorical functions and that each function could be roughly aligned with

the chapters found in a traditional-simple dissertation (i.e., reports on a single study, and is organized into chapters following the introduction, methods, results, and discussion structure). Table 24 summarizes the rhetorical functions described by Ravelli et al. (2021) and a few additional points from the literature.

**Table 24.** The four rhetorical functions (Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012; Ravelli et al., 2021; Thomson & Kamler, 2016).

Rhetorical Function	<i>Corresponding section or chapter in a traditional-simple dissertation</i>
<u>Research warrant.</u> Includes demonstrating need and space for new knowledge, as well as establishing the relevance of the inquiry and the contribution proposed.	<i>Introduction</i>
<u>Research capacity.</u> Includes establishing how the inquiry relates to theory and/or practice (self or others'). Involves gathering material, concepts, ideas, technologies, references, and/or collaborators and demonstrating the learning involved prior to carrying out the project.	<i>Literature Review</i>
<u>Research evidence.</u> Includes establishing the project, process practice, and/or theory as research.	<i>Results</i>
<u>Research effectiveness.</u> Includes drawing out implications and arranging arguments for the contribution the project makes to practice, experience, knowledge, theory, and/or other future initiatives.	<i>Discussion</i>

Like the V&PA dissertations analysed by Paltridge et al. (2012), my analysis suggests that Visconti's dissertation could similarly be misrecognized when subject to strict comparison with conventional dissertations. But, when an appreciation of the rhetorical functions is prioritised over where they appear, the ways in which Visconti's dissertation *does* respond to conventions is revealed. Table 25 presents readers with the results of this analysis. Note: While in theory it may seem simple enough to suggest that each section or chapter of a dissertation fulfills one rhetorical function, in actual practice we observe some slippage. For instance, a review of the literature might be found in both the introduction and literature review chapters in a conventional dissertation. In this case, the introduction could be seen as fulfilling more than one function (establishing the warrant and capacity).

**Table 25.** The four rhetorical functions, as dispersed across the different components of Visconti’s dissertation.

Component	I	M	R	D	Notes
Infinite Ulysses participatory digital edition	X	X	(x?)	X	A case could be made that the digital scholarly edition itself is a <i>result</i> and fulfills the rhetorical function of providing evidence of research (“research evidence”).
White paper report on process and product	X	X	X	X	
Research blog posts	X	X	X	X	Distributed across the content of ~35 blog posts, and to differing degrees in terms of level of detail. Some posts feature embedded video presentations.
Public repository of design and code (GitHub)	X	X			Also: Literature Review
Manifest of dissertation methods & explication (GitHub)	X	X	X	X	Also: Literature Review

**Note:** (I) stands for introduction and corresponds to the *research warrant* and *research capacity* function, (M) stands for methods, (R) stands for results and corresponds with the *research evidence* function, (D) stands for discussion and corresponds with the *research effectiveness* function. Adapted from Ravelli et al. (2021).

Aligning the different pieces of Visconti’s dissertation with these four functions demonstrates how even unconventional dissertations that radically depart from traditional forms or formats can still, like dissertations in the visual and performing arts, “include the same components as a conventional doctoral dissertation, but in more dispersed forms” (Paltridge, Starfield, Ravelli, & Nicholson, 2012, p. 340). For example, while designing and coding a digital scholarly edition (“Infinite Ulysses”) may not neatly map onto traditional conceptions of the scientific method, the iterative, spiralling process Visconti describes as having gone through while creating the digital edition definitely bears resemblance to some modes of qualitative inquiry. Although the Infinite Ulysses website has since been archived, it is still possible to access it and have a look around ([Visconti, 2015b](#)).

On the Infinite Ulysses site, there is an “About” tab that reveals a drop-down menu with several navigable options, one of which is “Research.” Clicking on this option brings the viewer to a page titled “About the Research Behind This Site,” where a statement about the methods and questions guiding the inquiry can be found. Some descriptions of the process or methods of study, as well as explanations of key terms (e.g., “user studies” and “analytics”) are also found here. The site’s smooth appearance makes it easy to forget that, in order to conduct research in this collaborative digital space, Visconti needed to build it from the digital-ground up *first*—including all the digital-bricks, mortar, and other materials needed to bring this “lab” (or co-laboratory, given the participatory nature of the project) into being. Plus, *writing* (computer code) also undergirds this co-laboratory. Thus, it’s possible to view the link and reference to the Infinite Ulysses project (in Visconti’s list of dissertation elements) as serving multiple purposes, such as to indicate that work has been completed on this component *and* that this work is counted as part of the dissertation.

Again, I think the link and reference to the Infinite Ulysses project is doing some important work to enact the methods and study underpinning Visconti’s dissertation—Infinite Ulysses *as method, tool, conceptual framework, and data*. The idea that methods, research, and theory can be enacted or performed is something other digital humanists have written about, as the following quote from Bauer (2011) shows:

Once I was presenting *The Early American Foreign Service Database* and got the question ‘So where is the theory in all of this?’ Before I could answer with my standard, diplomatic but hopefully thought-provoking, response a longtime digital humanist called out ‘***The database is the theory! This is real theoretical work!***’ I could have hugged her. When we create these systems we bring our theoretical understandings to bear on our digital projects including (but not limited to) decisions about:

controlled vocabulary (or the lack thereof), search algorithms, interface design, color palettes, and data structure. (para 8, bold italics added)

In addition, Visconti also conducted usability testing to improve users' experiences with Infinite Ulysses, as well as its site design, and dedicated a significant portion of their white paper to reporting on this process and its outcomes.

It is also worth mentioning that each of the components that comprise Visconti's dissertation (as listed in Table 25) fulfill two or more rhetorical functions and three rhetorical functions in particular reappeared across all of the components. More specifically, I was able to account for the presence of the *research warrant* ("validate object of study," "demonstrate space for new knowledge," and "establish relevance of own contribution"), the *research capacity* ("position study in relation to theory and/or position study in relation to practice"), and *research effectiveness* ("argue that research undertaken in a contribution to theory and/or practice") in each of the different components, albeit with varying degrees of intensity and concentration (Ravelli et al., 2021, p. 226). Visconti's (2015c) white paper, for instance, engages in re-imagining scholarly editions in a way that Visconti's (2015d) research blog is unable to for reasons due to constraints on the length of a typical blog post. Thus, while the rhetorical functions associated with a traditional-simple dissertation are distributed quite widely throughout Visconti's dissertation, the contents of the components provide "evidence that the overall doctoral research (both the written and creative components) constituted something more akin to a traditionally-formulated empirical study" (Ravelli et al., 2021, p. 226).

These findings suggest that a more generous approach to analysing the macrostructures of dissertations, one that incorporates an understanding of the rhetorical functions that underpin a dissertation, is warranted. Likewise, I'd also argue that a generous approach ought to also incorporate an understanding of the purpose or function behind the manuscripts or publications that comprise a manuscript-based (also known as

an article-compilation or thesis by publication) macrostructure. That is, why do scholars write manuscripts or publications to begin with, and for whom? Such questions ask us to reflect not only on the purposes behind scholarly communication; they also ask us to think more carefully about how we understand what it means to be a scholar, as well as the values that undergird this understanding (Agate et al., 2020; Day et al., 2013). Not only does assuming that the scholarly manuscript is either a journal article or book chapter perpetuate views that these products are the *nec plus ultra* forms of doctoral dissertation writing (and scholarly communication more generally), but it also runs a risk of divorcing writing from its social-rhetorivities. In addition, if academic outputs can and do change, why would it make sense to assume that the “manuscript” in a manuscript-based dissertation can only refer to two possible scholarly products? While it’s true that there are many manuscript-based dissertations that consist entirely of legacy forms of scholarly communication, my concern here is that adopting a problematically narrow definition of what constitutes a scholarly manuscript increases the likelihood of the assumption that a manuscript-based dissertation can *only* ever consist of legacy forms of scholarly communication.

Yet in earlier times, as Boyer (1990) reminds us, “scholarship” used to refer to “a variety of creative work carried on in a variety of places, and its integrity was measured by the ability to think, communicate, and learn” (p. 15). It’s only relatively recently that a narrow, more restricted view of scholarship began to take hold (Boyer, 1990; Wellmon & Piper, 2017). This shift has been attributed to the emergence of the “research university” (Clark, 2006) and the shift to viewing “basic research” as the “first and most essential form of scholarly activity, with other functions flowing from it” (Boyer, 1990, p. 15). Under this paradigm the modern research university emerged (Wellmon & Piper, 2017, para 27). The “institutional legitimacy and authority” of the modern research university came to rest “on the universal ‘calculability’ of published knowledge” (Wellmon & Piper, 2017, para 27).

Under this system, scholars become “academics who conduct research, publish, and then perhaps convey their knowledge to students or apply what they have learned” (Boyer, 1990, p. 15). As ideas about a “research-based scholar” became more widely circulated, so too were assumptions that a published journal article or scholarly book chapter “reflected the scholarly abilities, industriousness, and personal genius of an academic persona” and, as such, were the property of the (imagined) solitary author (Wellmon & Piper, 2017, para 22). Disagreeing with this view, Boyer (1990) argued for a “more comprehensive, more dynamic understanding of scholarship” that rejected artificial separations between teaching, research, and service and invited “flexibly defined” and broadened ways of thinking about scholarship to flourish instead (p. 16). When it comes to dissertations, the University of British Columbia’s (UBC) policy on the inclusion of published material in the dissertation is one example of what it might look like to think more broadly along Boyer’s (1990) terms:

Publications are most commonly in the form of articles appearing in academic journals or chapters appearing in edited volumes. Publications may also include films or other audio, visual, or graphic pieces shown or published in public venues, or other scholarly artifacts such as policy briefs, webpages or computer applications, curricula, etc., that are in use in a professional or community domain. Nothing should be included in the thesis that cannot be made open-access through cIRcle [Institutional repository] (after a short-term embargo, if warranted and approved). (Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, UBC, 2022)

Under this definition, it is easier to see how Visconti’s manifest and repository of code, both of which are available on GitHub (a web-based platform primarily designed for and dedicated to the sharing, development, and maintenance of software and code) *can* be considered a contextually relevant method of scholarly communication as well as an act (and activity) of knowledge creation. The GitHub website “provides a system for easy tracking, commenting, and forking (making new, individually customizable versions) of git-

based projects” (Brock, 2019, p. 125). Brock (2019) also argues that there are social and rhetorical dimensions to GitHub that bear some resonances with the academic peer review environment, such as the practice of offering “in-code comments” and “meta-discursive commentary” (p. 128).

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter introduced Dr. Amanda Visconti, who completed their PhD in English (Digital Humanities) at the University of Maryland in 2015. Visconti’s dissertation radically departs from the other unconventional dissertations I’ve introduced in previous chapters. However, as I suggested in this chapter, it nonetheless taps into a long-standing tradition of scholarly editions. I also highlighted some of the pitfalls that can come with overly form-focused analyses of unconventional dissertations. I pointed to two implications specifically: that of the need to consider the rhetorical functions that undergird dissertations, as well as the need to re-consider tendencies towards privileging legacy forms of print scholarship when considering the macrostructures of ‘publication-based’ dissertations. The latter point, to my knowledge, has not yet received any notable attention in the literature pertaining to macrostructural analyses of dissertations.

