13 The Curious Predicament of an (un)Comfortable Thesis Conclusion: Writing with New Materialisms

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Abstract: A conclusion often entails providing answers derived from questions like "What does all this mean?" and "What do we now know about the topic we did not know before?" While conventionally appealing, these questions become redundant within a feminist new materialist approach, as they are premised on a separation between the knower (researcher) and the known (subject/s). This chapter explores tensions that emerge between ontological foundations of research and thesis writing conventions, such as a *tidy* conclusion. Drawing on Karen Barad's (2007) concepts of onto-epistem-ology and intra-action, I consider how a new materialist ontology reconfigures binary concepts such as question/answer, research/researcher, and knowing/not knowing. These binary concepts often underpin the conclusions a thesis offers, along with doctoral framings of *success* and *failure*. The chapter ponders questions that emerge for re-imagining doctoral writing when binaries are blurred.

A *conventional* Ph.D. thesis[1] suggests a tidy package neatly bound by an inviting introduction and a comfortable conclusion. This structure follows the guidance provided in the plethora of books on "how to write a thesis": well-meaning advice underpinned by the goal of (ideally) leaving the writer and examiner with a sense of purpose and satisfaction (Eco, 2015; Evans et al., 2014; Gruba & Zobel, 2017; Murray, 2011). In this chapter, I consider what happens when a theoretical framework provides, or rather demands, an ending that is not so neatly packaged. What happens when academic con-

1 The term "thesis" is commonly used in Aotearoa New Zealand, although for some readers, the term "dissertation" may be more familiar.

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ventions rub uneasily with the ontological foundations of the research? And, what (dis)comforts might this afford the doctoral writer?

The discussion draws on my own doctoral experience working with postqualitative research practices (MacLure, 2013a; Mazzei, 2013) and feminist new materialist thought, in particular the work of feminist philosopher and quantum physicist Karen Barad (2003; 2007). Methodologically, postqualitative approaches provide intriguing quandaries for the researcher: What counts as data? What is our relation to it? What is possible to know? (MacLure, 2013b; St. Pierre, 2013a). In the context of my research, a feminist new materialist framework demanded a fundamental shift in the analytical approach to data, forcing me to be aware of tendencies to slip into a representational reading (MacLure, 2013a) and the seductive allure of telling a cohesive and linear narrative (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). It raised pertinent questions in regards to the Ph.D. thesis *process* and expectations of academic conformity and linearity. One point of perplexity was how to write a concluding chapter that was congruent with the theoretical foundations of the research *and* met doctoral examiner expectations. In what follows, I explore how doctoral writing, in particular a thesis conclusion, often coheres around binary concepts such as question/answer, research/researcher, knowing/not knowing, and failure/success. I consider how Barad's (2007) concepts of onto-epistem-ology and intra-action reconfigure binary concepts and the questions this may raise for re-imagining doctoral writing.

The Journey and the Clot

Advice books for doctoral researchers often liken the writing of a thesis to a journey: a metaphor that depicts a progression from one fixed point to another (Kamler & Thomson, 2008). This framing positions doctoral writing as a set of linear steps with a clear start and ending: the thesis conclusion situated at the latter end of the journey signposting "the destination." A concluding chapter is often expected to bring a "sense of closure" and highlight key findings and contributions to knowledge (Evans et al., 2014, p. 123). In the advice book *How to Write a Thesis*, for instance, Rowena Murray (2011) posits closure as one of the "ultimate goals of a thesis" (p. 202). In exploring what closure is and how to go about it, Murray (2011) draws on the metaphor of a blood clot:

> The blood circulates freely through the system until it meets a clot. The blood may have been thickening for some time, restricting flow, but the clot stops flow completely. Similarly, in the thesis process ideas flow freely and even the writing

> can usefully be free of structure at many stages. However, there is a need to block the free flow and design an endpoint to the thesis. (p. 202)

The blood clot is an intriguing metaphor which Murray (2011) notes brings "appropriate undertones of pressure, tension, pain and anxiety" (p. 202). And, might I suggest, in unfortunate cases, death. As a noun, a (blood) clot can be defined as "a coagulated mass" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In the context of writing, a clot signals a sense of completion in the form of "limiting, shutting off, confining" (Murray, 2011, p. 202). Key questions are revisited and answers reinforced; the contribution or *success* of the thesis is made evident.

