Flock Around and Find Out:

Dissertating, Murmurating, and Liberating

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ABSTRACT

Inspired by bell hooks (1994), this dialogic inquiry documents seven scholars' thinking and reflections on dissertations in practice. Our scholarship contributed to the knowledge base in our respective fields by and while embarking on dissertations authentic to us. We rooted in the literature, interrogated issues, collected data, and shared our findings; we just happened to do it through a podcast, song breaks, collaboration, sisterhood, multi-color writing, and non-linear and unique presentations. We didn't defend 'alternative' dissertations; rather, we argue that ours exemplify what dissertations are meant to be. Identifying dissertations as either traditional or alternative ascribes a set of (ab)normative values to both knowledge and the production of knowledge that should be antithetical to dissertations.

KEYWORDS

dissertations, knowledge construction, critical theory

We are 7 doctors writing about our dissertation experiences in a doctoral program at a mid-size midwestern university. Our writing collective is multiracial, multi-gender, queer-expansive, and multi-dis(abled), and these identities inform(ed) our dissertation journeys, our flocking and murmurating, and our writing below. We have authored our paper in a hooksian (hooks, 1994) style, which we acknowledge may be disconcerting for some, but which is as much a part of our argument as it is our process of murmurating and flocking. Like all murmurations, our conversation reflects the sounds and echoes of our collective ideation, movement, and knowledge advancement.

This article and the data that follows come from a series of conversations we held in the first 6 months of 2024 in response to this special issue's call for proposals. While we quote our transcripts directly at times, readers should also know that we wrote the entire paper collaboratively and surfaced many ideas that, while not

quoted, also arose from those conversations. We begin this work by explicitly tying our flocking to the construct of action research.

Josie[1]: How do we take what has happened, or ourselves into the community to create that change? And I think that's where the action research part of this is… I don't wanna say *missing*, cause you know, we may not be able to hit every single thing, but it is really clarifying. What are we saying? Is it us? Is it the individual? Is it the collective? Then now going back into their realms of influence and causing that change. So, I think what you just said, Brandelyn, really brought some of those things to mind and some of it is in the conversations we've had, which is good.

Brandelyn: Josie, I think what I heard you saying is that action research is being thought of two ways. One is like within the dissertation. There's action research as this epistemological stance. But you're also talking about action research as the process of actioning research itself. Right? It's no longer an individual epistemological stance for research. It's about

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[1] When writing this paper, we wrote in distinct colors modeled after Rae's dissertation (Wright et al., 2020) in which font colors served to highlight the dissertation's individual and collective voices. We have

each shaped the ideas in the paper, and so we are now publishing in a single font color (black) to represent our shared voice (Wright et al., 2022).

forwarding this idea of what can be and changing it and feeding back to research itself.

Josie: Yes!

Brandelyn: There's this move toward action research, a privileging of action, research, and a privileging of process that involves an actual context and actual change. And what we're saying is, if you're gonna privilege the process and changing the process, you also ought to privilege changing the product and letting the product follow naturally from this process.

We resonate with the words of Grace Lee Boggs, who offered that to "transform yourself [is] to transform the world" (as cited in brown, 2017, p. 53). As individuals and as a collective, we each attribute tremendous value to the concept of *action*. We ground our work within action research epistemologies (Buss, 2018; Osterman et al., 2014; Zambo, 2011; Zambo & Isai, 2012) and privilege those ways of knowing intended to result in change, particularly change toward equitable, ethical, and just worlds. Our privileging of action is thus not simply methodological but is also epistemological and ultimately axiological.

