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Edited by

NANCY WELCH ◆ CATHERINE G. LATTERELL ◆ CINDY MOORE ◆ SHEILA CARTER-TOD

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New Perspectives in Rhetoric and Composition

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Contents

Introduction *vii*

Part 1 (Re)Writing the Dissertation Initiation Ritual

1 Writing Selves, Establishing Academic Identity
Marilyn Vogler Urion 1

2 Behind the Accordion-Shaped Door, or Living the Questions of a Personal Academic Dissertation
Alys Culhane 13

3 Participation: On an Ethics of Beginnings
Fred Arroyo 24

4 Other Than Oedipus: Sideshadowing Tales of Dissertation Authority 34
Nancy Welch 34

Part 2 Locating and Pluralizing Advising

5 Dissertation Writing and Advising in a Postmodern Age
Catherine G. Latterell and Cynthia L. Selfe 45

6 Mothers, Spinsters, Othermothers: Metaphors for Women Mentors and Their Students
Joy Ritchie, Kate Ronald, and Hephzibah Roskelly 55

7 "She Herself Is the Writing," But the Form Doesn't Fit: The Dissertation as a Site of Becoming
Cindy Moore and Peggy Woods 66

Part 3 Writing Between Tradition and Change

8 Writing Wrong: The Dissertation as Dissent
Devan Cook and Darrell Fike 79

9 The Multiple Voices in the Dissertation and Beyond
Janis E. Haswell 90

10 The Personal Narrative in Dissertation Writing: A Matter of Academic Honesty
Tonya M. Stremlau 101

11 Dissertating in a Digital Age: The Future of Composition Scholarship
Janice R. Walker and Joseph M. Moxley 110

Part 4 So What *Is* a Dissertation for—And What Comes Next? 119

12 Why Write a Dissertation?
Marsha Lee Holmes 119

13 "You Both Looked the Same to Me": Collaboration as Subversion
Amy Goodburn and Carrie Shively Leverenz 126

14 In Search of My "Jingle": Reconciling Voice and Identity After the Dissertation Defense
Sheila L. Carter-Tod 137

Works Cited *147*
Contributors *161*

Chapter One

Writing Selves, Establishing Academic Identity

Marilyn Vogler Urion

> *The symbolic efficacy of words is exercised only in so far as the person subjected to it recognizes the person who exercises it as authorized to do so, or, what amounts to the same thing, only in so far as he [sic] fails to realize that, in submitting to it, he himself has contributed, through his recognition, to its establishment.*
>
> —Pierre Bourdieu (1991), *Language and Symbolic Power*

Many of us encourage and engage in innovative academic writing both before and after the dissertation, from the essays of first-year writing students to those of established scholars. By contrast, it is generally accepted that dissertations must adhere to narrowly conceived notions of academic discourse and to rigid formatting requirements. Understanding why this is so—how the dissertation process serves not only as demonstration that we are able to do the work of scholars but as a rite of initiation—provides insight into why the academic community is as it is and how it might become more open to diversity. As each of us goes through the process, submits to the requirements, and adheres to the guidelines, two things happen: The structure of the genre is reaffirmed and we are changed. Much about the process is consistent with Arnold van Gennep's (1908) model of initiation rites characterized by a three-stage pattern of separation, transition, and incorporation.[1]

Though we talk casually about the dissertation as a ritual of initiation, ritual is not generally thought of as its primary function. Nor do we talk seriously about the ritual aspects of measured margins, third-person pronouns, double-spacing, and standard written English. Such requirements, however,

reveal the underlying ritual like old tombstones yielding their inscriptions to the rubbing of crayon on paper. Pierre Bourdieu, recognizing their social function, chooses to call initiation rituals "rites of institution" (1991, 117). Investiture, he explains, both transforms expectations persons have of those invested and ". . . simultaneously transforms the representation that the invested person has of himself, and the behavior he feels obliged to adopt in order to conform to that representation" (119). Writing a dissertation, in other words, obliges us to adopt a new set of behaviors.