This leads me to the question: If a conclusion is the clot, then what does this make the doctoral writer? A clotting agent? Moreover, what does this *do* to the doctoral writer? Doctoral writing is argued to be both text work *and* identity work, where the thesis and doctoral identity "are formed together, in and through writing" (Kamler & Thomson, 2008, p. 508). The writer of a thesis is often positioned as a learner—a research apprentice (Honan & Bright, 2016), a positioning clearly evident in the perceived market and ongoing comissioning of "how to write a thesis" texts. As doctoral students, we learn what knowledge is valued, what questions are to be asked and answered (Badenhorst & Guerin, 2016). Importantly, we learn how to construct a text that is recognisable within the academic discursive context as a *thesis* (Honan & Bright, 2016). These firmly sedimented ideas may fit cohesively within some disciplines and theoretical approaches; yet for others, they may provoke a sense of unease or discordance for the doctoral writer.

Ideas that constitute a *recognisable* thesis often cohere around firmly sedimented binary concepts, such question/answer, research/researcher, and knowing/not knowing. Murray (2011) suggests bringing a sense of conclusion to a thesis may entail "limiting the topics in some way, . . . filtering out the ideas that you are not going to develop in your thesis" (p. 205). The act of filtering out underdeveloped, or perhaps unanswered, ideas reaffirms a question and answer binary. As the researcher, I am positioned as the one asking and ultimately answering the thesis question/s. Failing to answer a question (or leaving an idea underdeveloped) puts the research/er at risk of *not knowing*. This is a precarious position premised on a clear separation between the researcher (knower) and research (known).

Many doctoral students have utilized guide books (myself included) and continue to do so. I am not suggesting these texts are unhelpful; however, it is pertinent to ask how this well-intended advice might constrain our questions (and answers) or stifle creativity and freedom (Honan & Bright, 2016). How

might these expectations (re)produce ideas of doctoral success or failure? Questioning the pedagogical and political implications of such advice, Barbara Kamler and Pat Thomson (2008) argue these texts offer a rigid model that follows a prescribed format and style; as a result, academic writing is treated as "a discrete set of technical skills that are effectively context free" (p. 506). There is an underpinning assumption that doctoral writing is a generic and straightforward skill that can be learned (Badenhorst & Guerin, 2016; Burford, 2017a) and ultimately conformed to. Although, as Doreen Starke-Meyerring (2011) suggests, research writing is situated rather than universal. In order for research to be recognisable by our peers, as doctoral researchers we must demonstrate that we "know how to play the game according to the particular rules of their discipline" (Badenhorst & Guerin, 2016, p. 17).

Playing the game is another familiar metaphor associated with the neoliberal university; in particular, that of the finite games where rules must be followed in order to win (Harré et al., 2017): *winning*, in this instance, is successfully meeting the criteria to be awarded a doctoral degree. As opposed to the infinite game which encourages diversity and open-ended expression, finite games tend towards sameness, where changing or breaking the rules is considered a violation (Harré, 2018). Taking into account the *rules* and structures that surround the doctoral research process, it can easily be understood as a finite game, where the prize (i.e., the award of the Ph.D. degree) enables winners to "claim knowledge of the world which may be treated as the truth" (Harré, 2018, p. 8). Indeed, as Niki Harré and co-authors (2017) point out, research is the "most prestigious finite game played by and at universities"; yet, research is also at the center of our academic identities and thus "richly interweaves infinite and finite play" (p. 10). By this, the authors refer to the appearance of playing both games at once: a successful academic activist and a successful researcher. For a doctoral researcher, this may involve the infinite game spaces of open-endedness and creativity (encouraged by a theoretical approach) alongside the academic regulations, expectations, and vulnerability that form the examination process (and finite game). How might we play the game in the spaces in-between?

