12 Fictional Writing in Doctoral Theses: The (re)Engagement of Play and Reflexivity

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Abstract: In this chapter, I make the case for experimenting with fiction in doctoral writing in terms of both writing process and product. Experimentation with fiction involves playing with different ways of telling research stories, be they stories about the data itself or about the research process. Fiction offers doctoral students different ways to speak about affect, their relationships with participants, contradictions, messiness, uncertainties, and more. I draw attention to the potentials of using fiction as a process of sharing and (de)constructing knowledge in group settings and to its value as an alternate to conventionalized forms of academic language, particularly in terms of the representation of data. In short, fictional representation provides a way of playing with the doctoral performance and a further exploration of the ways language is used to make claims, position the author, and represent the social worlds being researched.

Fiction and Social Research

The use of fictionalized accounts is a well-established practice in social research and is just one of a number of writing forms that contribute to the creative turn in academic writing where aesthetics and voice are of key concern. Narrative research (Netolicky, 2015); arts-based research (Chilton & Leavy, 2014); and numerous iterations of ethnography such as creative analytic process ethnography (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), performance ethnography (Alexander, 2005), new ethnography (Goodall, 2000), and autoethnography (Anderson, 2006) are all areas where this kind of creativity can be seen.

Fictionalisation and concerns with the boundary between fiction/non-fiction can be found in a lot of these works, but as the list implies, ethnographers have had a particularly long-standing interest in it. The ethnographic novel is a genre that has its origins in the 19th century (Narayan, 1999), and it remains

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37514/INT-B.2021.1343.2.12

a common form. Contemporary work uses ethnographic fiction not just in the form of novels but also in shorter pieces (Sparkes, 2002). In ethnographic fiction, the border between fiction and non-fiction is deeply blurred, as the stories presented are offered as examples of real phenomena that have been witnessed during research. Ethnographic novels and essays have been used by academics to examine diverse areas of social life, such as homelessness (Augé, 2013; Christensen, 2012), professional identity and expertise (Müller, 2017), educational experiences of the underprivileged (Clough, 2002), drug addiction and treatment (Elliott, 2014), and anorexia (Kiesinger, 1998). Another strand of this work is the concern with historical processes, such as early 20th century migration (Bahari, 2021) or education in the US (Gerla, 1995).

The reasons why fiction has been so important to ethnographic novels and essays has already been discussed in detail by other authors (Banks & Banks, 1998; Gibson, 2020; Rinehart, 1998), so I shall review these points quickly. The fictional turn must be seen as part of a broad set of methodological critiques within qualitative research relating to both the crisis of representation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and the crisis of voice (Jackson & Mazzei, 2009). Diverse areas of theory including Indigenous methods (Denzin et al., 2008), queer theory (Plummer, 2005), critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), non-representational theory (Vannini, 2015), performance methodologies (Dirksmeier & Hellbrecht, 2008; Richardson, 2015), post-qualitative inquiry (St. Pierre, 2018), and post-feminist theory (Lykke, 2014)—to name but a few—have had substantial input into these debates. The crisis of representation refers to the denial that the complexities of social life can be "captured" and presented as defined and bounded descriptions that *stand* or *account* for the fluid, negotiated, improvised practices/experiences/interpretations that comprise people's daily dealings. This denial emphasises the interpretive nature of social life, research practice, data analysis, writing, and reading and points to the impossibility of treating any "report" (from a researcher, research participant, or anyone else) as anything other than one telling in an (infinite) range of possible others.

Closely related, the crisis of voice refers to a drive, particularly from critical inquiry, to give voice to research participants while avoiding simplified "single truths" and showing the "polyvocal and multiple nature of voice within contexts that are themselves messy and constrained" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2009, p. 1). Critically, researchers are seen as central to the process of constructing these voices, and data in the form of quotes, fieldnotes, or even videos are seen as limited and partial. There is, it is suggested, a "tyranny of evidence" in traditional qualitative enquiry, where interview transcripts are held as evidence for social phenomena and/or for the researchers' re-interpretation of these texts:

> Who decides what 'exact words' should be used in the accounts? Who was listened to, and how were they listened to? How might voices be necessarily complicated, distorted and fictionalized in the process of reinscription? And indeed, how are those voices necessarily complicated distorted and fictionalized in the process of reinscription? (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012, p. 746)

The reference to fiction in this quotation is telling, as it shows that fictionalized accounts must be seen as a rejection of treating data as a transparently obvious "phenomena." The turn to fiction is a rejection of specific methodological claims and part of a broader process of re-imagining academic practices of writing, representation, and "evidencing."