Literature on doctoral writing suggests that certain rhetorical functions of the dissertation reappear across different disciplines and contexts, even when conventions appear absent (Ravelli et al., 2021; Thomson & Kamler, 2016). However, these functions might be obscured by conventions that are perceived to be typically associated with them. For example, when there is an expectation that a dissertation will follow the structure of a scientific report (IMRD) in a discipline because past doctoral candidates have typically always conducted empirical research. A dissertator who is interested in pursuing a humanistic approach to inquiry more likely to be successful if they can find ways to convey how their chosen approach speaks to the functions that underpin the introduction,

methods, results, or discussion sections found in traditional-simple dissertations (See also Clarke, Chapter 7).

The next section marks the beginning of the end of this dissertation. It begins with Chapter 12, where I review some of the strategies dissertators use to help them construe relationships between the written and creative or practice-based components of their dissertations (as reported in Ravelli et al., 2013). In Chapter 12, I also showcase the pedagogical implications these strategies can have for conceptualising unconventional dissertations (including those with multiple components). In Chapter 13, I conclude the dissertation, starting off by highlighting and discussing some key findings and contributions.

## **Section Three**

## **Chapter 12: Pedagogical implications – More than an afterthought?**

Doctoral programs around the world face increasing pressure to adapt to the changing needs of doctoral students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Inouye, 2022; Paré, 2017; see also Badenhorst et al., 2021). These pressures include perceptions of emerging trends in the job market (e.g., fewer tenure-track positions, more interest in “alt-ac” positions, etc.) and the enrolment and attrition rates of doctoral student (i.e., more enrolments, difficulties with retention), among other things (McAlpine et al., 2021; Sverlink et al., 2018; see also, generally, Ahmed, 2012; Burford, 2017b; Caretta et al., 2018; Dolmage, 2017; Henry et al., 2017; Pidgeon et al., 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2014). Relatedly, the doctoral dissertation, as an integral part of doctoral education, has been identified by researchers as an opportunity or problem space (possibly both) in connection to the previously mentioned points (Owler, 2010; Paré, 2017; Starke-Meyerring et al., 2014).

Regardless of whether the dissertation is positioned as a problem or opportunity, doctoral writing researchers appear to agree on the need to move away from conceptualisations of doctoral and dissertation writing that are de-linked from power, ideology, identities, social action, the context, or rhetorical situation (to name a few examples), and are moving instead towards conceptualisations that emphasise writing as an embodied, contested and stabilized-for-now mix of typified socio-rhetorical practices (e.g., Amell, 2022; Badenhorst et al., 2014; Burford, 2017b; Casanave, 2010; Paré, 2014a; Starke-Meyerring, 2011; Tardy, 2005; see also, Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010). At the same time, scholarly knowledge production—along with its meaning, modes of representation, mechanisms of authorisation, and methods of assessment—remains a hotly debated subject within the context of higher education and increasingly more broadly as well (Agate et al., 2020; Fitzpatrick, 2011; Monk et al., 2021; Paré, 2019; Parham, 2018; also Bergan et

al., 2022; Clifton-Ross et al., 2019; Oreskes & Conway, 2022; Prasad, 2022; Taylor, 2022).

The time is ripe, in other words, for research that seeks to examine scholarly knowledge production.

Arising at the intersection of these aforementioned issues, the present study has sought to critically engage with assumptions governing practices and modes of scholarly knowledge production via a focus on unconventional dissertations. The dissertation, as a relatively modern invention, is a particularly apt site for inquiry. Despite ongoing calls for expanded conceptions of the dissertation, the academy appears to “not only refrain from encouraging, but actually prohibit” dissertations that break with convention (Porter et al., 2018, p. 4). Throughout the present dissertation, I’ve productively questioned notions of unconventional dissertations, including what they are or might be, as well as how authors of unconventional dissertations manage to bring them about.

The previous section concentrated on presenting readers with the main findings resulting from the present study. Chapter 5 explored descriptions of unconventional dissertations from the perspective of questionnaire respondents and authors of unconventional dissertations. I provided textual excerpts from 11 different dissertations and ended the chapter with a more detailed exploration of one dissertation in particular (Stewart, 2015). In Chapters 6 through 11, I introduced readers to six authors of unconventional dissertations and explored the conditions surrounding the production of these dissertations. Findings suggested that tendencies to conflate ‘doctoral dissertations’ with conceptions of legacy forms of scholarly communication still prevail. However, I also revealed how some dissertations might intentionally appear conventional on the surface in order to belie the unconventionality lurking below. These findings and others are synthesized and discussed in the next chapter (Chapter 13), which also serves as the conclusion for this dissertation. Before we arrive there, however, I’d like to spend some

time pointing to some pedagogical takeaways this study can offer those who are working with doctoral writing and writers.

Because doctoral writing pedagogy can happen in any number of contexts, I hope readers will understand that the content I provide here may require readers to develop and tailor it further so that it is both appropriate and relevant to their specific circumstances. The chapters begins with me first presenting an adapted version of the heuristic Ravelli et al. (2013) present in their analysis of the relationships between the written and creative components of visual and performing arts dissertations. Next, I share some questions for further reflection. From there, I turn to consider some possible responses to these questions, using myself as a case study and, in the process, re-visit a previous roadblock I experienced earlier on in the dissertation planning stage. Finally, the chapter ends with six “mini-cases” that are presented to readers with the expectation that they might reader one or two before moving on to the next chapter, which concludes this dissertation.

### **Pedagogical materials**

The cases provided in this section, as well as throughout this dissertation, can be found in the database of unconventional dissertations I’ve made publicly accessible the Canadian HSS Commons site (Link: <https://doi.org/10.25547/93ZF-H523>). Readers are welcome to navigate to the database at any time.

Some additional pedagogical materials can be found in Appendix 3. These include two handouts and some suggestions for incorporating mini-textographies as an assignment.

### **Thinking strategically about the relationship between the conventional and unconventional aspects of dissertations**

Most of the research-based dissertation advice literature that is available appears to focus on describing the work that accompanies more conventional dissertations (e.g., topic-based or traditional-simple) or manuscript-based dissertations. While this literature is

valuable, particularly since many of the unconventional dissertations shared in the present study follow these macrostructures, findings from the present study have also suggested that the unconventionality of a dissertation isn't limited to its macrostructure. Further, some are beginning to suggest that an increasing number of what I'd refer to as unconventional dissertations are comprised of "multiple object types" (Shirazi & Zweibel, 2020, p. 1131). While some guidelines for the assessment of unconventional dissertations have been developed (e.g., Kuhn, 2021; Modern Languages Association of America, 2014; Next-Generation Dissertations, 2021a), little attention has been paid to the earlier stages of these dissertations. Though the Next-Generation Dissertations (2021b) website, the edited volume by Kuhn and Finger (2021), and a recent journal article by Shirazi and Zweibel (2020) all offer a place to begin, questions about what goes into an unconventional dissertation's planning process, for instance, or how dissertators and supervisors determine which components to include in a multi-part unconventional dissertation remain relatively unanswered in the literature. In addition, it appears that dissertators are assumed to have decided on their unconventional projects at the outset, leaving little if any guidance for those who might wish to add an unconventional dimension to their project later on in the dissertating process.

While this specific topic receives limited attention in the present study, some preliminary guidance nonetheless can be inferred. This portion of the chapter concentrates on re-considering the heuristic Ravelli et al. (2013) present in their analysis of the relationships between the written and creative components of visual and performing arts dissertations. Unlike unconventional dissertations, which can include quite literally any dissertation that is perceived to successfully depart from conventions, dissertations in the visual and performing arts *must* consist of a creative and written component (Ravelli et al., 2013). This means visual and performing arts dissertators will need to figure out how the components relate to each other, as well as how to represent this relationship in writing

(Ravelli et al., 2021; Ravelli et al., 2013; See also Chapter 3). The uniqueness of visual and performing arts dissertations can present other challenges as well. Notably, dissertators are often required to demonstrate characteristics of originality, mastery, and contribution via the creative component *and* the written component (Paltridge, Starfield, Ravelli, & Nicholson, 2012).

Although dissertators of unconventional dissertations that consist of multiple components may find it easier to see the relevance and applications of Ravelli et al.'s (2013) heuristic, most if not all dissertators stand to benefit from the opportunity to think more strategically about how the conventional and unconventional aspects of their dissertation relate to each other, as well as to the whole. To support this aim, I've suggested some modifications to the original heuristic (as conceived by Ravelli et al., 2013) that I believe increase its potential usefulness for unconventional dissertations. The modified heuristic is presented in Table 26. This is the version I gradually arrived at over the course of analysing the dissertations in my corpus. Likewise, I suggest readers adjust this heuristic as they work with it. To help with this, I recommend reviewing the modified version (Table 26) and unmodified version of the heuristic (Table 4, p. 55, Chapter 3), along with Ravelli et al.'s (2021) summary of their study and findings.

**Table 26.** Heuristic for construing relations between the components of an unconventional dissertation (Modified from Ravelli et al., 2021; Ravelli et al., 2013).

**Separated:** Atypical or unconventional component(s) is not really visible in the written or conventional component(s) or is positioned as separate from the institutional copy of the dissertation. Note: This may be inverted, where the written or conventional aspects are positioned as more or less separate from the institutional copy of the dissertation.

- *Parallelism:* Atypical or unconventional component(s) and written or conventional component(s) are treated as parallel processes with little textual connections created between them. For instance, there's no explicit mention of the URL in the written component and asides from occasional mentions of "this site," it's easy to think you're reading a print-based dissertation.
- *Influenced:* The research undertaken through the written or conventional component(s) is positioned as contributing to the atypical or unconventional component(s) or vice versa, but emphasis here is on a unidirectional relationship. For instance, a policy brief is created in response to the research but is mentioned only briefly and found in the appendix, almost as an FYI.

**Connected:** Atypical or unconventional component(s) is positioned as a crucial element of the institutional copy of the dissertation or is positioned as inextricable from the written or conventional component(s), or vice versa (the conventional components are positioned as inextricable from the unconventional components).

- *Incorporated:* Atypical or unconventional component(s) and written or conventional component(s) remain separate but are seen to influence each other. For instance, collages created in response to research findings are included throughout the dissertation but seem to stand separate or 'beside' the written components. Or the institutional copy of the dissertation serves as a record of the atypical or unconventional component but is positioned as "not" the dissertation. In these cases, a reference is usually made to the component that "is" the dissertation, such as a website for a digital dissertation.
- *Intermingled:* There is a sense of interdependence between the atypical or unconventional and written or conventional component(s) and a distinct understanding that they are a part of the same project. For instance, comics are used to enact the arguments that are being made for the value of different knowledge making processes, or when a combination of audio and writing serves to highlight the multivocal nature of the research process.

### Questions for further reflection

Some general questions can be extrapolated from the heuristic presented in Table 26 and elsewhere (Table 4, p. 55 in this text; also, Ravelli et al., 2013). These questions are presented below. Note that it may be more suitable to substitute other words for "component," such as aspect or element (see also Table 1, p. 49, for more inspiration). It is

assumed that a focus for the project and/or some overarching guiding questions have already been identified.