Umberto Eco (2015), in another advice book also titled How to Write a Thesis, suggests if you "write your thesis with gusto . . . you will experience the thesis as a game, as a bet, or as a treasure hunt" (p. 221). This idea conveys a sense of fun and adventure, which incidentally, are words I would not typically use to describe my own doctoral process. Eco (2015) declares: "You must experience the thesis as a challenge. You are the challenger" (p . 221). Albeit optimistic and perhaps a little romantic, the sense of "gusto" is not unappealing. This leads me to another question for the doctoral writer, particularly for

the postqualitative or feminist new materialist variety, such as myself: How do we create a sense of closure—a coagulated mass—without succumbing to the immanent risk of (scholarly) death? Perhaps a bit melodramatic, I blame the metaphoric undertones of pain and anxiety the clot provides. Scholarly death, in my mind, is when an approach (i.e., writing a *tidy* conclusion with neatly packaged answers) is antithetical to the theoretical foundations of the thesis, thus breaching *the rules* of the game. Or, in a more positive frame, how do we bring a sense of "gusto," or, more importantly, ourselves as "the challenger" (Eco, 2015, p. 221), to the game? Or more specifically, to the spaces in-between?

How Does *Knowing* Matter?

The concept of *knowing* is integral to the writing or becoming of a thesis text and the conclusion it may offer. The development of postqualitative inquiry brings a challenge to "conventional, reductionist" modes of qualitative inquiry (St. Pierre, 2011, p. 613) and a rejection of representational thinking (MacLure, 2013a). Representationalism is premised on "the presumed capacity of the researcher to represent with words the reality s/he observes" (Davies, 2018, p. 115). Postqualitative inquiry brings a rethinking of how knowledge is produced and what is possible to know (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013). In relation to my doctoral research, this produced an interesting quandary for me when it came to the thesis conclusion. A conclusion often entails answers derived from questions like "What does all this mean?" and "What do we now know about the topic we did not know before?" While conventionally appealing, these questions become redundant within a new materialist onto-epistem-ology (Barad, 2007), as they are premised on a separation between the knower (researcher) and the known (subject/s) (Allen, 2018a). Indeed, as I write this chapter, I am speaking from an anthropocentric position, which is somewhat ironic considering the posthumanist framing of my research. I am mindful to note, the use of the researcher "I" in this chapter does not signal an ontologically separate researcher. Rather, it is an entangled "I", denoting the entangled state of the researcher in the research process, by which myself as researcher is also constituted.

Barad (2003; 2007) uses the term onto-epistem-ology to recognise the interdependent and intertwined relationship between being (ontology) and knowing (epistemology). The separation of epistemology from ontology establishes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, matter and discourse, subject and object. Instead, Barad (2007) argues, the practices of knowing and being cannot be separated from one another and are mutually implicated; as such, onto-epistem-ology can be understood as "the study of

practices of knowing in being" (p. 185). In Barad's (2003) words, "we do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because *we* are *of* the world" (p. 829). In this framing, our ways of being in the world depend on our knowing of it, and our knowing depends on our being (and continuous becoming) in the world (Lenz Taguchi, 2010). Here, our meaning making is dependent on the material world around us; we are not separate to the world but part of it in a process of mutual and intra-dependent becoming.

Barad's (2007) agential realist framework posits knowing and being as occurring in the same moment; therefore, there is no ontological distance between the researcher and the research subject. As the researcher, I am entangled in the becoming of the research. I cannot stand back, look upon the data, and give meaning to it: This is something a traditional representational account might offer, yet is impossible within a feminist new materialist approach. What counts as *method* and *data* take on a different form in new materialist research (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013). In conventional qualitative approaches, data is often treated as passive matter waiting to be selected, organized, and interpreted by an ontologically separate researcher (Lenz Taguchi, 2012; MacLure, 2013a). In contrast, a new materialist ontology posits data as neither passive nor separate from the researcher. Data and researcher are understood as entangled, acting upon one another in particular ways. A reciprocal, co-constitutive relationship exists between data and researcher, where neither are pre-existing or privileged over the other. Within this non-hierarchical relationship, it is impossible for a researcher to determine what data might *mean* or represent.