The remainder of this chapter looks at specific ways that fiction can and has been used in doctoral writing. My discussion includes examples from doctoral theses and the occasional example from other published works by established scholars. These latter examples are included where I see them as offering something particularly relevant in thinking about the role of fiction in doctoral work. I also draw on my own experiences in working with doctoral writers and the ways that we have used fiction to leverage different kinds of research stories and representations.

In the next section, I explore the uses of fiction in doctoral writing and then move to discuss practical uses of fiction by thinking about the concepts of "character" and "scene," showing how these can help to tell research stories. I then reflect on the use of stories as a feature of producing collaborative and reflective doctoral experiences.

Fiction and Doctoral Writing

While I have not conducted a systematic review of the uses of fiction in doctoral writing, my searches of doctoral theses published in English illustrate that fiction is a well-established writing genre in doctorates of the arts such as film studies, drama studies, and literature studies. In the social sciences, fiction is much less common and seems to be used mostly in the areas of anthropology/ethnographic inquiry or in the "post-" paradigms described in the previous section, with education studies being a particularly prominent area (Burford, 2016; Müller, 2017; Petersen, 2007). However, as a comparatively new practice, there are important outstanding questions regarding the academic disciplines where fiction is most commonly found and the theoretical frameworks that inform its use.

Of the doctoral writing I have analysed, the turn to fiction is frequently framed in terms of a frustration with the conventions of doctoral thesis writing (Burford, 2016; Kara, 2013), an interest in exploring the sensory and emotional character of social life/experience (Okoronkwo, 2018), and/or an aim of presenting authentic narratives (Warren, 2018). By writing with fiction, Ph.D. students alter discursive forms or "ways of knowing" (Lovat et al., 2008) within a thesis and, consequently, shift the boundaries of expertise that inform its production. As supervisors are not commonly practiced or trained in fictional writing (Gibson, 2020), there may potentially be a change in the role they play in shaping the thesis. Indeed, it is precisely an awareness of the complex politics surrounding the writing relationship that drives many researchers towards fiction, usurping or at least playing with the conventional division of expertise (Kara, 2013; Weatherall, 2019). Further, using fiction in a thesis raises critical questions about the examination process and the criteria of assessment. As has happened in relation to professional/work-based doctorates (Costley, 2013), the change in boundaries of expertise within other doctoral writing indicates a need to explore the processes of assessment of that work (see Ravelli et al., Chapter 11, this collection). This is a debate that has yet to be held in earnest in relation to the use of fiction in doctorates, but it is one that is in urgent need in the context of the re-imaginings that I propose here.

Characters and Scenes

As narrative researchers have emphasised (Chase, 2008), when we talk about the people that we research, we create myths about them—partial re-orderings of selected bits and pieces of information (data) constructed as cases and representations. These *tellings* are myths not only because of the limits of language but also because of the normative practices that structure how we write. In a doctoral thesis, the normal structures of presentation radically constrain how we can talk about people (Aitchison, 2015; Honan & Bright, 2016; Weatherall, 2019), but fiction provides an alternate set of practices, opening up what we can say about the participants in our research. Neil Carey's (2014) reflections on his use of creative fictions in his doctoral thesis about naming and meaning making in male "same-sex genital relations" made the point vividly:

> I adopt this form of writing as a means of taking seriously the idea that representing biographies is far from straight-forward, that the selves that tell and are told in biographical and autoethnographic writing are themselves fictions, and

> that such selves can be (re-)inscribed against those narrative tropes that dominate the cultural milieu in which present and future 'self' might find itself located. (p. 2)

Thinking of participants as characters is a way to both recognise and experiment with the ways that *narrative tropes* structure our tellings. Characters in stories live in contexts, and describing those contexts through fiction enables us to make available (in an imagined way) the lives of the people under study. As Eva Bendix Petersen (2007) put it in her ethnofictive work, the "protagonist is a factual fiction or a fictional fact, a bodied figure, who sweats, laughs and eats, yet she is not 'real', not 'there'" (p. 147).