1. What components comprise the dissertation?
2. Are these components weighted equally, or will one component serve to anchor the rest of the dissertation?
3. Which of the components comprising the dissertation, if any, will or must happen first?
4. Will each of the components listed be made visible in the dissertation as a whole? Or will some components (e.g., the anchoring components) be featured more prominently?

Additional questions can be found in Appendix 3 (“Questions to guide the writing process”).

**Part 1. If you only have time to do a little.** If you have a project in mind or are preparing to propose a project, you could use each of the questions to help you think more deeply about the connections between the convention and unconventional aspects of the project. If you don’t have a project in mind, consider using one of the teaching cases I provide later on in this chapter. What you change, if anything, about the observations presented in the mini-analysis for the case you selected?

**Part 2. If you have time to do a little more.** Consider diagramming the relationship between the components in the project you describe in Part 1. If you aren’t sure where to start, you can take a look at the diagram I created in Figure 17 for my “re-imagined” dissertation.

In the next sub-section, I respond to the questions provided above using myself as a case study and, in the process, re-visit some of my earliest difficulties with proposing a dissertation.

*Self as Case: Re-imagining my dissertation in light of this research*

**Context.** As a student undertaking doctoral studies in a department with a well-established disciplinary tradition of conducting empirical research (quantitative, qualitative, and/or mixed methods), I was introduced early on to the concept of the manuscript-based dissertation. This style of the dissertation, at least as it was presented to me, sort of follows the hybrid simple/manuscript organizational pattern reported on in Anderson et al. (2021): that is, the manuscripts (the majority of which are published or have been accepted for publication) are organized into discrete chapters that can stand alone that often follow the IMRD pattern of the traditional-simple macrostructure (or a modified version of this, if reporting on separate studies). The only caveat is that although Anderson et al.'s (2020) description of the hybrid simple/manuscript does allow for the possibility of mixing published material with unpublished material, in my context, my experience is such that this is not presented as an option.

In short, the impression I had is that while manuscript dissertations were a desirable option, it seemed I needed to start publishing right away if I wanted to successfully pull this option off. I struggled to reconcile this knowledge with the other requirements that were mentioned; notably that manuscript-based dissertations are required to represent “a coherent account of a unified research project” (Carleton University, 2022, Section 12.4.A) and consist of an introductory chapter/literature review, methods chapter, “data (research papers) chapters,” and a conclusion (Carleton University, 2022, Section 12.4.B). Despite having published three papers, two of which were co-authored, as well as a special issue of a journal and an edited book on the topic of doctoral writing, I struggled to figure out how I could connect this work so that it would meet the requirements for required format.

In any case it wasn't until after I had completed most of the work on the present dissertation that I realised another way was possible. Out of the two options presented in Carleton University's Graduate Calendar (2022), the *monograph* surprisingly offers the

most flexibility because it isn't defined or really even referred to outside of being presented as a contrast to the manuscript-based dissertation:

Many disciplines, especially in engineering and the sciences, accept a thesis consisting of student work based on published papers, conference proceedings, or papers awaiting publication. Known as the 'integrated article,' 'manuscript,' 'sandwich,' or 'chapter' thesis, this type of thesis *contrasts with the monograph thesis traditionally offered for examination*. (12.4, italics added)

Nonetheless, even if I had opted to pursue this approach (i.e., blending published and unpublished material together in a monograph format), I still expect other challenges would have presented themselves, such as determining how different publications would fit together across the entirety of the dissertation project.

**Re-imagining my dissertation.** Using the four questions presented in the previous subsection as a base, the remainder of this sub-section focuses on re-imagining a solution to the obstacle I presented earlier (that of bringing my publications together in a way that meets Carleton's criteria for manuscript-based dissertations). Because I want to keep this exercise on the briefer side, I'll list out and respond to each question at the same time.

1. *What components comprise the dissertation?* To answer this question, I would first begin by listing out any published material (by sections or in whole) I wished to include, along with other components the dissertation might feature, for example, a reflection, a smaller-scale study, and a series of workshops.

2. *Are these components weighted equally? Or will one component serve to anchor the rest of the dissertation?* I imagine I could group the published material together in a cluster that could serve as an anchor for the broader project. Then, I imagine myself using this cluster as a backdrop for the dissertation. I could then highlight the development and carrying out of a smaller-scale study and a series of workshops based on my experiences with publishing.

3. *Which of the components comprising the dissertation, if any, will or must happen first?*

The material I imagine listing in my response to question 1 are published, and so in a sense had already “happened.” But perhaps some planning would need to happen before I could deliver the (hypothetical) workshops, so incorporating at least part of the planning process for the workshops into the design of the smaller-scale study seems like it would be a good idea in theory.

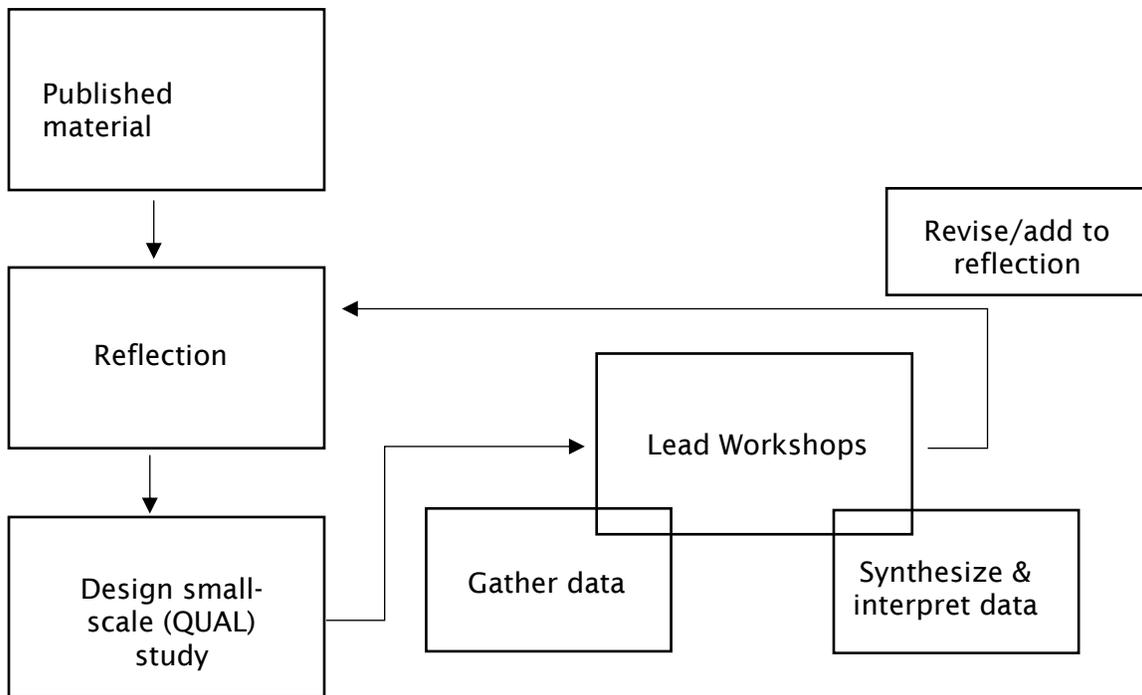
4. *Will each of the components listed be made visible in the dissertation as a whole? Or will some components (e.g., the anchoring components) be featured more prominently?*

I can imagine bringing together excerpts of unpublished and published material in a reflection chapter for the dissertation. For instance, I could feature portions of emails or calls for proposals I had written and reflect on the process that went into them, along with some key lessons. I could also imagine interspersing some of the material throughout the literature review portion of my dissertation (with proper attribution). But, I could also see the workshops offering some fantastic opportunities for learning and stretching, so perhaps more weight and “airtime” (visibility) would be given to this component.

**Reflection.** Something about this process has reminded me of diagramming the different stages for a mixed methods study. I wonder if similar diagrams could be generated for dissertations with multiple components. Figure 17 shows an example of what this diagramming might look like, based on my descriptions of my re-imagined dissertation. In it, the published material, the small-scale study, and the workshops all feed into the reflective piece which in this case could then develop into the written or conventional component and institutional copy of the dissertation. It’s difficult to tell from the diagram I’ve rustled up, but I could imagine the relationship between the components would be construed as connected—they are positioned as inextricable from each other. Whether the dissertation could be described as connected incorporated (unconventional components and written or conventional components remain separate but are seen to influence each

other) or connected intermingled (unconventional components and written or conventional components are interdependent and closely related) would depend on the final product— but if the imaginary project went more or less as planned, I’d be willing to place my bets on “connected intermingled.”

**Figure 17.** Diagram of components for Britt’s re-imagined dissertation.



**Cases for further reflection**

In this section, I present six “mini-cases.” The intention here is to demonstrate the usefulness of Ravelli et al.’s (2013) heuristic by showing what can be revealed when it is applied to considerations of unconventional dissertations. Rather than attempting to read the whole section, readers might instead wish to choose one or two cases to peruse before moving on to the next section (“Thinking with Textography”).

*Teaching Case #1*

**Dr. Graham (2020): Pedagogical potential in the complexism learning process: A performer's journey through Brian Ferneyhough's ‘Bone Alphabet’ (1992).**

In a nutshell

- Institution & Discipline: University of British Columbia. Orchestral Instrument, Musical Arts.
- Two clear components: Lecture-Recital and Written Component.
- Macrostructure: Traditional-Simple.
- Proposed relationship: Separate-influenced.

#### Components and links, where applicable

- Dissertation (Open Access): <http://hdl.handle.net/2429/75370>
- Supplementary materials (Open Access): <http://hdl.handle.net/2429/77295>
  - These include videos of Graham demonstrating strategies for learning difficult aspects of to Bone Alphabet

#### More

Graham's (2020) dissertation is the perhaps the easiest to begin with because clearly consists of two components: a lecture-recital and a written document. Lecture-recitals consist of a lecture and a live performance, whereas the "written document" is intended to "complement and amplify the lecture-recital" (School of Music, 2016, p. 24). The typical length for this document, according to the guidelines set out by the School of Music (2016), "should be 30-50 pages"—although students may submit "longer" documents with "the permission of the supervisor" (School of Music, 2016, p. 26). In Graham's (2020) case, the "goal and purpose" of the dissertation, including its key arguments, were introduced and discussed during the lecture portion of the lecture-recital. The recital portion consisted of a live performance of Brian Ferneyhough's "Bone Alphabet" (p. vi).

The written component of Graham's (2020) dissertation, which is 142 pages long (including front matter), focused on exploring the process of learning and performing a complex work. It follows a traditional-simple dissertation organizational pattern, with the notable modification that a methods section is not included, despite Graham having conducted research interviews with four participants. Interview questions and transcripts

are included in the appendices. Graham (2020) suggests there are parallels between Graham’s experiences with learning the Bone Alphabet and participants’ interview responses, and this feeds into a key purpose of the written component which is to argue for the benefits of working with and on “musical complexism” (p. 4).

### *Teaching Case #2*

**Dr. McKenzie (2020): “Indigenous women’s reproductive (in)justice(s) and self-determination: Envisioning futures through a collaborative research project.”**

#### In a nutshell

- Institution & Discipline: University of British Columbia.
- Inclusion of policy brief.
- Macrostructure: Traditional-Simple.
- Proposed relationship: Separate-Influenced.