Equally useful in understanding why dissertations are the way they are is Lorraine Code's (1995) notion of rhetorical spaces, spaces in which "subjectivities are variously enacted, and identities are . . . continually reconstructed in the enactings"—spaces characterized by uneven distributions of knowledge and authority. She explains:

> Rhetorical spaces, as I conceive of them here, are fictive but not fanciful or fixed locations, whose (tacit, rarely spoken) territorial imperatives structure and limit the kinds of utterances that can be voiced within them with a reasonable expectation of uptake and "choral support"; an expectation of being heard, understood, taken seriously. (ix–x)

Negotiating a voice that is acceptably within the confines of the space, one that will be "taken seriously," while at the same time maintaining fidelity to a sense of personal identity during a transforming ritual of initiation seems more difficult as a person's distance from the center of academic culture increases. Code and van Gennep show us why.

Listening to dissertation stories can also help us understand how the experience changes those who go through it and thus how the academic community is itself perpetuated. This chapter draws on dissertation stories I gathered during my own initiation into academe.[2] Though participants didn't talk about being engaged in an initiation ritual, as I listened to their stories, I saw patterns emerge that were consistent with van Gennep's model. Similarly, characteristics of the rhetorical spaces that Code describes are openly apparent in dissertation stories. I heard stories of persons being told to set aside projects they wanted to work on in favor of something more "appropriate." I consistently heard stories of giving in to revision demands that ranged from conceptual restructuring to the use of the word *that*. At the same time, people shared stories of supportive friends, advisors, and committees. Supportive advisors, in fact, seem to be the rule, a phenomenon consistent with initiation rituals where a guide both tests and protects the initiate.

Supportive advisors, however, do not mitigate the fundamental role that rites of initiation play in maintaining institutional uniformity. The rhetorical space of dissertations remains conservative in that it (1) adheres to particular hierarchies of power and privilege and (2) relies on a particular distribution of knowledge and authority, both of which maintain dominant culture privilege in the academy. Advisors and committees, as well as students, are constrained

by the conventions of this space. That these constraints are shared explains, perhaps, the general feeling of a diminishing space for risk-taking. At the prospectus stage, constraints may mean being realistic about what can be accomplished. Later, concerns about the public reception of the work appear. The advisor of one dissertator in my study, for instance, expressed concern late in the process that risks a student takes may reflect badly on the student's advisor and department, illustrating Bourdieu's claim that "the function of all magical boundaries [is] to stop those who are inside, on the right side of the line, from leaving, demeaning, or down-grading themselves" (122).

But I was unaware of this when I began my research. With my proposal for an autoethnographic dissertation about dissertation-writing approved, I had thought the days of the rigidly structured, tortuously written dissertations must have passed. But now, having concluded my project and moved into graduate school administration, I must say that things seem not to have changed all that much. As recently as the final months of 1998, the e-list of the Council of Graduate Schools hosted discussions that condemned the notion of collaborative dissertations and affirmed the need for the disciplining dissertation format checker. Some months after my degree was awarded, I was told by colleagues in a regional deans' meeting (who were leafing through my dissertation) that it would never have been approved at *their* institutions. This rigidity, I now believe, has to do with the liminality, and thus vulnerability to subversion, of the ritual/rhetorical space in which one becomes an academic.

In the following pages, I will first discuss some of the origins, both internal and external, of the constraints on dissertation form. I will then explore what it means to inhabit the rhetorical space of the dissertation before suggesting some of the discussions that must accompany a move toward innovation in dissertation form. In all of this, I must emphasize my belief that the dissertation, including the ritual aspects of it, serves a necessary function—we need, simply, to free the space from the arbitrary constraints that perpetuate the exclusivity of the community.