"Characterisation" is often used to create composite characters that stand for phenomena found across the data. One example of this technique is Petersen's 2007 journal article, in which she published her ethnographically based thesis. In it, she explored the performance of academic identity by imagining an average workday for an academic as follows:

> She picked up her diary. Lecture at 10:00, then coffee with Sandra. The nerve under the right eye twitched. Then teaching at 1, and then at 4 meeting with the new postgraduate student who had asked if she would supervise him—what was his name, ah, Adam. That meant that she could look at that peer-review report she was supposed to have finished yesterday now, and look at the grant application between teaching and supervising. Won't be time to do any actual writing today, she thought, and felt the usual acidic pang in her abdomen. Oh, and call John to set up that meeting, and give Jane instructions on copying, and I really ought to look at that book review which was due last week. And I have to see to getting my heater fixed, she thought. And that draft Paula had sent her a week ago; she had to read it before their meeting tomorrow. Sitting there, looking down on her diary, she already felt quite drained. And these were her precious morning hours when her head was supposed to be fresh. She turned to the article lying on top of one of the piles of paper on her desk. (Petersen, 2007, p. 175)

The character depicted in this excerpt was not a real person but a way of representing the general experiences/phenomena of the participants in Petersen's study. Petersen showed the character in a real-world context, depicting the tensions that existed between her and her colleagues/friends; the ever-present

performance of "being an academic;" and the ways in which this manifested in teaching, casual talk with colleagues, commenting on students' work, discussing research projects with doctoral students, and the micro-politics of academic departments. In Petersen's narrative, she walked the character through her day, showing her conversations as well as her own internal dialogue around them. The structure of the narrative makes visible the lived feelings of the main character and the ways those feelings emerge in particular contexts and events.

Of course, characters can also be used to show the experiences of specific participants rather than a generalized group. The next example comes from Elizabeth Krause's (2009) study of Italian weavers, which was not a doctoral thesis but which used a very unconventional structure that has a lot of potential for doctoral work given the extended form of both genres. In this book, Krause combined fiction and conventional ethnographic narrative, with the two genres intersecting in thought provoking ways. This combination can be seen in the opening paragraph:

> Emilia Raugei was a young girl who wove plaits of straw in a hill town above Florence, and the foggy March day she had her heart set on winning a weaving game of the girls' invention. Only seven years old, she willed her fingers to maneuver straw strands for hours as she sat on a straight-backed chair in a circle with a group of girls, her head being over her work and her arms immobile. Some six meters of woven plaits, five centimeters wide, formed rings at her feet. (Krause, 2009, p. 17)

Krause began the text with the girl, Emilia, who was at the center of the story, a character based on a real person the author came to know through conducting the research. In this paragraph, Krause described the scene of Emilia's work, set up a particular context (Florence on a March day), explained some of her motivation (to win the game), invoked specific features of the setting (the straight-backed chair and the group of girls), and characterised aspects of the physical action (her immobile arms). As the story unfolded, Krause went on to deal with complex issues, such as the rise of fascism, industrialisation, urbanisation, and how these social phenomena played out in the everyday lives of the characters. These phenomena were not presented as abstract theoretical constructs. Instead, they were shown as real processes that were connected with the life of the girl and her family.

In the second half of the book, Krause (2009) described the research that informed this story, including how she met Emilia, the relationship that de-

veloped between them, and the pragmatics of recording and gathering data. It is interesting to reflect on how these imagined conversations, narrative plots, aesthetic descriptions, and sensory qualities impact on the experience of reading the ethnography. I found that the story helped me to develop a much more intimate sense of the setting and the historical conditions than ethnographic narratives typically do. When reading the ethnography, I felt that I already knew Emilia and that I understood something of the village in which she lived. Doctoral theses provide good contexts for these kinds of writing explorations because, in pragmatic terms, having large amounts of narrative space to present data in different ways means that the type of structure Krause modeled can become a real possibility.