#### Components and links, where applicable

- Dissertation (Open Access): <http://hdl.handle.net/2429/73316>

#### More

McKenzie (2020) introduces their dissertation as but one of the outcomes associated with a “collaborative action-oriented study” that sought to centre Indigenous women’s’ and two-spirit people’s experiences with sexual and reproductive injustices in Canada, as well as their right to self-determination and justice. Mobilizing knowledge gathered through this research effort was an important aspect of the project’s design and associated aims (p. 1). Unlike Graham’s dissertation, it’s easier to miss the unusual component (a policy brief) that accompanies McKenzie’s (2020) dissertation. The brief is mentioned only four times throughout the dissertation (twice in the research methods, once in the discussion, and once in the conclusion), and is located in the appendices.

McKenzie (2020) describes how then-recent media coverage of the forced sterilization of Indigenous women, paired with collaborators’ experiences and discussions,

motivated McKenzie to initiate the process of co-authoring and publishing a policy brief that would “address the racist, sexist, and colonial conditions that underlie coercive practices” as well as “the hospital policies that enabled them to be enacted” (pp. 149-150). The policy brief was submitted to Canadian health authority representatives at the municipal, provincial, and federal level, and offered McKenzie (2020) an avenue to “creatively disrupt” the “colonial standards and ideologies that continue to structure academic research,” as well as the “practices and politics” of academic research more broadly (p. 195). McKenzie’s (2020) dissertation follows a traditional-simple organizational structure (IMRD). It doesn’t include a creative component in the strictest sense, but it does include an atypical or unconventional component. The research is positioned as **separate** from the policy brief, but the conventional components of the dissertation establish the context, need, and research for the unconventional component (policy brief), thus lending the appearance that the research process **influenced** the creation of the policy brief.

### *Teaching Case #3*

#### **Dr. Sousanis (2014/2015): Unflattening: A visual-verbal inquiry into learning in many dimensions**

##### In a nutshell

- Institution & Discipline: Teacher’s College, Columbia. Interdisciplinary Studies in Education.
- Comics based dissertation (published with Harvard University Press in 2015).
- Macrostructure: Analogous to topic-based. Organized into several chapters that cover the range of subtopics (not studies) relevant to the research topic, with an introductory (“flatness”) and concluding (“awaking”) chapter.
- Proposed relationship: Separate-influenced.

##### Components and links, where applicable

- Institutional Copy (2014): Not available

- Other: Harvard University Press (2015)

### More

The fact that the creative or unconventional component of Sousanis’s dissertation is the *dissertation* (it is written entirely in comics form) makes it difficult to discern “components” per say. However, there is one page (p. 47 in the dissertation, p. 54 in the Harvard Press edition) that is meant to mimic the way a dissertation is traditionally supposed to look (typed, double spaced, font style, etc.). This page includes a “figure” (hand-drawn, like the rest of the dissertation) which has a caption (“Fig 1: Object bent in water”). Interestingly, Sousanis (2014) shares how this page was the only one singled out by the office of doctoral studies in need of correction. He writes:

The office of doctoral studies singled out this image, and said that because of this figure, I needed to include a ‘List of Figures’ page in my front matter that pointed to page 47 and listed ‘Figure 1’ on it. Long pause. I wanted to think that it was a joke – yet I’m pretty sure it wasn’t. But it so beautifully reinforced the point I was making with the work and explicitly on this very page, and in such a way that I would never have thought of it myself. It’s this poetic moment – a list of figures in front of a text of 130-some drawn pages that cites a single image on the page with the most text and least images. It sums up the absurdity of tradition that I was pushing against. (Sousanis, 2014, para 9)

Page 47/54 is purposely presented as separate from the rest of the dissertation—it is meant to disrupt readers in an obvious way. At the same time, readers are able to move from the previous page (which is comics-based) to the parody page (which is print/text-based) without losing their place in the story or overall argument Sousanis is making with the dissertation. Based on this, I would propose this as a neat example of a *separate-influenced* relationship. **Separate**, because the entire dissertation is presented in comics form, save for one page (the ‘written component’ see above), which is presented in a way

that is meant to be disruptive. **Influenced**, because the effect is that the written component (which would typically be considered conventional) becomes atypical or unconventional in the context of this dissertation. This component (p. 47/54, depending on which version the reader has) is made possible through the rest of the dissertation (which is in comics form). In other words, the comics establish the context, purpose, argument etc., needed to make sense of the written page.

### *Teaching Case #4*

## **Dr. Schell (2013): We Rock Long Distance: M.anifest and the Circulations of Diasporic Hip-Hop**

### In a nutshell

- Institution & Discipline: University of Minnesota. Comparative Studies in Discourse and Society. Digital Humanities.
- Components: institutional copy, web-based dissertation, feature-length documentary. Note: links can be found at the end of the next section.
- Macrostructure: Topic-based. Organized into several chapters that cover the range of subtopics (not studies) relevant to the research topic, with an introductory and concluding chapter.
- Proposed relationship: Separate-parallel.

### Components and links, where applicable

- Dissertation (web-based): <https://sites.google.com/a/umn.edu/wrld/>
- Institutional copy: <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/151349>
- Documentary: <https://www.werocklongdistance.com/is>

### More

Inspired by ethnographic work that illustrates theory, ideas, data, and narratives via multiple modalities, Schell's dissertation taps into a rich tradition of ethnomusicology.

Although the focal point of Schell's dissertation is M.anifest—a Ghanaian hip-hop artist who

resides in Minnesota—Schell fluctuates between immersing readers in local venues and offering wider views that situate readers in the literature and conceptual frameworks that essentially give rise to the conditions and situations in which Manifest as an artist (and artists like Manifest) can propagate. At the heart of the dissertation are deeper questions that get at the legacies and possibilities of scholarly communication (but also its limitations), the legacies of who speaks and who listens, as well as what it means to do research and enact distance. Schell explores these points using video, photos, audio, and writing. On this, Schell writes: “sometimes the media illustrates a point, sometimes it serves to introduce a story, sometimes it tells a story in itself” (p. 6, institutional copy or para 9, preface, dissertation website).

Focusing on the interaction between the institutional copy of Schell’s dissertation and the web-based version of the dissertation (which is the original), my impression is that the institutional copy is intentionally crafted to reinforce the feeling that the author is trying to convey, which is that Microsoft Word is not a one-size-fits-every-situation technology. For example, although it appears that the institutional copy of Schell’s dissertation is the same as the website that was developed as the dissertation, there are some notable absences that remind readers of the difference—such as an empty box where audio or video content would have been if the dissertation were viewed as it were originally intended, for instance on an interactive medium that wasn’t Word or PDF based (p. 8). Commenting on this directly, Schell notes how, despite the myriad “technological possibilities available to scholars to create different formats of their work or combine existing formats of work” the “form of the dissertation still suffers from technical limitations” (p. 6). Although Schell technically could have embedded audio and video files into the document directly, the file-size of the PDF would have been too large to submit, thus compromising Schell’s ability to meet the requirement that a copy of the dissertation be submitted to the institution’s repository.

Based on the above, I propose that Schell’s dissertation is an example of a *separate-parallel* relationship. **Separate**, because the institutional copy is positioned as separate (i.e., not the same as) the ‘actual’ dissertation, which is a combination of a website and a feature length documentary film. The documentary is also housed on a website that is separate from the dissertation website. A sentence that appears on the dissertation’s home page provides readers with a link to the documentary and encourages them to check it out. **Parallel**, because the institutional copy is positioned as the “conventional dissertation PDF” (p. 8), which is different from the dissertation website and documentary (i.e., the unconventional or atypical components). I see this distance being enacted intentionally, feeding into the overall arguments Schell seeks to make.

### *Teaching Case #5*

**Dr. Gan (2019): “Russia outside Russia”: Transnational mobility, objects of Migration, and discourses on the locus of culture amongst Educated Russian migrants in Paris, Berlin, and New York**

#### In a nutshell

- Institution & Discipline: University of British Columbia. Anthropology Digital Humanities.
- Components: written/institutional copy and interactive multimedia installation (“Still Life with a Suitcase”)
- Macrostructure: Hybrid Simple/Manuscript. Reports on a single study using IMRD format. Chapters 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6 contain content (either in whole or in part) that was published and/or presented.
- Proposed relationship: Connected-Intermingled.

#### Components and links, where applicable

- Dissertation (Open Access):  
<https://open.library.ubc.ca/soa/cIRcle/collections/ubctheses/24/items/1.0376258>

- Installation website: [https://www.gregorygan.com/still\\_life.html](https://www.gregorygan.com/still_life.html)

### More

Gan’s dissertation utilizes a fascinating mix of audio, visual, and textual materials—or “voices” as Gan refers to them in the dissertation’s abstract: the autobiographical or self-reflexive voice, the autoethnographic or self-referential voice, the empirical or academic voice, and the multimedia voice (an interactive audio-visual installation).

Gan (who hails from the Soviet Union) takes readers with him as he travels across Moscow, Paris, Berlin, and New York to talk with “educated Russian migrants . . . about moving to a new country” (Abstract). A total of forty-five conversations were recorded and edited into short stories that appeared in an interactive video and sound installation (“Still Life with a Suitcase”). This installation was presented at the Digital Anthropologies/*Anthropologies Numériques* Film Festival in Paris and exhibited at both the Canadian Anthropology Society’s Annual Meeting in Santiago de Cuba and at a satellite campus of Norwich University in Berlin. The installation works together with the written component to explore “how people search for personal fulfillment across different political contexts” (Lay Summary), and both are positioned as part of Gan’s inquiry process *and* the product, which means they are difficult to disentangle. For example, in the written component of Gan’s dissertation personal vignettes are presented using bold italicised text, whereas more “auto-biographical” (p. 4) text is presented using a lighter typeface, and “academic prose” is represented using bold type (p. 5).

Based on the above, I propose *connected-intermingled*. **Connected**, because the different components are difficult to disentangle from each other. **Intermingled**, because there is a strong sense of interdependence between the installation and the research that was undertaken for the written or conventional component(s), as well as a distinct understanding that they are a part of the same project. Author notes that the written and

video components of the dissertation both consider how “people search for personal fulfillment across different political contexts” (Lay Summary).

### *Teaching Case #6*

#### **Dr. Chakraborty (2014): A Computational Framework for Interacting with Physical Molecular Models of the Polypeptide Chain**

##### In a nutshell

- Institution & Discipline: Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University. Computer Science.
- Components: written/institutional copy, scalable model of polypeptides (blueprints).
- Macrostructure: Topic-Based. Organized into several chapters that cover the range of subtopics (not studies) relevant to the research topic, with an introductory and concluding chapter.
- Proposed relationship: Connected-Incorporated.

##### Components and links, where applicable

- Dissertation (Open Access): <https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/handle/10919/47932>
- Supplementary Files: <https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/handle/10919/47932>
- Website created for “Peppytide:” [www.peppytides.org](http://www.peppytides.org)

##### More

Dissertation focuses on new developments in biomedical tools, specifically physical, scalable model of polypeptides. Chapters 2 through 4 establish the context and theoretical base for the “Peppytide” physical model and argues for its “accuracy and ability” (p. 16). Peppytide, one of the first physical and scalable 3D models of the polypeptide chain, can be “constructed with readily obtainable parts” (p. iii). The blueprints for the model are provided in the supplementary file section of the dissertation repository page, or via a website created by Chakraborty for the purposes of dissemination ([www.peppytides.org](http://www.peppytides.org)). Chapter 5 discusses the possible impacts associated with Chakraborty’s project, with a

specific focus on the use of the Peppytide model in formal and informal learning environments.