Imposition of Form

A dissertation begins, and the exertion of the conservative begins, when one accepts that words must be put to paper, that it must have a form, a progression, a tone, an audience, a title, a length, a logic—a shape. But the shape is often blurred, or perceived in caricature:

> Lynn:[3] My notion of the actual D is that it will be "original," though heavily researched, about 250 pages, several drafts depending on what my readers like or don't. Of course we want an intellectual voice in writing this thing, but I'm still trying to sort this out.

To see what dissertations should look and sound like, students often consult one of the many handbooks available. The *Guide to the Successful Thesis and*

Dissertation: A Handbook for Students and Faculty (Mauch and Birch, 1993) offers, for instance, an answer to "one of the first things a student wants to know . . . what a thesis or dissertation looks like" (225). While the modeling provided by these sources may satisfy a student's initial need, it also limits what is possible. The imposition of arbitrary rules both disciplines the writer and makes manifest the hierarchies of privilege that Code maps. It was telling that at a recent meeting for departmental graduate program liaisons at my university, a number of participants reacted with surprise when I explained that as far as the Graduate School was concerned dissertations needn't be double-spaced, nor printed on only one side of the page, and that only the binding margin was critical.

Students may also seek out dissertations to use as models only to find that the chosen volumes model traditional constraints rather than innovation. Barbara had gone to the dissertations of her advisor and recent graduates for models. Later, however, she explained:

> I don't think those were good examples of being able to really integrate the level of personal voice and experience. Not necessarily because of the topic, but I think in part because the writers were restrained by their own assumptions about what they could do.

Such self-restraint is not surprising. In another guide to dissertations, Jody Veroff explains, "stylistic rules may require you eventually to disembody yourself in your writing . . ." (1992, 159). This notion of disembodiment is disquietingly consistent with descriptions of male adolescent initiation rituals examined by van Gennep where the initiate experiences a symbolic death of the body and is then "reincorporated" into the body of the institution.

The dissertation itself is not the first hurdle, however, as a proposal generally generates boundaries for the dissertation that follows. If it's common to think, "Of course, everyone knows what a dissertation looks like," there is an equally strong sense, especially in fields and departments where students don't routinely write research proposals, that *no one* knows what a proposal looks like. What is expected may vary from one advisor to another. It may be the first three chapters of the dissertation or six pages of informal discussion. It may need to be defended or it may simply need to be approved by the advisor and possibly the committee. One can go to any university library and read dissertations; even one or two sample proposals may be hard to come by. While it is true that rigid guidelines can deter innovation, it is also true that the complete lack of guidelines can be similarly constraining.

More troubling, perhaps, the proposal seems to be the stage where potential committee members play out their own struggles of hierarchy and power. A woman in counseling psychology, for instance, explained that after months of struggling to get a proposal written, she reconstituted her committee—a move that might have been foreseen in an earlier story she had told about how her chair and one of her committee members disagreed fundamentally over the dis-

sertation's purpose. Another woman, frustrated that members of her interdisciplinary committee could not settle on the boundaries of the project after a dozen proposal drafts, simply began data analysis. And though it seems to contradict the stories of methodological loggerheads and endless demands from committee members, it is also common for students to say of the proposal, as Lisa did, "I'm pretty much doing this on my own." At the point where the dissertation itself is being planned out, students find themselves working in an unfamiliar genre and in a politically volatile arena. Very little about the process encourages students to incorporate experiment into the plan for the dissertation.

In these women's stories, the proposal loomed as a much larger hurdle than I had imagined—a place wherein initiates are brought to a state of abjection. One woman, who early in the process was confident and enthusiastic, developed a severe writing block while working on her proposal. For a number of months, she reported some progress, then quit corresponding. A brief note indicated she was going to get it done "ASAP," but she later told of falling into depression, then of seeking treatment. She was, when I last spoke with her, trying to get three pages written for her advisor (who had been "quite supportive" the whole time). The woman who finally shifted to data analysis had gotten to the point where sitting down to write brought her to tears, and she was convinced, she said, that what she did manage to write was "awful."