Representational logic assumes there is a primary reality out there to be found and that it can be accurately represented through language (St. Pierre, 2013b); both of these notions are untenable within new materialist thought. In contrast to representational approaches, "materialist ontologies prefer a *flattened* logic (DeLanda, 2002; Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010) where discourse and matter are mutually implicated in the unfolding emergence of the world" (MacLure, 2013a, p. 659). Language no longer holds an elevated position of giving meaning to the world; instead, language is one element within an array of entangled forces and intensities. As such, data are not a reflection of *reality*. Rather, data enacts *becomings* produced via assembled material-discursive relations. For Barad (2007), the relation between knowledge and being is understood as a profoundly ethical issue. As Bronwyn Davies (2018) explains: "It is a matter of questioning what is being made to matter and how that mattering affects what it is possible to do and think" (p. 121).

The ontological reorientation of knowing and being reconfigures how we conceptualise *endings* and the *new*. This has important implications for what a

thesis conclusion can *say* and *do*. Within a new materialist framework, Louisa Allen (2018b) succinctly notes "failure to end is an onto-epistemological inevitability" (p. 125), and it is this open-ended potential that forms part of the *new* that a feminist new materialist approach opens up. For Barad (2007), "the 'new' is the trace of what is yet to become" (p. 383). This "newness" is not nameable or representable because feminist new materialism renders it indeterminate; instead, we might think of the newness as creating "*a space where something new can emerge*" (Allen, 2016, p. 8). Perhaps a space of the infinite game?

Feminist new materialisms demand a different logic and attitude towards knowledge and meaning-making. What is required is "a logic of unknowability, a logic of openness and a logic of uncertainty" (Blaise & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2019, p. 117). This unending and unknown potential may sit uncomfortably with some readers and with the conventional expectations of a conclusion, particularly within the context of a doctoral thesis which must endure the rigours of the examination process. In the case of the university where I studied (and other institutions), in order for a Ph.D. degree to be awarded, it must satisfy a range of criteria, including offering "an original contribution to knowledge or understanding in its field" (The University of Auckland, 2016, p. 1). However, what does an "original contribution to knowledge" look like and feel like? More specifically, what understandings of ontology and epistemology is this *knowing* based on? And, what is at risk if we fail *to know*?

In her work on reconceptualising qualitative research, Mirka Koro-Ljungberg (2015) raises several pertinent questions: "Why does knowing matter? How does knowing matter? Why does not-knowing appear so scary, inaccessible, distant, and potentially not respected?" (p. 109). Considering the latter question, Allen (2018b) suggests "knowing" and "being knowledgeable" are "identities humans and social institutions like universities have a deep investment in" (p. 128). Indeed, "knowing" can be understood as the core business of academics and universities; it is part of the structure of the finite game, particularly for winners. Therefore, being open to the unknown "engenders vulnerability as an academic. It risks academic work slipping into unintelligibility and subsequently intellectual obscurity" (Allen, 2018b, p. 5). For the doctoral researcher, the risk of vulnerability can be in the form of failing the Ph.D. examination process or not having sufficient *answers* to even proceed to examination.

Returning to the idea of closure in *How to Write a Thesis*, Murray (2011) suggests "closure is invention; the writer has to create it" (p. 203). This idea is appealing. Although, Murray acknowledges for many writers, there is a tension between closure and creativity, as closure encapsulates the idea and practice of limiting and shutting down, hence the metaphor of the clot. This

tension between closure and creativity extends to the wider university setting. Despite the rhetoric of creativity that many universities espouse, organisational structures, policies, and dominant academic discourses can work to diminish and discourage creativity (Badenhorst & Guerin, 2016; Tierney, 2012). It is also pertinent to note that various disciplines may encourage or regulate creativity (in the form of thesis structure) to varying extents (see Molinari, Chapter 2, this collection). While the *rules* of the game may differ within and between disciplines, they are ultimately bound within broader university structures and the potential tensions this might produce.