Based on the above, I would suggest that a *connected-incorporated* relationship offers an apt description of the manner in which the research undertaken and reported on in the written component of Chakraborty's (2014) dissertation is positioned as informing the development and design of the physical "Peppytide" model. In other words, I would suggest: **Connected**, because the physical model and the written component are inseparable from each other, and **Incorporated**, because the research undertaken through the written component informs the development and design of the model.

### **Chapter summary**

This chapter identified some of the pedagogical implications resulting from the present study and proposed an adapted version of Ravelli et al.'s (2013) heuristic. Next, I shared some prompts I generated based on this heuristic and then used these as a tool for reflecting on a roadblock I experienced early on in my dissertation process. I also present six "mini-cases" with the understanding that readers might read one or two before moving on to the next chapter, which concludes this dissertation.

The cases provided in this section (as well as throughout this dissertation) can be found online in the database of unconventional dissertations I've shared via the Canadian HSS Commons site (Link to repository: <https://doi.org/10.25547/93ZF-H523>).

## Chapter 13:

### **Not all who want to, can – Not all who can, will**

In this dissertation, I have been concerned with showcasing a wide repertoire of unconventional dissertations, as well as the many epistemic, textual, and rhetorical paths doctoral writers took—and sometimes created—to bring these unconventional dissertations to pass. Some have suggested that while there is a need to re-consider the purpose, form, and structure of doctoral dissertations in order to better suit the needs of doctoral students, actual meaningful change has been slow (e.g., Paré, 2017). At the same time, some have also begun to show that dissertations can and have shifted over time (e.g., Bao et al., 2018; Paltridge & Starfield, 2020). Regardless, both views agree that the PhD is likely to continue to undergo more pressure to change, and that more research is needed that examines the “scholarly forms and practices [that] are now being accepted for PhDs” (Paltridge & Starfield, 2020, p. 14), as well as the experiences dissertators have with writing their dissertations, including the “choices [they make] at the macrostructural level” (Anderson et al., 2021, p. 17).

Consequently, my research has sought to better understand what unconventional dissertations might be, as well as how authors of unconventional dissertations managed to bring them about. To answer these questions, I conducted a textographic study that combined analyses of dissertations, interview transcripts, and questionnaire responses together to reach a contextualised understanding of the practices surrounding the production and reception of unconventional dissertations. The findings from this study have revealed that dissertations can be unconventional in a range of ways and this range indicates that unconventional dissertations are simply not those that buck all traditions. Instead, to bring these dissertations about, authors frequently need to make a series of strategic decisions. These decisions can include determining which conventions to follow

and which to set aside in order to mitigate risk. Findings have also revealed that tendencies to conflate ‘doctoral dissertations’ with conceptions of legacy forms of scholarly communication still prevail. However, habitualised conceptions of scholarship and entrenched forms of scholarly writing can be challenged—even shifted—when the functions and values that underlie and motivate these conceptions and forms are investigated with open curiosity. In the next section, I revisit these findings in further detail and discuss them in light of previous research. Then, I draw out what I view as the theoretical and practical implications of this study. Finally, I outline some suggestions for future research and conclude the dissertation with some final thoughts.

### **Summary of findings: A case of déjà vu?**

Ten years before I started the research I report on here, Gossett and Lamanna completed a study of born-digital dissertations in writing studies programs across the U.S. Despite the fact that more than a decade has passed since their study, their findings continue to have relevance today, not only for unconventional dissertations more generally but also for unconventional dissertations in disciplines and contexts beyond writing studies in the U.S.

Gossett and Lamanna found four key obstacles to born-digital dissertations—dissertations “that are conceived and authored as works of digital media” — continued to resurface in their analysis of interview and survey data (as reported in Gossett & Potts, 202, p. 50). These obstacles could be roughly grouped together into two categories: prior exposure to or experience with digital forms of work and the broader institutional context. As it relates to the first, Gossett and Potts (2021) note how “the vast majority of the faculty had no experience evaluating digital work and did not feel qualified to do so” (p.53). Further, whether as a result of faculty (in)experience or otherwise, “most graduate curricula, even in digital media-focused programs, did not include courses in digital authoring,” which meant that student “interested in pursuing this type of

scholarship” are required “to spend extra time (often years) learning the technologies. . . needed to complete their dissertation work” (p. 53). In terms of obstacles that are linked to a broader institutional context, Gossett and Lamanna (as reported in Gossett & Potts, 2021) found that “the majority of venues for depositing dissertations did not accept born-digital dissertations,” despite typical institutional requirements that students deposit or archive their work (p. 53). This, combined with a general “lack of institutional policies regarding born-digital dissertations” meant that, in order to succeed, students needed to navigate institutional barriers that act as gatekeepers for scholarly knowledge (Gossett & Potts, 2021, p. 53). Further, even though participants in Gossett and Lamanna’s study indicated that they each had plans to carry out digital projects, only two of the 24 graduate students that were interviewed went on to actually complete a born-digital dissertation (Gossett & Potts, 2021).

I find the findings from Gossett’s and Lamanna’s study strikingly echoed in the findings I’ve reported on throughout this dissertation. For instance, some of the participants in the present study, like the participants in Gossett and Lamanna’s study, similarly indicated that they had originally wanted to pursue a different form for their dissertation—a novel and an art exhibit being two of the examples that were mentioned. As we saw in Chapter 6, Dr. Richards was cautioned against adopting an unconventional form by her supervisor, who felt that a dissertation that deviated too far from the structure of a scientific research report (introduction, methods, results, discussion, or IMRD) ran the risk of being unrecognizable to an external (and anonymous) examiner. And, while Dr. Bray (Chapter 8) still ended up with an unconventional structure (a manuscript-based dissertation), she noted that she felt as though she had “crumbled” in the end. Even though Bray’s supervisors were supportive of her desire to pursue something different, our interview suggested that there was something in the atmosphere of the department that brought her to question herself and her plans for her dissertation.

The circumstances surrounding Dr. Clarke’s (Chapter 7) dissertation brought to light the difficulties dissertators can face when they attempt to resist certain epistemological traditions, including how writing and epistemology can be entangled in ways that are rendered invisible, habitualised and cloaked in common sense (see Doody, 2021, and Starke-Meyerring, 2011, for more). In Clarke’s case, this entanglement led her to abandon her idea of pursuing a radically different form for the dissertation so that she could instead focus on arguing for the alternative epistemological stance (that prompted her to consider a radically different form). When she realised her supervisor and committee would likely have no idea how to assess a novel, Clarke opted for a more traditional dissertation that similarly followed the structure of a scientific research report (IMRD), even though it was a bit at odds with the humanistic inquiry methods Clarke drew on. Similarly, in Chapter 5, I noted the frequent use of “non-traditional” by questionnaire respondents to describe unconventional dissertations. I noted how this usage corresponded to descriptions of “conventional” dissertations, which were perceived to be those that follow the traditional-simple organizational structure commonly allied with the structure of reports on scientific experiences (i.e., those that follow an IMRD format and report on one study). At the same time, I also noted that some respondents’ perceptions reinforced understandings of writing as socially and rhetorically situated.

Other similarities that arose between Gossett’s and Lamanna’s study and the present study included issues with depositing unconventional dissertations. This issue was raised by LaFollette (Chapter 10), who needed to meet certain formatting requirements in order to deposit her dissertation and graduate. In Chapter 11, we also learned that the institutional copy of Visconti’s dissertation consisted of a handful of pages (e.g., the abstract, acknowledgements, and table of contents) that pointed readers to the location of Visconti’s *actual* dissertation—a website that they own and are responsible for

maintaining—thus suggesting that some institutional repositories are possibly still not unable to handle digital dissertations, or even unconventional ones for that matter.

Other notable insights have arisen from the present study. For instance, we have seen how dissertations can be unconventional in a range of ways. Writers might adopt an unconventional research methodology and non-canonical forms of writing, but nest these within a conventional dissertation structure (Richards, Chapter 6). Writers might draw on different modalities, such as images and artwork to help them enact their argument (LaFollette, Chapter 9). And, as demonstrated by Bray (Chapter 8), Freeman Jr. (Chapter 9), and Visconti (Chapter 11), unconventionality might also show up at the level of structure.

The present study has also revealed the importance of paying attention to a dissertation's examination context—something that isn't considered by Gossett and Potts (2021). Having external examiners considered at an arm's length from the dissertation (and who may also be anonymous, as in Richards's case) likely will influence the range of potentials available to a dissertator. Similarly, the extent to which there is wider institutional support for unconventional dissertations will also likely influence this range. This might come in the form of explicitly worded guidelines indicating how the dissertation can and cannot be formatted, the type of files allowable for submission, and as well as the requirements for the dissertation. For instance, Dr. Bray noted how bringing recently released guidelines for the manuscript-based dissertation to her defense aided her in persuading an otherwise reluctant committee member that her dissertation met the criteria set out by the university.

Finally, other issues flagged by Dr. Freeman Jr. and questionnaire participants as worthy of further consideration were raised in Chapter 9, including the importance of bringing committee members on-side as early as possible in the dissertation process and of providing supervisors/committee members with successful examples of other unconventional dissertations. We have also seen how relationships and other forms of

collective labour are critically needed when it comes to preparing and negotiating the conditions that are integral to the success of unconventional dissertations—lending further support for resisting (if not rejecting) views of unconventionality and innovation as intrinsic to an individual or individual text.

## Implications

**Theoretical implications.** Overall, the findings from this study provide evidence that *there are a myriad of ways* meaning can be made and shared, despite prevailing tendencies to conflate the definition of scholarship and research with notions of discovery (Barden, 1993; Boyer, 1990; Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012; Poole, 2013). Findings from this study also support the view that *ideas about the contribution*—typically formulated using epistemic terms (i.e., a contribution to knowledge)—*must remain flexible* because the idea what constitutes knowledge (and how it is demonstrated) is itself in flux (Geisler, 1994; Kaufer & Geisler, 1989; Lovitts, 2007). At the same time, certain forms of knowledge production, such as the notion of the scientific research report, do often appear to occupy a relatively uncontested position of dominance within a domain. However, even entrenched forms of scholarship shift over time, as Bazerman (1988) and others have shown. Thus, the *ideas and discourses* that circulate in a given environment about writing (what it is, does, and how) also matter (Gere et al., 2021; Hyland, 2009; Ivanic, 2004; Kelly, 2017; Lemke, 2005; Paré, 2009). Studies that focus on examining texts as sites of resistance can act as a “corrective” to these ideas and other “assumptions about unproblematic genre adherence in homogenous communities of practice. . . that often inform the teaching of academic writing” (Makmillen & Riedlinger, 2021, p. 169).