Others experienced similar, if less debilitating, failures of confidence about their ability to write as an academic. Samantha's experience demonstrates the typical reaction to lack of feedback. The day she sent a partial draft of her prospectus to her chair, she wrote to me:

> I'm quite sure that I write in my own voice. I have very little confidence about speaking out in a graduate seminar. . . . However, when I write, I think/feel my voice is authoritative and I suffer less anxiety about expressing my views.

Following a lengthy period of no response to her draft, she said, "I think my advisor may be waiting for the finished product before he spends time (wastes time?) writing back." After she received the draft back with requests for revisions, including two difficult ones, she described her voice as "nonexistent." When I asked what she meant, she explained:

> The "nonexistent voice" in my revising may be due to feeling that I don't know enough, haven't read enough *and* kept careful notes—maybe because I'm supposed to be academic, informed, intelligent, somewhat of an expert and feel (know) that I'm none of those things.

She did, however, complete the revisions within the time her advisor had asked:

> [For a time] I found myself thinking about the readers' comments, suggestions, etc. and trying to defend what I had done against those remarks. When

> I sat down to work on it, it was much easier than I had imagined. Of course, I did *not* restructure or redesign my project. But I did reword and reorganize several sections and I more explicitly (sort of Dick and Jane writing) explain why I want [to approach the topic the way I do] . . . I feel hopeful about what I've done, but not confident.

Samantha had, in alluding to "Dick and Jane," exemplified the ritually necessary stripping away of old language and subsequent relearning of the language of the initiate.

Even when alternatives are imagined and survive in the prospectus, they may be stifled late in the process. Stories I'm told suggest that the tolerated level of risk-taking diminishes as the defense approaches. One writer was told to eliminate from a completed draft lengthy sections where she discussed her developing friendships with participants in her study; "So much," she said, "for my own voice." Another had spoken of her project as "pretty innovative," but last-minute revisions demanded of her had this effect:

> I was defending a dissertation that I didn't believe in, had not envisioned, and didn't like very much at all. I wondered why the hell I had been given just enough free rein to be frustrated in ways I had never imagined.

Disturbed by their own experiences and the stories they hear others tell, students often ask, "How can we do it differently when we become academics?" Those who finish, however, are acutely aware that, however unpleasant it might have been, their advisors did manage to get them through. Coupled with this is their own responsibility as academics to accomplish the same, that is, to help their students complete the process. As one recent PhD explained:

> One of the reasons I entered the e-list discussion was to warn grad students that they need to be careful about pushing too hard on those boundaries. I often see relatively established scholars loudly claiming that print is dead, that we should write hypertexts instead of static, linear texts. All I can say is, That's all well and good if you have tenure. . . . I have students work in hypertext now; although I still wouldn't suggest any of them write a diss completely in hypertext.

Hypertext thus seems to fall outside of the boundaries of what can be taken seriously within the dissertation's rhetorical space. And perhaps more than anything else, the need to be taken seriously structures the work of academics. Stacy explained why she wasn't concerned with innovative discourse:

> I'm not opposed to doing it [the dissertation] in the cookbook fashion if it means that a dissertation about the sex industry is going to get accepted, and it's going to appear in my university's graduation bulletin. There's also pressure to make a dissertation on the sex industry more academic and more scholarly because it is a stigmatized subject.

Dissertation writers who choose to explore stigmatized issues or politically sensitive topics are placed in the position of having to choose their battles. Allison explained:

> I had to justify every dot and dash. When I say that they made me justify every claim, this is consistent with a logical, analytic mode of discourse. But beneath their demands on me was more than a desire to make my dissertation the best it could be in the field. They also didn't believe that my subject's non-analytic style of discourse could be considered "real" philosophy.
>
> I edited the work and changed whatever my director wanted without much complaint because . . . I knew I could make the work be what I wanted it to after I got through the program . . . so I wrote like I knew they wanted. . . . Interestingly enough, however, this mode of expression is easy for me to slip in and out of. [My] concern was also that I was educating an entire major university philosophy department about ideas that I believe are very important . . . and I was adjusting my "voice" to one they could hear.