So, where does this leave the doctoral researcher? In relation to doctoral writing, Eileen Honan and David Bright (2016) challenge the normalisation of the thesis structure and call for a "stretching of boundaries" and "interference" with ways of knowing and writing that traditionally comprise qualitative research (p. 735). They argue it is "imperative for doctoral students not to adapt their thinking and writing to what is required": rather, how might we embrace "a style and structure that eschews the already thought; a writing that is against style and against structure" (Honan & Bright, 2016, p. 733). Perhaps this may include "stretching the boundaries" of what is considered closure and a neatly packaged thesis? Or perhaps blurring the boundaries between *knowing* and *not knowing*? What if a thesis had no conclusion? Or the conclusion consisted of two paragraphs? What if the *answers* a conclusion offers is in the form of further questions?

Success ~~or~~/and Failure

So far, this chapter has considered some of the binary concepts that cohere around doctoral research, including question/answer, research/researcher, and knowing/not knowing. Together, these concepts are entangled with another binary: understandings of doctoral success and failure. Failure is often constructed as the opposite of success. What separates success from failure in doctoral research is consistent across many universities: "The work must: constitute an original contribution to knowledge; be scholarly, coherent and rigorous; be appropriately located in terms of the existing scholarly literature and creative work; be well presented; and, demonstrate a synthesis between the creative and critical elements" (Brien et al., 2013, p. 7). The success/failure dichotomy confines doctoral researchers to familiar structures that regulate the possibilities for thinking, doing, and being. Doctoral failure is often seen as something to be avoided or simply "not an option" (Brien et al., 2013, p. 4). Failure, or even the mere threat of failure, induces feelings of anxiety, guilt, and shame. Yet as James Burford (2017b) argues, failure can be a productive

ground for alternate affects, such as joy, relief, and satisfaction. Offering a queer reading of failure, Burford (2017b) suggests if we conceptualise doctoral failure as a legitimate position to inhabit, then "we might discern its possibilities for discontent, critique, and rejection of arguably hollow meanings of 'success'" (p. 475). This approach highlights the productive potential of failure in opening possibilities of non-normative becoming (Halberstam, 2011). It also blurs the boundaries between success and failure, prompting us to rethink what is valued and considered productive.

The generative potential to dissolve binaries resonates with new materialist thought; for instance, there is no longer a clear separation between matter/discourse and subject/object (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012). As explained, the concept of onto-epistem-ology (Barad, 2007) dismantles a separation between researcher and research. The capacity to blur boundaries might also be applied to the dichotomy of success and failure. Within a new materialist framework, Anna Hickey-Moody (2019) suggests success and failure can be understood as "intricately enmeshed: one is co-constitutive of the other"; here, the failure/success binary is dissolved as "the constitution of failure relies on the co-constitution of success" (Theories section, para. 2). We can think about this idea through Barad's (2007) notion of intra-action, a key concept in her agential realist framework. Barad (2007) defines intra-action as "the mutual constitution of entangled agencies" (p. 33). This means individual agencies are not distinct or prior but rather emerge through their intra-action or mutual entanglement. The concept differs from the idea of interaction, which is premised on an understanding of separate individual entities that exist prior to their interaction or connection.

The ontological reorientation offered by the concept of intra-action opens up a way of approaching the success/failure binary differently. One is not prior or separate to the other; they only become distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement (Barad, 2007). Hickey-Moody (2019) argues acknowledgement of the constitutive relationship between success and failure is needed in how we think about empirical research design and practice. Drawing on her own research practice, Hickey-Moody (2019) suggests failure creates "unexpected successes" (Theories section, para. 2). In doing so, failure in empirical research can be re-thought as dynamic and generative as opposed to a sense of lacking or something to be avoided. This resonates with Koro-Ljungberg's (2015) idea of "productive failures" (p. 101), which she explores in relation to conclusions and endings. In failing to write a conclusion, Koro-Ljungberg (2015) states: "I also fail to provide you (my readers) a way out, a reason to stop reading, interacting and thinking. Instead I hope that this failure will be a productive new beginning and thus in itself quite desirable" (p. 101).