Characters can also work to represent concepts and theoretical ideas. One of the exercises I use in doctoral writing workshops involves encouraging students to describe a concept using an invented character. One student who was researching the educational experiences of Syrian children displaced through conflict created the concept of "the dark lord" as a representation of children like "Omar" who lived with trauma:

> Omar: I first encountered his presence when I was at that barrack, with all these dead bodies around me, with all the blood and the beheaded corps. I was shocked, full of questions, and I felt sick to the bone . . . at that exact moment, I felt him, he stood there, looking at me, grinning in the most hateful manner, and I knew I could do nothing but let him take all over me, so . . . he just did.
>
> When I moved to Turkey, I thought I got rid of him, but no. . . . In the end, he knew I was still suffering, and I knew that he fed on my agony, and so it was . . . he just lingered there. I could see him laughing and teasing me every time I was told off by people I worked for, and every time I stood at the school gate, wishing I was inside one of the warm classrooms rather than selling paper tissues in the cold streets of Istanbul.

In the extract, we see how the character followed the child and intimidated and oppressed him ("laughing and teasing me").

In the next extract, the same student researcher used the same character to make sense of the child's own behaviour:

> It was in one of Omar's Spanish classes, when I first noticed the dark lord's presence. Omar was struggling with the

> teacher's instructions, so my advice was for him to ask the teacher for assistance; however, instead of helping Omar, the teacher told him off. It was then when I saw the dark figure, smiling, while grabbing Omar's hand, pulling him out of our world, and dragging him to his gloomy world.

By metaphorically representing the dark lord through depictions of "darkness" and "worlds," the student researcher illustrated the child's experience of trauma and showed the alienation created by the teacher's treatment of the child. Because these concepts were presented as a character, we come to see alienation and trauma not as *abstracted concepts* but as lived, embodied, and interactionally tangible experiences.

"Scenes" are the spaces writers can use to show the contexts characters live in and to narratively play out the experiences that are the focus of our research. One of the substantial critiques of qualitative approaches, such as thematic analyses, is their tendency to remove contact from view—to present quotations as if they have no relation to a real-world context of talk (van Manen, 1990). Ethnography, particularly in contemporary "creative forms," does much better at (re-)building the research scenes by selecting details of context to place people within real places (Elliott & Culhane, 2016; Pandian & McLean, 2017). I see fiction as nothing more than an extension of this phenomenon and an embracing of creative form to build resonant places (Banks & Banks, 1998).

In her thesis, Peggy Warren (2018) provided a resonant example of scene building by using the description of an imaginary scene on a beach to situate a conversation between some of the characters involved. She wrote:

> On the sandy beach of Negril under the scorching sun, eight hopeful couples and two single men are discussing their future dreams. Though the motherlan' has been at war and times are hard, the earth still produces food for survival. Saltfish is sparse but they clubbed together their rations to get enough food to bring and share. Yam and saltfish are buried beneath the hot coals in de sand. The redemptive lyrics of reggae music invigorates the dreamers. Motherlan' calls and the pull is 'trong. As the gossip goes, motherlan' streets are paved with gold. The men lie face down on the beach, in unison they repeat the common dream that Ganja man has written in the sand.
>
> 'We go, we earn, we learn, we return.'

> Reggae beats are followed by the ballads of the blues. Brooke Benton, Ella Fitzgerald and Sam Cooke are amongst the great musical story tellers. Each story resonates with someone in the group. As the ballads resound, the men rise and 'drop foot'. The women look on and giggle. Everyone's happy. In the ice box is cool aid [*sic*], rum punch, Dragon stout and Red Stripe beer. (Warren, 2018, p. 128)

I see life abounding in this description: food, music, accent, weather, dance, emotions, and brands. These things are important to people, so much so that we can think of them not as "mere details" but, rather, as the stuff of life that makes culture/people/experience more visible. These specificities, in a novel and in creative writing, make the scene feel real and authentic (Leeke, 2020). As Warren herself emphasised, these are things that are important to the participants, and including accounts of them re-inscribes *their* meaning into the accounts, making them both accessible and recognisable.

Collaboration and Critical Thinking

Philip Leeke (2020) has pointed out that fiction can play an important role in critical thinking and exploration. When we tell stories, we produce cultural narratives, making visible often taken for granted ideas about the people and social worlds we are exploring. Similarly, when we read stories, we interpret those narratives, assessing their legitimacy, accuracy, and plausibility. As Leeke (2020) has suggested,

> Who is telling the tale and why are they telling it? How reliable are they as tellers of the tale? Does ignorance, fear or ambition influence their reportage? What are they telling you and what is their behaviour showing you? This is the vocabulary of every creative writing class I have ever entered. (p. 202)

Through such questions, we can use fiction to put our representations (of people and their talk/actions/claims/rationalisation) under the microscope, making visible clichés, assumptions, and (over-)simplifications, and, perhaps, moving towards accounts that are rich in detail and that show complicity and nuance.