If we are to be heard, we must approximate the legitimated forms of expression. A parade of students carrying placards is not likely to be taken as a dissertation defense. But less extreme cases are more difficult. Can one call a textbook a dissertation? a compilation of others' works if it includes extensive annotation? a collaborative project? a hypertextual collection of original and quoted poetry? At the extreme, there is the question of whether a nonstandard dissertation *is* a dissertation. If it is not, the ritual has failed to perform its function—that is, the boundary between those to whom the ritual does pertain and those to whom it does not will have been blurred—and the possibility looms of an impostor being endowed with the *skeptron* (Bourdieu 1991, 109).

Interstice Inhabited

Much of the power of ritual, and the determining factor in whether we are taken seriously, is in the proper utterance of prescribed language. The dissertation serves this function: It involves a lengthy, intense period of writing in a discipline-specific discourse, developing fluency with a vocabulary that is often unintelligible to anyone outside the discipline. Academics often say they learned to write while writing their dissertations. All too often, this involves substituting an advisor's words for one's own. One woman, who had gotten suggestions for revision that she didn't particularly agree with, told me she made minimal changes, "just enough to get by." Another told of getting back a draft with extensive interlinear revisions that she was expected simply to adopt. Yet another explained that after struggling with her text, she appreciated her advisor's suggestions and opted to use his version "because he said it so much better than I could." Near the end, another explained, she made suggested revisions to wording that she might have resisted earlier.

Perhaps some of us can, as one participant explained it, "easily slip into and out of an academic voice." Like a mask, it can be put on and taken off. And it is difficult to dispute arguments such as Shirley Lim's, in an AAUW symposium, that women need to "learn and follow established academic forms such as dense citations. Your credibility depends on them, though they're loaded with hierarchical assumptions . . ." (Cook 1997, 23). My concern is that the habits of mind we take on in dissertation-writing determine our notions of what forms of expression are legitimate, of who should be taken seriously as competent members of the community. What is conserved by traditional dissertations—even the best of them—are the particular habits of mind that shape a vigorously dominant-culture university community. Gillian Howie and Ashley Tauchert put it strongly:

> What may start out as the price of admission, adopting alien behaviors to survive a male-run system of rewards and punishments, becomes our chosen way of operating. By a process of "interior colonization," we regulate our own behavior according to male norms. (1999, 1)

Sometimes, however, innovation in academic discourse is not seen as an issue at all: Jane, for instance, asked, "Is learning the discourse really so different than all the other compromises of spirit we make to survive/thrive/fit?" *Survival* is perhaps a fundamental cause for restraint with regard to risk and experimentation in dissertations, for students are acutely aware of their own friends and acquaintances—sometimes partners and parents—who haven't succeeded.

Bruce Lincoln, elaborating on van Gennep's model, helps explain, perhaps, the aversion to innovation and risk as dissertators make this rite of passage from one defined position to another:

> Between any two well-defined social positions, [Gennep] argues, there lies a no-man's land, a liminal period during which one has lost a previously held status without yet having gained a new one to replace it. (1991, 99)

Dissertators inhabit this liminal space. Having not yet "reincorporated," they in some sense have no identity at all. Whether intentional or not, much of the culture of graduate education reinforces these notions: the lack of formal recognition short of the PhD (coursework certification, for instance); the infrequency with which formal withdrawal procedures are used (doctoral students simply fade away); the fact that we track placement of our graduates but not of students who do not graduate. Successfully completing a dissertation that one doesn't like stifles the writerly self, but at least this self has an identity.

Whether, then, it is satisfaction with the status quo, an unconscious acceptance of it, fear of the alternatives, or the "vehement indignation and resistance" met by "any hint of reform" (Hamilton 1993, 53), there is, among those advising and writing dissertations, a strong inclination toward replication. Still, I believe that doing a dissertation is a necessary part of joining the continuing

scholarly conversation. I believe there is value in the process itself—in the extended putting into words of an idea that both finds its location in and extends the scholarly conversation. Nor is the ritual to be undervalued.