Findings from this research also reveal how *ideological struggles* can become ensnared in debates over the meaning of scholarly discourse and knowledge production. These struggles may be symbolic or institutional—symbolic struggles tend to relate to contests over “narratives, symbols, meanings, and common sense” understandings,

whereas institutional struggles tend to relate to struggles that play out at broader structural levels, such as “laws, policies, distribution of wealth, and relationships of power” (Smucker, 2017, p. 223).

The findings from this study are also likely to be of interest to researchers of unconventional doctoral dissertations or in innovative forms of doctoral writing. In particular, the combination of different sources of data and the frameworks and tools for analysis used herein may inspire researchers to consider alternative ways they too might account for unconventionalities that go beyond the level and structure of a dissertation.

**Practical and pedagogical implications.** The insights into different ways in which unconventional dissertations might be structured, defended, and otherwise navigated will likely be of interest to supervisors and practitioners who are concerned with pedagogies for doctoral writing and supervision. The findings from this study also reveal the “discursive options available to scholars under certain conditions” (Makmillen & Riedlinger, 2021, p. 169). However, as this study has demonstrated, the conditions for writers vary. Thus, individuals will need to determine, based on their circumstances, what is applicable or transferable from my exploration of dissertations and their conditions of production.

Finally, the findings and examples of unconventional dissertations described herein may also be of benefit to doctoral writers who are interested in unconventional forms of writing. The dissertations profiled here, along with the examples of dissertations contained in the [database](#) I compiled, can all be drawn on to help writers to make the arguments they require to proceed with their project. They may also find some inspiration in these dissertations, as well as ideas they can adapt to suit their own purposes, contexts, and needs.

### **Overly optimistic views?**

Throughout this dissertation, I have attempted as much as possible to avoid presenting an overly optimistic view of unconventional dissertations, particularly one that

frames their success as inevitable. Portrayals such as these are predicated on a “normative model of success” where, “if you succeed, it is because you deserved it—and presumably because you paid your dues in failures” (Leary, 2018, p. 93). Portrayals like these run the risk of missing out on what can be gained from productively engaging with questions about what it means to engage in ‘successful’ scholarly knowledge production. For instance, who fails and why? Who gets to rebrand their failures as successes or does not (Burford, 2017b)? What happens when, as O’Gorman & Werry (2012, p. 5) write, “bubbles burst and projects don’t go as planned?” As much as I have laboured to present some initial insights on this matter via the present study, more research is needed.

Weighing the potential costs or risks of pursuing an unconventional dissertation against its benefits seems to me to be helpful if not generic advice for a dissertator and their advisors. Less generic, are concerns that relate to the potential costs associated with scholarly success and belonging. Assuming for a moment that feeling accepted and as though one’s work has been accepted can be an indicator of “scholarly success,” what potential costs might be associated with this success? Consider, for example, Stewart (2015), whose aim to prioritise Indigenous knowledge(s) and experiences in his dissertation necessitated flouting certain conventions that infringed on Stewart’s ability to meet this aim. But, as we learn later, this decision required other concessions to be made: there was a “high possibility” Stewart’s dissertation would not be accepted by the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies at the University of British Columbia if Stewart didn’t receive ethical clearance to carry out his study (Stewart, 2019). “The decision was mine,” Stewart (2019) says, “as I was the one to be affected” (p. 9). Weighing the risk, Stewart (2019) decided to “resubmit the application using standard academic conventions” (p. 9).

Another example might be Agloro’s (2015) dissertation, which is a combination of a complex and intricate alternative reality game *and* a written monograph. While the two are inextricable from each other in theory, the written monograph is positioned as related but

separate from the game. Curious about whether this was intention, I emailed Dr. Agloro to ask. Agloro responded that she opted to do both for a few reasons:

First, it was the advice of my committee/ advisor/ mentor to double up the work so I didn't limit myself on the job market and could apply for design/ humanities/ media studies/ basically any kind of job that vaguely applied to me. I could've talked my way into just a game dissertation, but that would have limited me in future job prospects to places that already understand that rigor. So, writing up the process in a more 'traditional' dissertation was also a way of proving that I could think and be legible in fields that valued writing. But, having done the written dissertation as well, I found value in having to step back and think about it and not just be in the trenches making stuff and then moving on without a big reflection. And also, since my diss was largely untraditional in its making elements, having the written piece made it so that no one could question the research/rigor/qualifications for a PhD within my dept. There's always some pushback when what you're doing is pushing the edge of the field. (Personal Communication, October 7, 2021)

At the time, I had interpreted her response through the lens of what others in my study said, particularly regarding mitigating risk, and shared as much in my email back to her. Agloro generously took the time to clarify that it wasn't "just the risk mitigation factor," but the "positionality involved in it too" (personal communication, October 18, 2021). Agloro continued on to add that

as a woman and a person of color doing non-traditional work, it comes with all the inherent biases and obstacles that already exist coupled with non-traditional research formats. I highly recommend the book *Presumed Incompetent*, because I think identity has a lot to do with this too. (Personal Communication, October 18, 2021)

Following up on Agloro's suggestion, I retrieved a copy of "Presumed Incompetent" from my library and found the following passage:

When I am at school, I act white. I dress conservatively. I avoid speaking Spanish. I study harder than them. It's that simple. I can't change that I am a female, but I can make them stop assuming I am a dumb Mexican. I am like an Othello game piece. You know that game? At least I know the game I have to play. (Bowen 2012, pp. 131-132)

In both cases, Agloro and this student indicated they needed to put in additional work in order to be taken seriously and prevent their work from being dismissed. Unfortunately, their experience is reinforced throughout a swath of literature, including literature seemingly unrelated to doctoral dissertations. For instance, conducting a rich and detailed review of the literature on the interplay between identity and the writing of culturally and linguistically diverse students, Ball and Ellis (2008) have asserted that writers frequently encounter messaging in the classroom that reinforces beliefs that their linguistic and cultural backgrounds are not valued, and are viewed instead as things to overcome or put aside rather than as resources that can inform and enrich their writing. Respondents in Henry et al.'s (2017) study point out how views like these can also circulate in and amongst members of university faculties.

Wijesingha's and Ramos's (2017) study of the differences in tenure and promotion rates among racialized and non-racialized faculty at eight Canadian universities have demonstrated different ways discrimination can factor into the tenure and promotion process. In particular, Wijesingha and Ramos (2017) suggest that individuals who publish in "mainstream" venues tend to be awarded, whereas individuals who engage in research that does not conform to expectations of "mainstream research" find their work tends to be devalued (p. 69). Kubota (2019) has similarly flagged tendencies to devalue scholarship that falls outside of the mainstream of "white Euro-American knowledge" (p. 7), suggesting that this devaluation contributes to an enduring under-recognition of the "merit that minorities demonstrate" in the academy (p. 5). Elsewhere, these tendencies have also been

described as “cognitive imperialism” (Battiste et al., 2002)—a kind of thinking that “perpetuates” and “enacts” the thinking that is welcome, and “discards” or “discredits the kind it fears” (Battiste, 1998, p. 21)—as well as “systemic distortions” (Pokhrel, 2011, p. 321). Thus, whether navigating the dissertation or the tenure and promotion process, those “deemed non-normative” may find that the process “takes more of a toll” on them “than on those constituted as insiders and [as] belonging” (Henry et al., 2017, p. 291).

These issues ought to concern anyone who appreciates, values, and is invested in the project of scholarly inquiry as a whole. Decisions made whether to accept or reject certain scholarship, for instance, will influence not only how inclusive and diverse a field is, it will also influence how diverse higher education is more broadly (Ahmed, 2012; Bannerjee et al., 1991; Henry et al., 2017; Henry & Tator, 2009; Wellmon & Piper, 2017). Enacting “epistemological antiracism” in our everyday activities as academic, as Kubota (2019, p. 15) has argued, is one important way academics can productively contest and grapple with the often-obscured ways in which “white Euro-American” knowledge is positioned and reified as central, traditional, and superior in academe.

## **Future inquiries**

I remember the moment I realised I was at the beginning of the end. It was 2022, early Summer, and I was sitting outside on the stairs that lead to my backyard. Tired of the screen and its blinking cursor, I left my laptop inside and decided instead to bring my notebook and favourite pen with me. Feeling warmed from the sun, but quietly defeated by the most recent writing obstacle I had encountered, I sat there and did nothing. I had been trying to draft a conference talk based on this dissertation and had wanted to focus the talk on the work I had put towards developing what would eventually become a publicly accessible database of unconventional dissertations. But I didn’t know how to talk about the database without talking about the study that led to its creation. I knew I needed to situate the database in the context of the present study, but I had 10 minutes for the talk.

Based on my previous attempts, it seemed I could either spend the time talking about my study or spend the time talking about the database. I didn't know how to do both.

Sitting outside on that day with my pen and notebook, I did the one thing it seems I can always do: I wrote freely, without stopping, until I had no more words. Then I paused, wrote a little more, and put the pen down. When I re-read what I had written, the phrase that would soon become the title of the dissertation you are now reading jumped out at me. Figure 19 shows a picture of this page. It reads:

If I had to frame my findings [using] one key phrase, one key takeaway, it would be this

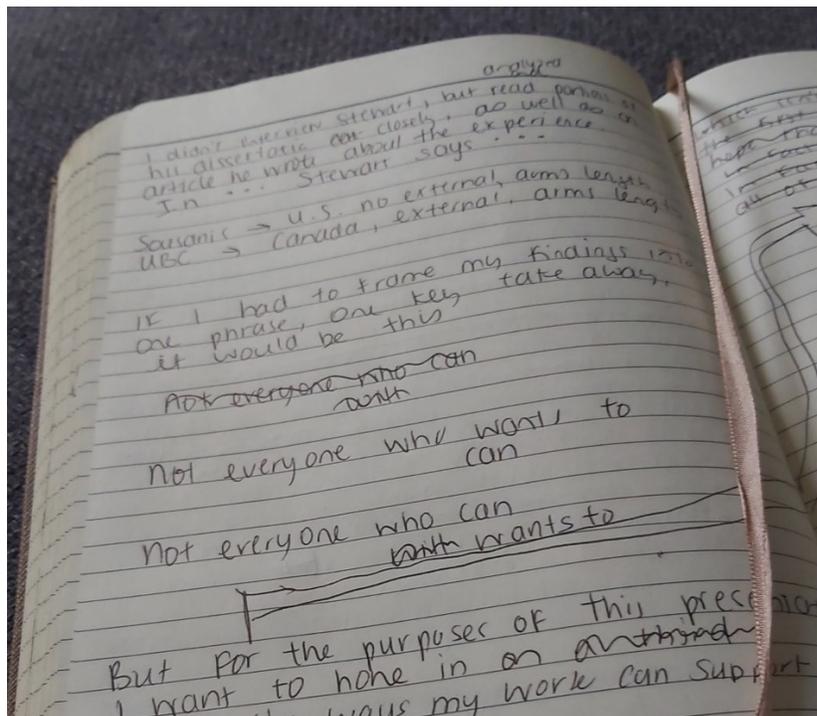
Not everyone who wants to

can

Not everyone who can

wants to

Figure 18. Photograph of a page from Britt's research notebook.