This idea of critical engagement is not unique to fiction, of course, and it is found in many of the post-realist paradigms referred to previously in this chapter. More generally, this kind of critique is strongly related to no-

tions of *reflexivity* in the social sciences (i.e., critically exploring the relationship between the writer and the words they are writing or claims they are making with the context, people, problems being researched) and of *intersectionality* in feminist writing (Lykke, 2014). So, the analytic possibilities of fiction are not exclusive to it. However, asking students to write and, importantly, to *share* and talk about their stories in a group setting is a useful way to open up research to public scrutiny. When doctoral students talk about their research, it is common for methodology and method to become the focus: the data collection, sampling, issues of access, and so on. These are, of course, important topics, but they can very easily dominate the conversation. When fictions are presented and discussed, the data and story itself becomes the focus.

A useful activity I commonly draw on is to ask students to write a short story about one aspect of their findings. The students share this story with a small group of up to three students who read each other's work. I then present them with some conventional tools used to analyze fictional stories, such as plot and character arcs (Weiland, 2016), and invite them to use these ideas to analyze each other's work. One part of the exercise involves mapping and re-drawing the story they have read. Students draw a map of the organisation of the plot in order to think about what the tension points are, when the moments where we learn important information occur, and what the resolution of the story is. I invite them to try to think of an alternative structure for the plot, such as by starting with the ending, by revealing the information in a different order, or by creating "cliff-hangers" and other structural tension points.

Through this exercise, participants come to focus on the thesis as a *story* and to think about what they want to say, their own assumptions about the data, and the ways that readers might interpret the claims being made. In most cases, the students do not use the stories in their final thesis, but the critical thinking in the exercises and the focus on representation are invaluable even in less experimental thesis work.

Reflexivity

The journey through a doctorate is a highly emotive experience involving the exploration and transformation of one's identity as a writer and researcher (Hallowell et al., 2004; Herman, 2010). We all use stories and metaphor to make sense of our experience, and it is useful to interrogate these stories to understand how we are making sense of things. Barbara Kamler and Pat Thomson's (2006) study of doctoral students' experiences as writers involved

looking at the metaphors they used to describe the process of writing. The students' descriptions used metaphors that highlighted confusion, danger, puzzles, and mazes—metaphors that drew attention to the troubles and difficulties of writing. Kamler and Thomson (2008) later proposed an alternate metaphor of a dinner party to try to create a new relationship with the writing process:

> The party occurs in one's own home, in the familiar territory where one belongs (not the ocean, or the swamp, or the dark tunnel). The candidate invites to her table the scholars with whom she wishes to engage in dialogue. The emphasis is on the company and the conversation. The candidate has selected the menu, bought the food, cooked the dishes which she offers her guests. As host to this party, she makes space for the guests to talk about their work, but in relation to her own work. Her own research/thesis is never disconnected from the conversation, for after all it lies on her table. It is part of the food the guests eat, chew and digest. (p. 6)

Extending this metaphorical idea further to thinking about fiction helps us see how fiction can become another way to explore the experiences of being a doctoral student/researcher. Ruth Weatherall (2019) used this approach in her own doctoral work, noting,

> I wrote stories pretending that I was one of my participants (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) and wrote stories and poetry about my own experiences. I also frequently shared my writing with my participants and talked about how and why I would have written in that way. And so, my writing started to take shape, situated among many different voices. (Weatherall, 2019, p. 106)

A concrete example of such writing is Helen Kara's thesis, published as a journal article in 2013, which follows in a tradition of using fiction to show the emotional character of research experience (Banks & Banks, 1998; Christensen, 2012; Lancione, 2017). In it, she created an invented dialogue between her alter ego, named Polly Semic, and two fictional deities to explore the emotions of doctoral writing. In the following extract—which is intersected with formal academic references due to the conventions of the journal that later published it—Kara has placed Polly in dialogue with Pohed (one of two deities) discussing the ways that writing conventions can seem to force themselves onto the writer and to marginalise the author's own voice:

> 'But I'm so stuuuuuuck,' Polly wailed. 'I can't see how I'm ever going to get started with this chapter. Suddenly I have to do everything differently. These stupid academic writing conventions, they make it all so artificial' (Davidson, 2000, p. 124).
>
> 'Writing is always artificial' (Magrs, 2001a, p. 227; Winter et al., 1999, p. 7) Pohede said gently. 'What's really troubling you?'
>
> Polly drew a trembling breath.
>
> 'What I think, and more to the point, what I feel, has been completely marginalised in the context of this research over the last few years. Even by me. I should have kept more notes. But I've bought in to this whole academic cognitive thing that I don't believe in. It's been like a process of assimilation, and I – I just don't want to be assimilated' (Groom, 2000, p. 73).
>
> A tear slid down the side of her nose and she wiped it away. 'I guess I thought that at doctoral level there would be more scope for individuality.' (Kara, 2013, p. 75)

In this dialogue, I find Kara's (2013) writing *performs* a self who is self-doubting, uncertain of how to resolve issues, and, fundamentally, emotionally challenged by the process. The writing contrasts strongly with more formal academic style. As Eileen Honan and David Bright (2016) have noted, "the language of bureaucratic transmission—is the hegemonic language of the doctoral thesis" (p. 736), and bureaucratic language is not typically a good resource for communicating emotionality, doubt, discomfort, and ambiguity—certainly not in ways that make those things *performatively evident*. In his reflections on the value of fiction, Leeke (2020) noted,

> A logical proposition and syllogistic reasoning helps me understand that something in the social world is true ceteris paribus, but dramatic writing allows me to grasp its emotional weight. This is why great novels are more compelling and immersive than bullet pointed, PowerPoint lectures. (p. 201)

Conclusion: Fiction and the Re-imagined Doctorate

The re-imagining I propose here involves thinking about doctoral writing as playful and experimental, as a process of "thinking through," of doing thought and exploring rather than of simply *representing* thinking. Lan-

guage is always a game of some sort—a game of playing with ways of representing ideas. Writing doctoral dissertations is ". . .a profound rhetorical, linguistic, intellectual, emotional, and psychological challenge" (Paré 2019, p. 81), and the writing process is central to these challenges (Russell-Pinson & Harris, 2019). Particular issues that doctoral students face in their writing journeys are developing creativity (Thurlow et al., 2019; see also Thurlow, Chapter 5 this collection), forming an authorial voice (Morton & Storch, 2019), managing emotions and time (Straforini, 2015), negotiating the tension between conventionality and innovation (Honan & Bright, 2016; Weatherall, 2019), and making changes to their identity as scholars and writers (Frick & Brodin, 2020; Mu et al., 2019). The turn to fiction provides a way to confront these issues by creating writing that is humanized and personalized through playful and collaborative engagement as a practice of the exploration of thought.

I see fiction playing an important role in theses as an alternative narrative structure that can represent lived experience, cultural life, complexity, and affect in ways that are often more resonant for readers and that are more accessible to members of the non-academic community. I have suggested thinking about argument in terms of story and exploring data and concepts through characters, scenes, and plots. I also see fiction as an important resource for collaboratively thinking and exploring ideas. There is value in creating spaces where writing can be shared. I have pointed to the potentials of using fiction as a way of thinking differently about theses and the stories they deal with, including stories about the experiences of being a doctoral researcher. In my experience, the creation of "playfulness" in relation to the thesis experience can be hard to foster. The systems of metrics and surveillance used to monitor doctoral students in terms of the quality of their writing and its "doctorateness" as well as how quickly they move through the structured programme of education certainly push against experimentation and play (Aitchison, 2015; Burford, 2017; Gannon, 2018). And yet, I have found that when students are given the chance to write differently and to think differently, they embrace it.

Ingold (2015) noted that by opening our writing in these kinds of ways, we will perhaps "find that working with words, the writer can once again become a draughtsman or an artist, or even a musician of sorts. We might cease our endless writing *about* performance, and become performers ourselves" (p. viii). The examples included in this chapter show that such creativity is certainly present in doctoral work and in the academy more broadly. I hope that this chapter can help to further its wider acceptance and development.

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