I would also argue vehemently that the dissertation all too often involves unnecessary frustration, trauma, and humiliation. One woman said she felt as if she had to be "fucked" before the examining committee would allow her to leave the room following her defense, another that she completed the ordeal feeling "bruised." Gesa Kirsch, citing a "willingness to reinterpret and reevaluate difficult writing experiences in a positive light," relays the feelings of yet another about revising her dissertation: "I thought it was really very *helpful*. It almost *destroyed me* personally. It's *devastating* to get a whole dissertation with [critical comments]. But it was *very instructive*" (Kirsch's emphasis) (1993, 67). A number of the women who responded to my initial request for dissertation stories suggested that telling these stories would provide a way for them to heal from the process. There is no space set aside in van Gennep's model for healing.

I began my dissertation project suggesting that the rigidity of the dissertation silenced those who were alienated by academic discourse—silenced in that they simply could not, or would not, accommodate to the limits of academic discourse. Yet the women I was talking with had either finished their dissertations or were still in process, though at least one has since decided not to complete the dissertation. For those who finish, the term *silence* doesn't really fit, in spite of the passionate claim made by a friend who told my feminist theory class that she had been "silenced" by the dissertation process. A number of women in my study talked instead of shifting their work's focus, of finding "my own voice" seven, eight, twelve years after the dissertation was completed. And so I think what often happens is that voices from the margins are not silenced but *stifled* by putting on a mask and performing a conversion narrative prescribed by the community. If this mask is not a good fit, that is, if one does not inhabit a location of cultural dominance, its removal involves an arduous struggle to relearn one's own writerly voice.

Resistance and Intervention

How, though, to intervene? In an essay titled "Voicing the Self: Toward a Pedagogy of Resistance in a Postmodern Age," Randy Freisinger, whose class in literary nonfiction opened new writing spaces for me during my first year as a doctoral student, offers this vision:

> The fourth and final problematic term in my title—*resistance*—provides potential hope with regard to the subject, or self, and its capacity for liberatory struggle. If we can sensitize our students, make them aware of the ideology of the entrenched and empowered class and the way in which institutions often operate to maintain the status quo, we put these students in a position to fight back. (1994, 262)

Can we imagine the dissertation as a place in which we—ourselves and not just our first-year comp students—can fight back? If we wait until after the dissertation, until we are legitimate, speaking academics, we will have taken on habits of mind that are inadequate to the task. But prior to receiving the degree we are not yet recognized as fully competent members of the community; fighting back can be dismissed as adolescent rebellion. This leaves the dissertation—a period somewhat comparable to the calendar space between the ending of the old year and the beginning of the new when the carnivalesque reigns, a period of no status, a period when the initiate is liminal, interstitial, alive with *potential* to effect change.

We are left, however, with the question: If the dissertation is a space for resistance—a space in which the exclusionary, hierarchical nature of the academic community can be changed—how is it to be accomplished? We must stop thinking of dissertations as unproblematically neutral. In a composition theory class I took several years ago, Marilyn Cooper stunned me by asserting that when we teach writing we teach a world view. To extend her assertion, when advisors "teach" dissertations, they/we (shifting pronouns becomes difficult) are teaching a world view. Dissertators are no less students learning to write than are the first-year composition students who are the implied subjects of so many of our discussions about the politics of writing and teaching. We must provide a revolutionary answer to the question that first brought many of this collection's contributors together at conferences such as CCCC: What does composition's call for diversity in academic discourse have to do with us, with our dissertations?