Shulman (2005) introduced the concept of signature pedagogies, defining them as "types of teaching that organize the fundamental ways in which future practitioners are educated for their new professions… to *think*, to *perform*, and to *act with integrity*" (p. 52, emphasis in the original). Perry (2012) explicitly connects Shulman's definition to the purpose of a Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) *dissertation*[2], naming it as "the culminating experience that demonstrates the scholarly practitioner's ability to solve problems of practice and exhibits the doctoral candidate's ability 'to think, to perform, and to act with integrity'" (p. 44). Further conversation on Doctor of Education (EdD) dissertations have included rejoinders to expand the norms of format (Archbald, 2010; Ferrell et al., 2019; MacGregor & Fellabaum, 2016; Maxwell & Kupczyk-Romanczuk, 2009; Meyer & Shannon, 2010), of support and mentorship (Alpert et al., 2023; Olson & Clark, 2009; Zambo & Isai, 2012), and of authorship (Smith, 2022). Recent proposed signature pedagogies for the EdD include pedagogies of/for activism (Jones Becton & Jeffries, 2020; Weiler & Lomotey, 2022) and explicit connections are being made between action research methodologies and justice (Alpert et al., 2023; Osterman et al., 2014). In this tradition of offering (re)visions[3] to the dissertation, we offer our signature pedagogy: flocking. We locate our flocking squarely in adrienne maree brown's tradition in which she describes flocking as "an art" in which members of the flock "[stay] separate enough not to crowd each other, aligned enough to maintain a shared direction, and cohesive enough to always move towards each other" (2017, p.

13)[4]. Unlike many of the other (re)visions to the dissertation, we flock around shared norms rather than a specific form or product; in doing so, we intend to create "futures in which everyone doesn't have to be the same kind of person" (brown, 2017, p. 57).

An important part of our journeys was realizing that knowledge is constructed, contested, and arguable (American Library Association, 2015). Each of us had been socialized, to different extents, into accepting that knowledge simply *was*, that experts simply *were*. While we each brought a healthy dose of skepticism to educational norms and practices, we were generally accepting of the norms of doctoral study itself. As we moved into and through our doctoral study, we each engaged in a process of discovery, aided by those whose work we took up because their values aligned with our own. While this work absolutely includes those we consider to be in our academic lineage[5], we came to realize the importance of one another in our individual and collective growth. Figure 1 depicts the significant relationships between the authors as individuals and as a collective, as well as shares some information about each author's dissertation and how they unfolded relative to the others'.

Figure 1. Relationship and Chronology Map of Authors and Dissertations

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[2] In this article, we utilize the phrase *dissertation* to refer to an approach of dissertation/dissertation-in- practice writing that rejects the forms and practices of either so-called 'traditional' or 'alternative' dissertations.
[3] We use (re)vision in the tradition of Cynthia Dillard (2012) to indicate that the work is simultaneously located in the present (visioning) and the past (revisioning).
[4] If a reader of our paper is not yet familiar with this book, please immediately remedy the situation. We wish we could re-experience our first time reading emergent strategy and look forward to you experiencing those same rushes of joy, confusion, and possibility.
[5] We define our academic lineage as follows. Many of these influences flow between multiple authors but are only named once as our works and thoughts do not exist in vacuums. (Brandelyn): Bettina

L. Love, Cynthia Dillard, bell hooks, Charlene Carruthers, (Rae): Sara Ahmed, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Brittney Cooper, adrienne maree brown, (Tynisha): James Baldwin, Derrick Bell, Ta Nehisi Coates, Kimberle Crenshaw, Patrice Khan Cullors, Ibram X. Kendi, Treva Lindsey, Kyra Shahid, Patricia Williams, Venus Evans-Winters, (Courtney): Resmaa Menakem, Beyonce Knowles-Carter, Alice Walker, Elaine Welteroth, Erykah Badu, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, Cole Arthur Riley, Antar Tichavakunda, Brent Staples, Zora Neale Hurston, (Kayla): John Dewey, Tema Okun, (Ike): Judith Butler, Scott Herring, Donna McCormack, C. Riley Snorton, Meg-John Barker, Ramzi Fawaz, (Josie): Damon A. Williams, Katrina C. Wade-Golden, and Tara J. Yasso.

Our program is structured into cohorts, a single cohort admitted per year and is designed to be completed in three years. Thus, at any given time we have a novice cohort, a more advanced cohort, and a cohort engaged in completing dissertations. We have learned that our flocking is supported by this cyclical pattern as murmuration happens within and across cohorts.