Working with this idea in a new materialist frame, Allen (2018b) conceptualises failure to end a project or book as "a potential that promises further possibility" (p. 129). Failure, in this sense, is seen as productive and generative (Hickey-Moody, 2019); it "indicates that more has to and can be done" (Koro-Ljungberg, 2015, p. 101). A new materialist framing challenges the oppositional relationship between failure and *knowing*. Drawing on Chris Hay's (2016, p. 77) idea that "failure can be understood as a *way of knowing*, and is constitutive of knowledge in its own right," Hickey-Moody (2019) conceptualises failure as "epistemologically specific and valuable *because it is epistemologically specific*" (Theories section, para. 13). What failure is, and can be, varies across disciplines. This framing is not an attempt to valorise failure (O'Gorman & Werry, 2012) nor situate it as a pit stop or stepping stone on the trajectory to success. Rather, it is an attempt to think differently about success and failure, shifting it from an either/or positioning to one of mutual entailment.

Within a new materialist framing, success and failure emerge in material-discursive entanglements. This means failure and success are no longer solely in my domain as an individual entity (i.e., doctoral researcher). What might this space mean for the doctoral researcher? What possibilities might it open up for re-imagining doctoral writing? Patti Lather and Elizabeth St. Pierre (2013) make an interesting suggestion: "At some point, we have to ask whether we have become so attached to our invention—qualitative research—that we have come to think it is real" (p. 631). They note "the ethical charge of our work as inquirers is surely to question our attachments that keep us from thinking and living differently" (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013, p. 631). With this in mind, perhaps we need to question our attachments to meanings of success and failure, to *knowing* and to *tidy* conclusions? Perhaps we need to challenge the desire or expectation to justify ourselves as winners in the Ph.D. finite game? As Harré and co-authors (2017) suggest, in order to play the infinite game, we need to "cultivate indifference to convention"; we need to recognise the university's finite games, such as the doctoral thesis, "for what they are, devices that can and must be played with, in an effort to bring alive the infinite spaces that lie between" (pp.7-8). If, as Murray (2011) suggests, "closure is invention" (p. 203), what could writing a thesis look like or feel like in this infinite space?

My own curious predicament of writing an (un)comfortable conclusion was an entanglement of theory, ideas, feelings, and academic requirements. It was a curious space of impending relief, unease, tentative indifference, and conformity. It was a balancing act fuelled by questions: What is possible to know and say within this theoretical frame? Will this satisfy the examiners?

Will the examiners be *appropriate*? For me, the thesis conclusion was a manifestation of this balancing act. In a traditional sense, it did (some of) the work of a concluding chapter by bringing together key ideas and arguments. At the same time, in keeping with the study's ontological foundations, the chapter was by no means an ending in a finite sense—it was both a conclusion and an opening to new possibilities and new questions. Integral to these new possibilities was a shift in how I came to understand my role as researcher and my relationship with the research. Looking back, it was a fruitful space for me as a doctoral researcher—an invitation to becoming comfortable with feeling uncomfortable. In order to "bring alive these infinite spaces" (Harré et al., 2017, pp. 7-8), maybe we need to question our notions of who writes whom? As Barad (2007) would suggest: is it that I have written this thesis, or has it written me? Perhaps, "'we' have 'intra-actively' written each other" (p. x). The practice of *writing a thesis* is a "mutually constitutive working out, and reworking, of" both thesis and ourselves as researcher (Barad, 2007, p. x). Who we are as doctoral researchers is produced in the entanglements. What spaces do we want these to be?

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