It took a few iterations to land on the exact wording, but the message has remained the same: Not all who wants to create an unconventional dissertation will be able to, and even when doctoral writers can create an unconventional dissertation, some may still choose not to. Of these two points, the first reinforces widespread beliefs about unconventional dissertations. However, the second point offers a view that is rarely, if at all, represented in the literature or in perceptions of attitudes towards unconventional dissertations. Throughout the present study I attempted to productively engage with both points, showing how some participants *did* abandon their original ideas, sometimes despite having a supportive supervisor. Through my work, I have also tried to show how even the most restrictive of circumstances might still be hacked. But more research is needed, particularly research that draws attention to the reasons dissertators *want to* pursue an unconventional dissertation but *can't*, as well as to the reasons dissertators who *can* pursue an unconventional dissertation but *won't*. At the same time, research that draws attention to the variety of reasons why dissertators *can* and *do* create unconventional dissertations continues to be critically needed, as is research that considers contexts of examination across different countries (possibly across institutions within the same country, as there may be variance there as well) influence the degree of unconventionality a dissertator and supervisor are willing to take. Relatedly, while research that explores how gatekeeping happens at the level of the discipline, department, supervisor, or committee continues to be an issue meriting further scholarly attention, the present study has also suggested that institutional policies and procedures may play a role in gatekeeping unconventional dissertations. I suspect this topic would benefit from further study.

As much as possible, I aimed to provide readers with a widened view of unconventional dissertations. One way I did this was through combining the textual analysis of unconventional dissertations with the analysis of interview transcripts and

questionnaire responses. At times, I also brought the perspectives of questionnaire respondents together with the perspectives of interview participants so that a more nuanced picture was provided on a given topic. However, for reasons due mainly to scope and time, I was unable to provide multiple perspectives on a single dissertation. Additionally, the disciplines represented by the participants I profiled were limited to education, English, digital humanities, psychology, information studies, and writing studies. While science, engineering, and math dissertations are included among those I gathered and analysed for my database, I was unable to dedicate significant attention to them in the present study. Thus, future textographies of unconventional dissertations could include those that focus on gathering dissertations from these disciplines, as well as multiple perspectives. Future textographies could also focus on the perspectives of other key players, such as supervisors and members of the examining committee, in accounts of unconventional dissertations, including gathering multiple perspectives on a single dissertation.

Future studies might also consider the perspectives of key players in terms of the “reading” experiences they have with a range of unconventional dissertations—print-based and otherwise. Tham and Grace (2020), for instance, studied readers’ experiences with digital scholarship from a user experience and user-centered design standpoint and found that disorientation and a sense of “placelessness” can accompany experiences with reading this form of scholarship. While disorientation can be generative, the authors note how it can also require readers to spend additional time “grappling” with the text (p. 10). Whether readers stay with the text seems to depend on the constraints of their already jam-packed workdays. Time, or the lack of it, is among these constraints. Thus, exploring the experiences readers have with unconventional dissertations would provide insights into the types of strategies and techniques dissertators can use to facilitate readers’ experiences with their dissertations.

Somewhat related to the above, more research that considers unconventional dissertations from a labour lens is needed—understanding that students, supervisors, and committee member are all impacted by labour conditions, including the labour that unconventional dissertations might involve. Whether unconventional dissertation represent more or less labour than conventional dissertations could be an interesting avenue of inquiry, if only to better understand why certain institutions appear to drag their heels when it comes to shifting guidelines and expectations of doctoral dissertations.

Additionally, while a consideration of the role the context plays in shaping unconventional dissertations remains important, it may also be worthwhile considering what role dissertators play in selecting contexts that are more favourable. For instance, Dr. Freeman Jr. (Chapter 9) shared with us how he found another supervisor once he realised that his first supervisor wasn't on board with his plan to pursue a manuscript-based dissertation. Dr. Nick Sousanis, whose dissertation is written entirely in comics form (and whose interview I haven't been able to report on here for reasons of space), shared the following with me in an email:

I think what is also true and likely significant is that I was an older student – I'd done a lot of things in my life (I'd traveled parts of the world as a tennis player, I ran a magazine by myself in Detroit for six years...) and I really didn't care what I was allowed or not allowed to do. I also was super naïve about academia; I had no clue I couldn't do this thing. And I applied to the program telling them this was what I was going to do. Had they said no, well, I would've done it somewhere else in some other fashion. I knew the kind of stuff that I wanted to do and was going to do it. (Personal Communication, April 13, 2022)

I can picture researchers drawing on in-depth inquiry methods such as case study to explore the pathways, rhetorical and otherwise, that unconventional dissertators take en route to completing their unconventional dissertations. What should prospective

unconventional dissertators keep in mind when proposing a project, finding a supervisor, or applying to a doctoral program? What do supervisors and graduate administrators interested in attracting and retaining prospective unconventional dissertators need to know?

Finally, questions about the nature of the dissertation are also fundamentally questions about the nature of scholarship and scholarly knowledge production—both of which are imbued with exclusions, failures, privileges, and power (Dolmage, 2017; Tamas, 2016). In my view, considering these questions in tandem and from interdisciplinary standpoints offers another avenue for further study. In this regard, we might look to some of the literature that pertains to tenure and promotion, as well as scholarly assessment and the assessment of writing more generally, systematically noting where lines of tension and conversation overlap as well as areas of limitation (e.g., Agate et al., 2020; Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012; Cushman, 2016; Day et al., 2013; Galey & Ruecker, 2010; Gere et al., 2021; Henry et al., 2017; Parham, 2018; Schimanski & Alperin, 2018).

## **Final thoughts**

Unconventional scholarship unfortunately remains “unreasonably risky” for many, unless it “comes after a scholar has an established record of nondigital publications” or is accompanied by “other kinds of scholarship already vetted by any given field or discipline” or (Parham, 2018, p. 678). It’s unlikely that most academics intend to make unconventional scholarship risky. As Finger and Kuhn (2021) suggest, it is rare for academics to be “print-centric by choice or sheer obstinacy” (Finger & Kuhn, 2021, p. 7). Instead, they have likely *become* print-centric through the processes of “habituation and acculturation” (Finger & Kuhn, 2021, p. 7). However, even unintentional failures “to imagine other ways of validating knowledge” or “other ways of validly demonstrating such knowledge” are nonetheless still failures (Ravelli et al., 2021, p. 229). And when failures to imagine and

recognise other ways of producing or demonstrating knowledge continue to occur, these failures add up to epistemic exclusion<sup>6</sup>.

As Parham (2018) has suggested, the problem is not that institutions must change or “develop new modalities, workflows, and values” to handle unconventional work or its assessment, because institutions “change all the time” (p. 682). The problem is, Parham (2018) argues instead, that “asking departments and units to identify the values inhering in current institutional practices would require many faculty and staff to reckon with how so many people have been historically underserved by them” (p. 683).

Re-imagining unconventional dissertations as a “resource” rather than a “burden” will require, at least in part, expanding personal theories about writing to accommodate the evidence that dissertation writers can and do address the rhetorical purpose and functions associated with the dissertation genre in a range of ways (Ravelli et al., 2021, pp. 229). Assembling a range of example dissertations that highlights their differences and similarities can help with the process of liberating oneself from the vice-grip of assumptions governing what a dissertation ‘should’ be (Ravelli et al., 2021). Additionally, prioritizing the purposes, values, and social actions a dissertation fulfills over whether or not a dissertation follows a particular form, can also help students and supervisors to better resist a genre’s “ideological pull” (Devitt, 2015, p. 390). However, curating a selection of dissertations that represent the range that is possible can be challenging. It can be difficult to locate unconventional dissertations; particularly those that fly under the radar. In an effort to help remedy this difficulty, I offer [the database of unconventional dissertation](#) I’ve developed over the past few years, along with some of the insights gleaned through this study. Each of the unconventional dissertations in this database

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<sup>6</sup> Here, epistemic exclusion can be understood as the impact of “individual biases in determining what knowledge is valuable and who is deemed a credible contributor to knowledge production” combined with formal and/or informal systems for evaluating scholarship at departmental and institutional levels (Settles et al., 2021, p. 10).

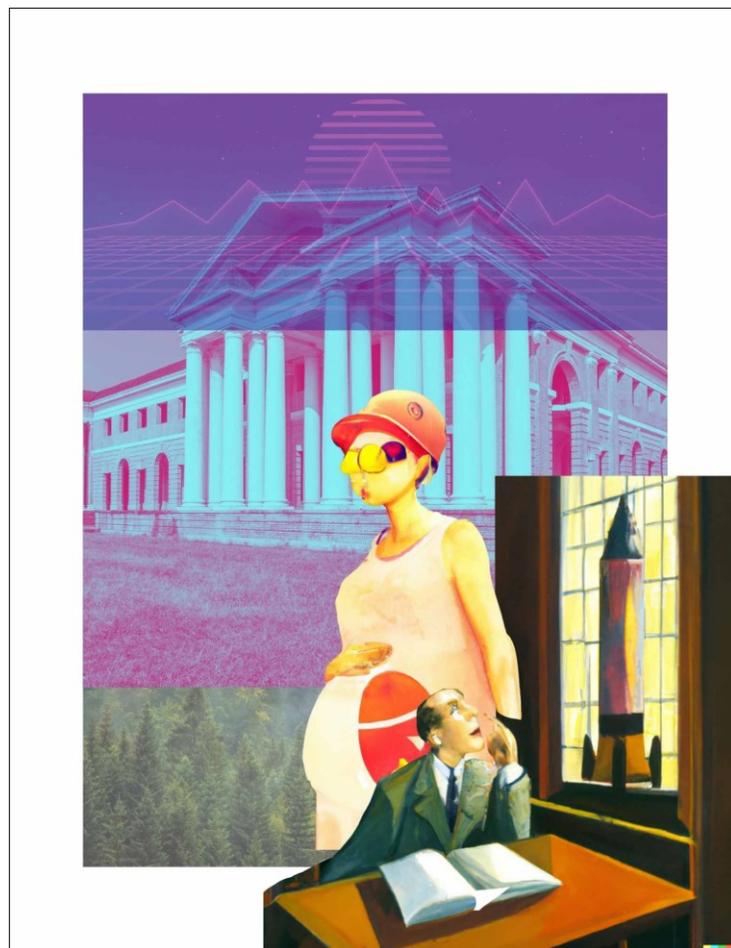
represent examples of subverting epistemic exclusion and resisting the pull of the status quo. The link to the database is presented in Chapter 12 but can also be found here:

<https://doi.org/10.25547/93ZF-H523>.

Often the onus is on dissertation writers to demonstrate how their approach constitutes valid scholarship. This may require so much additional work that demonstrating the legitimacy of their chosen scholarly approach may actually *become* their dissertation—thus requiring writers to leave their original idea(s) behind for lack of time, energy, or for another related reason. Without better ways to say “this *is* scholarship,” as Dr. Amanda Visconti put it in our interview, writers may find they need to defend the scholarly value of their work, which can get in the way of getting any actual work done. I hope that the findings from the present study help to lessen some of this burden so that the scholars of tomorrow can focus on getting their actual world-changing work done.

## Postscript: Not all who can, will

I originally wanted to include the visual chapter I created for this dissertation here. It was to feature the many collages I created during the dissertation inquiry and writing process. But as I prepared to submit the defense copy of my dissertation and found myself working 10 to 12 hours straight at a time, I needed to put the visual chapter aside. Quite frankly, I ran out of resources and energy. I didn't feel I had it in me to add in whatever theorizing or contextualising work might be needed in order to include the pieces here. So, I decided instead that I would honour my reality (complete with implications) by including this acknowledgement as well as one of the collages I created. This one is entitled, "Bodies as networked sites of knowledge production." I look forward to unpacking this in the future.