We can, I suggest, encourage both a diversity of academic discourse and a variety of models for the ritual itself—in a word, anomaly.[4] My dissertation (1998) included resistance to the form that seem faithful to my own speaking self: essay, poetry, painting, computer graphics, visual play, performance, collaboration, conscious resistance to arbitrary format requirements. But *my* list, since I speak from a location very close to the hegemonic center, differentiated by gender, but otherwise much like the Euro-American, middle-class holders of power, will not necessarily be sufficient for others entering academe. Others have found their own alternatives. "I seem," one woman wrote, "to be writing a dissertation without footnotes." Another participant told me she had had a hard time thinking about writing her own dissertation because she could write academic papers only by imagining she was writing a letter to a friend. I also recall coming across a dissertation with a circular table of contents. In order to leave the space open to other innovation, we must encourage and tolerate the imagining of anomalies. What if a dissertation is letter, collage, autobiography, or patchwork quilt; if performance and installation from the fine arts permeate linguistic text; if the narrative of research logs infiltrates the language of scientific discourse; if whimsical illustrations intrude between even rows of text; or scientific articles appear as appendices to a science-fiction

novel; if one could argue a thesis by "talking story" as one of my participants suggested, or . . .

A diversity of academic discourses is one possibility; another is to re-shape the ritual. As it is currently mapped, the rhetorical space of the dissertation is congruent with the space of male initiation rituals. Yet my own experience was so unlike van Gennep's initiations that my dissertation more than flaunted discourse conventions: My committee met together over breakfast or lunch to discuss drafts; among the official members of my committee was a graduate student peer reader; my advisor suggested that I not call the public moment a defense—and so it was a "presentation." In his analysis of van Gennep's model, which emphasizes separation, transition, and incorporation, Bruce Lincoln (1991) suggests an alternative, more typically women's, idea of ritual with a pattern of enclosure, metamorphosis, and emergence. Here, the initiate does not leave the community but is taken deep into it (as many of the women in my study were drawn into personal issues by their dissertations). Neither does the initiate go through a transitional liminality but something more akin to metamorphosis. Again, the women in my study spoke of the dissertation as "transforming." Emergence following metamorphosis is not most noticeably to a higher status but into acceptance of a new level of responsibility (100–101). In what was perhaps the most positive story shared among participants in my study, Barbara explained her experience in a way that reverberates with Lincoln's alternative:

> I had a very supportive committee who looked at my draft and said to me, "Where are you in this? There's no way you should write this dissertation without us being able to see who you are and what happened to you in this, and to be able to leave a trail for other people doing research on this topic to follow." . . . In retrospect, that affirmation for myself, that both the researcher/observer/analytical voice and this very personal, sometimes very emotional, voice and experience could both be there and were legitimate, that was a new integration of myself. . . . I really had to learn how to honor a voice that I wanted to keep out completely because I didn't think it was academic enough. . . .

The necessary project, for which each of us bears responsibility, is to remap the space in which academic identities are constructed, encouraging a multitude of voices. Several issues, though, must be addressed:

- Evaluating dissertations that do not fit the standard form is more time consuming and difficult; committees must be prepared for more work and for some measure of uncertainty.
- Students and faculty need to engage in discussions about what constitutes acceptable risk—and what constitutes a dissertation.

- To provide generative models, departments should compile a bibliography of works that demonstrate—both visually and stylistically—a range of locally acceptable variations.
- Formatting rules are generally enforced by graduate school offices; these rules must be successfully challenged, which will require enlisting the support of our chairs and deans.

I will end with a challenge given me by my advisor while she and I were still talking through my dissertation's beginnings. She asked me to think about

> . . . what it would mean to *not* succeed at what you're attempting to do. . . . It seems to me it is much more than just failing to alter the dissertation repetition. But what?

End Notes

1. Vincent Tinto (1993) used this model to explain persistence and attrition among undergraduates and suggests it also may be useful for graduate students. For a discussion of the model's maleness, see Bruce Lincoln (1991), 99–102.

2. Though I did not limit my request for dissertation stories to women, those who stayed with the study were women.

3. The names of all participants in my dissertation study have been changed.

4. See Lincoln's (1989) discussion of the anomaly and its threat to normative taxonomic structures, especially pages 165–166.