

## The Plight of the Dissertator

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**M**ost doctoral students who make it to the ABD stage of their graduate career discover, sooner or later, that they have entered a world of psychic pain. (I've heard rumors that certain Ph.D. candidates actually *enjoy* the process of dissertating, but I don't know who these people are and am not convinced they really exist.) Pain is by definition unpleasant—I put aside here the problem of masochists—but it's all the worse when it's self-inflicted. Such is the pain of the dissertator: years ago, in a haze of naiveté, the dissertator happily agreed to take on this assignment. No matter how you cut it, dissertators are responsible for their own painful situation. Learning how to manage and endure the suffering is a major part of what the dissertation process is all about.

In my roughly five years as a dissertator, I spent most hours of most days feeling basically despondent and desperate and depressed, and the only semblance of relief came when I temporarily managed to forget about the work, but of course avoidance is a doomed coping strategy, and the unfortunate reality was that any moment of pain-free living I managed to steal back from the clutches of dissertatorial distress only served to prolong my suffering and compound my feelings of inadequacy and regret. Throughout this period, I often found myself reaching for metaphors in an effort to describe the precise texture of the experience to others. When friends asked me how I was doing, I'd typically say something like: "Still have weights on my feet" or, in bitterer moments, some version of: "Still in jail." Stock tropes such as these do an okay job of summing up the dissertator's basic psychic predicament, but the better metaphors—the ones with more emotional depth and that slice through the experiential marrow with finer autoethnographic precision—aren't usually appropriate for casual conversation. The good metaphors tend to be...off-puttingly dark.

The horrors of dissertating are absolutely *sui generis*. Don DeLillo and David Foster Wallace have both compared the experience of writing a novel to being stalked by a wailing, deformed infant 24 hours a day, and however ableist and insensitive this metaphor may be, it successfully drives home the point that novelists (like parents) have genuine love for their creations: instinctual affection will always accompany their feelings of shame and disgust. But the balance of affection and revulsion skews differently for

dissertators. This has partly to do with the fact that dissertators are not so subtly encouraged to cultivate disdain for their own work. The awful cliché that “the best dissertation is a done dissertation” is the most obvious example of this brand of encouragement, but other examples abound: people will tell you to just “hold your nose and power through”; I even have a close friend whose advisor once told him to “turn in a piece of shit”—awesome advice, according to this friend, who now has a Ph.D.

But the bigger issue is that, despite the time, labor, and care one invests in bringing a dissertation into the world, the product—regardless of any institution’s particular IP policy—never *belongs* to its creator. One could argue that dissertations belong to the committees, departments, universities, and/or whatever field a given dissertator is attempting to enrich; however, the view that becomes more common with each passing year is that dissertations *belong to no one*. Those that aren’t stillborn are orphaned. No matter how smart, polished, or rigorous, all dissertations are invariably destined for long futures of inutility and neglect. Dissertations belong to the lowest rung of formal writing.

It’s true that more enterprising/tenacious doctorate-holders find ways of repurposing their dissertations in time. Since a dissertation is not and never will be a *book*, the academic and publishing worlds agree that it is to a certain extent acceptable to harvest vital organs, siphon off nutrient-rich juices, saw off limbs, joints, appendages, and what have you, so long as you wield this raw organic matter toward the production of a higher life form. While this sort of recycling may offer a dissertation a possible glimpse at redemption, it also contributes to its ultimate disgrace. How cruel a fate to pass through this earth utterly and completely scorned and then finally cannibalized for parts! Not even afforded a proper burial, in the end.

In the bleakest hours of my journey as a dissertator, in moments when run-of-the-mill dissertorial malaise tipped over into over-the-top self-pity, I would occasionally find myself likening the dissertator’s condition to that of a hypothetical torture victim. One metaphoric hyperbole I returned to time and again begins with the image of a pillory in the desert. Picture the dissertator locked into the classic pilloried pose, woodenly secured at the wrists and at the neck, but as opposed to your traditional pillory where the hands are forced to dangle ineffectually through the holes in the cross-plank, this modern desert pillory has been modified with a horizontal shelf that juts out just below the hand holes. You may have guessed that on this shelf there is a keyboard and a monitor. The keyboard is just within reach of the dissertator’s fingertips, though in order to reach the top QWERTY row the dissertator must extend his or her distal phalanges to a tendon-tax-

ing degree. The computer—which is equipped with a reliable Wi-Fi connection, an internet browser, and an old version of Microsoft Word—runs on solar power and is always on. The computer also has FaceTime, which is always open, and the computer’s webcam is positioned so that it always captures an ultra-close-up of the dissertator’s face. The tiny webcam light glows green; every hour of every day, the dissertator has no choice but to study his or her own gruesome complexion while enduring the constant fear of the panoptically oppressed. Dissertators may *feel* alone in the desert, but they know that they are being surveilled. Oh, happy image!

Near the end of my journey as a dissertator, during a low moment, I actually found myself awake in the dead of night googling the question, “What is knowledge?” This is sad, unhealthy behavior, I realize, but on this particular night I couldn’t sleep and was feeling especially down as I was struggling to write my way into a new chapter and also coming to terms with a friendly but also sort of rattling email that I’d just received from my advisor, who had casually suggested that it might at some point be a good idea for me to prepare some thoughts about the nature of knowledge (What is it? How should one go about presenting it?) in case someone (my advisor?) asked me to justify the knowledge value of my research during my final defense. It shouldn’t have, but this advice caught me off guard, because even after years of doctoral training—reading the books, writing the papers, engaging in the discussions, taking the exams, attending the meetings, the conferences, being in all those rooms—I’d never had my feet held to the fire on The Knowledge Question.

This was a problem.

Is there a point to all the suffering? Does the dissertator grow stronger from the experience? Is the journey worth it, when all is said and done? For me, the answer turned out to be mostly yes. At a certain point, very late in the process, I began to feel like my work was of a certain quality, that it wasn’t utterly valueless, and that my dissertorial labor was contributing, in some small way, to a broad quest for knowledge that was essentially worthwhile. Over the course of the experience, I acquired new skills, cultivated new habits, and developed a new level of confidence that has benefited me personally and professionally ever since.

Ultimately, however, anyone who embarks on this quest will be left to evaluate the value of the experience on his or her own terms. Only one thing is certain: one way or another—whether in triumph, defeat, or anticlimax—the dissertorial experience does come to an end. And when it does, believe it or not, the pain does subside. All the late nights and early mornings, the years of unrelenting anxiety—all this recedes from memory faster

than the dissertator would have ever imagined. And suddenly, for the first time in so many months, the future looks wide open.