> …a murmuration, the way groups of starlings billow, dive, spin, dance collectively through the air… each creature is tuned in to… the creatures right around it in the formation… each creature is shifting direction, speed, and proximity based on the information of the other creatures' bodies. (brown, 2017, p. 71)

Word of the murmurations spread through the program. For example, as program faculty and program director, Brandelyn highlighted the work being undertaken by each of this article's authors and assigned their dissertations as readings. Further, each dissertation defense in the program is publicized so that current students can attend. Thus, subsequent students learned of each of these innovative approaches to a dissertation, but there was no requirement of murmurating or flocking as preconditions for undertaking or completing doctoral or dissertation work. Relationships between and among this article's authors include some predating the program, with others emerging during the program. Some relationships continued after the program, and others met during the initial call about this manuscript. We are reminded of brown's (2017) words on spontaneity:

> Birds don't make a plan to migrate, raising resources to fund their way, packing for scarce times, mapping out their pit stops. They feel a call in their bodies that they must go, and they follow it, respond to each other, each bringing their adaptations. (p. 13)

We were called to murmuration, followed it, each finding the spirit of the flock and incorporating our individual interpretations of that spirit as the north stars guiding our dissertations. Our processes are/were to murmurate and our product is/was the flock. We are/were each shaped by murmuration and we each shape/d the flock.

None of us knew that we could have the kind of dissertation processes we had; that we could do the kind of dissertation we did; and that we could center our scholarship around ourselves, our needs, our circumstances, and our values. There's not a blueprint for alternative dissertations - it would likely be antithetical to alternative dissertations if there was one. "The more people travel on a path, the flatter and smoother the surface becomes. When something is smoother, it is clearer; the more a path is followed, the easier it is to follow" (Ahmed, 2019, p.41). When there isn't a clear path, or more importantly, when the only clear path clear to us was a tradition(al) dissertation process, we had to forge new pathways, to make new meaning of the dissertation.

> Tynisha: There is a way that we are socialized, that dissertations are supposed to be. And then there is this idea about, like EdDs and what CPED is trying to do, and the degree to which we made the choices that we made because those confines didn't work for the situations that we were in, or you know, our lenses, or circumstances, or whatever. And so, I think what I'm adding is like a critique of and a question about *why not*? There's this way that we are told [dissertations] must be. And how are we breaking down the barriers or opening up access or expanding what's possible, if that's what the expectation is? These are ways that people still achieve scholarship. This is what is rare. It's not the norm.

> Ike: You know and part of that could be a conversation: here's what is the norm. And as a program, and as a group, as a collective that we are being - how unusual is it, and why is it that all of us had such successful journeys in such alternative ways within one single program? And all the journeys being so vastly different. Because you know, the traditional dissertation program or traditional doctorate program… there is a set way that you do it. And they are very good at doing it this way. So why is it that… Why is it that this program allows for *and* people also thrive in a way that is so varied?

While we may in fact be killjoys (Ahmed, 2021), we are also not interested in restricting our imaginations to critique. We are interested in doing things "differently, aligned with a different set of core principles for existence" (brown, 2017, p. 114). What follows is our reflections of how our 'alternative' dissertations came to life and our interrogations of what is (re)inforced when scholarship is referred to as 'alternative'. We did not seek out to author 'alternative' dissertations; rather our scholarship was born out of needs that were not met by 'traditional' dissertation pathways.

THE CURIOSITY

What is a dissertation?

The common understanding of a dissertation is a comprehensive and lengthy piece of academic writing that capstones the completion of a doctoral degree. It typically involves original research on a specific question that generates new knowledge in the field of study. These academic artifacts are often the culmination of years of study and represent the comprehensive understanding of what it is to research and offer a significant contribution to the academic community's understanding of the topic. These, though, are insufficient descriptors of a dissertation - prioritizing parts of form over function. As a group of scholars that have engaged in so-called 'alternative' dissertations, we first interrogated components of a doctoral dissertation - unraveling the product of a dissertation alongside the practice of dissertating:

> Brandelyn: How do you know if it's doctoral-level quality, if it doesn't look like what you think doctoral-level stuff has always looked like. What is the rubric?

> Ike: We live in a world of rubrics. We want the comfort of a checklist. So, what does it look like? What does doctoral work look like without the comfort of a checklist?