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## **Appendices**

### **1. Ethics Approval**

This research project received clearance from Carleton University's Research Ethics Board to carry out research within two phases.

Ethics Protocol Clearance ID for Phase 1: # 111006

Ethics Protocol Clearance ID for Phase 2: # 111205

## 2. Questionnaire items

- Where are you located geographically? (e.g., in which province/state and country?)
- How would you position yourself institutionally? For example: Are you a current PhD student, a graduate, supervisor, Dean of Graduate Studies, Academic Librarian, etc.?
- What terms do you use to describe dissertations that break with what is typically considered 'traditional' with regards to format and/or content (e.g., dissertation as monograph or by publication)?
- If you had to choose one term from your list above, what would your preference be and how would you define it?
- In this questionnaire, I refer to dissertations that break with what is typically considered "traditional " in terms of format and or content as "re-imagined" dissertations. You may have another term you prefer to use instead. In your experience, what constitutes a "re-imagined" dissertation? Please feel free to reference any examples of dissertations and list any criteria that you feel relate to or help you with your response.
- Have you written or are you writing one of these dissertations?
- Have you supervised or are you supervising one of these dissertations?
- Have you been a committee member who has had to evaluate one or more of these dissertations?
- Do you have some time to answer a few more questions?
- *Writers:*
  - Can you give a brief overview of your work & why you consider your dissertation to be a re-imagined one? Note: Please feel free to substitute the term "re-imagined" with your chosen term instead as you proceed through this section.
  - What motivated you to write a "re-imagined" dissertation?
  - Have you successfully defended your dissertation?
  - In your experience, to what extent did you run into concerns about whether your chosen approach to your dissertation constituted legitimate scholarship? Please explain.
  - How did you respond to concerns about whether your dissertation constituted legitimate scholarship, if at all?
  - If possible, what additional writing did you have to do alongside or prior to proceeding with the dissertation? For example, e.g., did you have to write an

additional proposal? A summary? Multiple emails? Did you have to prepare notes for meetings, or do research on other dissertations or forms of scholarship?"

- *Committee members:*
  - Speaking more generally, can you give a brief overview of your experience with evaluating these dissertations?
  - Generally speaking, what would you say the biggest concerns were, if any, that arose for you during your time on the committee?
  - If any, what were the main concerns, generally speaking, from other committee members?
  - If applicable, were these concerns mitigated, and if so, how?
  - Do you have any suggestions for supervisors with students who might be interested in pursuing a re-imagined dissertation, specifically as it relates to working with committee members?
- *Supervisors:*
  - Can you give a brief and general overview of your experience with supervising these dissertations?
  - Please move the slider (or keep it at zero if n/a) to indicate the extent to which you or the student you supervised ran into concerns about whether their chosen approach to the dissertation constituted 'legitimate scholarship'
  - What were the primary concerns, if any, that arose?
  - If applicable, what concerns arose for you during supervision?
  - If applicable, what concerns arose for committee members during this process?
  - How did you or the student you supervised respond to the concerns you've mentioned, if at all? Please elaborate if you are comfortable.
  - Do you have any suggestions for other supervisors with students who might be interested in pursuing a re-imagined dissertation? Note: Please feel free to substitute the term "re-imagined" with your chosen term instead
- Do you have any suggestions for PhD students who might be interested in pursuing a re-imagined dissertation? Note: Please feel free to substitute the term "re-imagined" with your chosen term instead.

- Do you have any suggestions for supervisors with students who might be interested in pursuing a re-imagined dissertation, specifically as it relates to working with committee members?
- Is there anything else you'd like to add?

### 3. Pedagogical Materials

#### Questions to guide the writing process (Handout)

- What is the conceptual core, controlling idea, or central claim/topic called for? What story needs to be told? What medium (or media) or interface will best support the project's conceptual core? Does the chosen medium fit or serve the subject matter? Is the medium flexible, adaptable, and/or scalable given my needs? What format best supports what you're arguing?
- Who is the intended audience? Who might benefit most from interacting with this writing, task, documentation, or project? What format is most likely to reach the most people who can use and build on your work? Does this audience have specific needs, expectations, or requirements? Is the project designed in a way that accommodates these needs? Are there certain fundamental features that will need to be incorporated in the project in order to make it legible to certain members of the audience? How "user friendly" is the project in its intended form? Are there plans for continual testing and iterative development?
- What is the purpose or goal for the task? What would I most like to contribute or accomplish? How formal is the purpose or goal? What might my answers to these questions suggest about the form(s) and medium(a) that should be considered?
- What strategies, tools or resources will be most effective? What does the purpose, goal, or contribution for the task suggest about possible strategies, tools, or resources? Of these, are there some I am more comfortable using or learning? Are there some that will be more effective than others? If so, which ones, and how or why?
- What is my role as a writer in achieving the purpose, goal, or contribution associated with the task? Do I want to share information or a solution to an issue audience members care about? Or do I want to help audience members understand something better? Do audience members want help solving a problem, to be entertained, or to learn more about something?
- To what extent need I be concerned with whether this project will be evaluated, recognized or count as scholarship in my particular circumstances? What might a need to count or be recognized as scholarship suggest about the form(s) and medium(a) that should be considered? For example, what expectations, conventions, guidelines, or requirements—tacit and otherwise—might need to be considered? How might these considerations shape the choices that are available and decisions that need to be made?

***"If you start with Word, you'll end with Word" (Ball, 2012, p. 62):*** Consider incorporating or making use of different media/modes when responding to the above questions. Notice which (if any) modes of expression seem to work best. Why? If you used a different format, what would be possible? What would you lose and gain? What would you learn?

—

Adapted from: Ball (2012), Ball et al. (2018), Dean (2008), Mattern (2012), Stein & Daniels (2017), Tardy (2016), and Visconti (2015c).

## Thinking with textography

I introduced the notion of a textography in Chapter 4 and presented the findings of the textographic research I undertook as part of the present study on unconventional dissertations in Chapters 6 through 11.

Textographies can be assigned as readings but, with a few tweaks, they could also serve as assignments. I've included a selective reading list and a few ideas to help tweak the textography. If the idea of assigning a mini-textography seems unlikely in your context, you might instead consider using the genre analysis heuristic shared by Bawarshi and Reiff (2010, pp. 193-194) or the activity in Box 3 to develop an analogous activity.

**Part 1. If you have a little time.** Select a reading from the list of suggested readings or locate different textographic studies of doctoral writing that are of interest. Reflect on the content of the reading and to analyse the reading as an artifact. Use the following questions if you wish. Note that these questions assume the readings pertain to textographies of dissertations.

- Is the purpose of the dissertation discussed? If so, what purpose is given?
- Who is considered the intended audience for the dissertation? What is their role?
- What conventions or expectations are discussed, if any, for the dissertation?
- How is doctoral writing and/or the dissertation conceived? What products and processes are envisioned? What assumptions appear to inform this conception of writing?

The questions presented in Box 3 can also be used to analyse the readings as an artifact.

**Part 2. If you have more time.** Consider a mini-textography as an assignment. Some suggestions:

- Next-Generation Dissertations (n.d.) has curated a playlist of interviews with authors of unconventional dissertations that would be useful in lieu of actual interviews
- The Canadian Association for Graduate Studies (n.d.) profiles seven unconventional dissertators on their blog
- The activity presented in Box 3 could be adapted to a focused examination of specific dissertations or aspects thereof (also, see next point)
- A variation on the textography that might be of interest: Have writers select a piece of writing they've previously completed for analysis. They could reflect on the process of writing the piece and analyse features of the text. Some questions to help with this (from Paltridge, 2008, p. 13):
  - What is the purpose of the text?

- Who is the intended audience for the text?
- What do you think is the audience's role and purpose in reading the text?
- How would you describe the relationship between the readers and writer of the text?
- Are there any particular expectations and conventions for the text?
- What background knowledge, values, and understandings do you think it is assumed the writer of the text will share with their readers?

### Part 3. Selective Reading List

Paltridge, B. (2008). Textographies and the researching and teaching of writing. *Ibérica*, 15(2008), 16.

Ravelli, L., Paltridge, B., Starfield, S., & Tuckwell, K. (2013). Extending the notion of 'text': The visual and performing arts doctoral thesis. *Visual Communication*, 12(4), 395–422. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357212462663>

Seloni, L. (2014). "I'm an artist and a scholar who is trying to find a middle point": A textographic analysis of a Colombian art historian's thesis writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 25, 79–99. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2014.06.001>

Starfield, S., Paltridge, B., & Ravelli, L. (2014). Researching academic writing: What textography affords. *International Perspectives on Higher Education Research*, 10, 103–120. [https://doi.org/10.1108/S1479-3628\(2014\)0000010011](https://doi.org/10.1108/S1479-3628(2014)0000010011)

### Box 3. Exploring the potential for unconventionality in ‘everyday’ genres

*Note: The following exercise is adapted from questions and examples found in Bawarshi and Reiff (2010, pp. 193-194), Shipka (2011, pp. 154-155), and Tardy (2016, p. 150).*

Gather as wide a range and as many examples as you can of the following three genres: Wedding invitations, restaurant menus, and sympathy cards (or culturally relevant equivalents). Aim for between 5-10 examples each. Hint: Examples can be found online and/or around you.

After you have finished gathering the examples, group them according to their purpose (Are they inviting guests to a wedding? Expressing sympathy? Highlighting a range of meals and/or beverages potential customers can select from?). You might wish to take note of any examples that appear ‘fuzzy’ in terms of their purpose.

After you have finished sorting the examples, select a group you wish to begin with. Look through each example in the group carefully, taking notes of any patterns or features that seem to recur across the examples. For instance, are there any variations between the examples in the group? What do the texts need to have in common in order for us to recognize them as examples that belong to a given group? How are the texts structured in terms of their overall design? What components or parts can you observe, and how are these parts organized?

Some other questions to consider include:

- Where would this text typically appear? What aspects about the text help you to answer this question?
- Who would typically have access to this text? What might one need to have, use, or own in order to access this text?
- Does the text have an obvious author? Why or why not? What might this say about attitudes towards authorship and credit?
- Is a response required from the example’s intended audience? If so, are there expectations regarding these responses, including how they might be framed or issued? Does the text ask directly for a response? How is it phrased? What social knowledge are audience members assumed to have? What might one need to have, use, or own in order to respond?

After you have finished, prepare to freewrite (e.g., find a pen and some paper and set a timer for 15 minutes). Try to answer as many of the following questions as you can:

- What are the roles of the writers and readers of the genre and what are their relations to each other (e.g., student-teacher, colleague-colleague)? Do they hold roughly equal or different power in the situation?
- Can you give an example of what might be considered an unconventional or innovative text for one or all of the different genres you collected? Which features or kinds of unconventionality or innovativeness would be more likely to be successful? On the flip side, what might be more likely to be discouraged and why?
- What might lead writers to break from convention in the first place? Who might have more freedom to break from conventional patterns? What is at stake?

You could also opt to discuss these questions in a small group.