> Tynisha: I don't agree with that. I don't. The credential is a thing, but what is it that you are able to do? There is a skill set. There is action and practice that we should be able to see and know, because you have participated in a process regardless of what the product looks like. Can you understand the environment and the landscape within which you're operating? Can you understand the conversations that have happened over time? Can you find and observe and notice what has been said, what has not been said? How, what has shifted and changed? I think it's about what you are able to do as a result of the experience, more than it is about the production of a paper or a research project in a certain style. And so, more than what I've heard you all just exchange, whether I make a podcast or Courtney sings a song, there is a skill set that we have acquired and a way that we are going to be operating in our institutions and in our communities that belies the credential, not the, the production of the thing.

> Ike: So that is a really interesting way of stating things because it makes me feel like what we're doing is very anti-capitalist in that traditional dissertation programs skills and the

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knowledge and the abilities that you are gaining through this process. And let the product be the product. And so it feels very like we're rejecting this, this system that's set up to be like 'You must accomplish this one thing in order to be successful'.

By design, a dissertation functions as a journey, though much of the focus is on the culminating product to which the academy assigns value. In our work, we found that the actual process itself is just as valuable. The process of ideating, ruminating, creating, and constructing is a full experience that does not exist in an end state but actually in a living state. Thinking of dissertations as living bodies of work highlights their impact and effect from conception to dissemination. Many of us found that the start of our work began with intentional attention given to what bothered us, what moved us, what mattered to us. We chose different dissertation design paths not (necessarily) to buck the systems and structures that maintained fixed containers but instead as an agentic move toward the creation and elevation of liberatory and identity-formed scholarship. That is, at its core, what we believe a dissertation should do.

What is alternative?

Our collective insight around the subject of defining dissertations led us to interrogate the word alternative as a misaligned term. Through our conversation, we began to invest our energy into the process of listening and learning about how we each arrived at the point of inspired creation. The dialogue we shared about each of our works created a sense of connectedness because in those moments of naming our personal *whys*, we came into an even deeper understanding and revelation about our collective *how*. *How* we produced our scholarship was unifyingly unique and steeped in a commitment to our values and vision for what knowledge and scholarship could look like outside of fixed, gate-kept containers.

During these moments, we found several points of connection that brought us to diverse yet similar paths along our journeys. Our work was different but our commitment to a personalized form was similar. What surfaced was a throughline of variety and creativity that resulted in each of us constructing a body of work that was new to the academic spaces we previously or had presently occupied. In our conversation below, we name 'alternative' as an insufficient descriptor of what we all produced.

> Courtney: Let's interrogate the word 'alternative and what is defined and named as different and perhaps start from that point. Like even that feels like a way to punch the system. It's like, why is this even being named as different, like expanding thought. Bring your whole full self into this dissertating process. There's something that I think can be named about normalizing that.

> Ike: I think that's a solid point, because in a lot of ways, when we talk about the word 'alternative', we associate it with unusual or nonstandard. Or you know there's a negative connotation with the idea of being alternative. It's seen as less than in a lot of ways. An alternative path in high school, an alternative school.

> Kayla[6]: It makes me wonder, paired with really interrogating our own understanding, what the purpose of a dissertation is, too. So, if the purpose is to develop new knowledge for a field then there can't be a normative way to share and develop knowledge.

We resist the othering the term 'alternative' implies. Such framing invites a hierarchy that privileges a supposed, centered norm rather than centering all ways of knowing as valuable and meaningful. We challenge the notion of a singular, normative path. There are many 'right' ways for the process and product of a dissertation to emerge. Our commitment lies in developing scholarship in forms that serve the purpose of the audience and content of our research. We learned that we were located with "one foot in creative destruction and the other… in the possibility of making new things" (Mariame Kaba in Hemphill, 2021, 4:49).

There is something beautiful that happens when we allow the musings of meaning to pour out from our souls and join with the wisdom that exists in prior research. The result of this type of (e)merging creates a space of meaning-making that is rooted and grounded in valuable theoretical pinings and depth-laden personal insights. This kind of work does not seek validation in its function and form; however, its personal and creative design does not dilute its valued and meaningful contribution to the scholarship space.

I DIDN'T KNOW YOU COULD DO THAT!

Our dissertations started with an important question: Can we even do this? This started with a conversation with Brandelyn, who served as dissertation chair for each of our dissertation committees. "*How* you do something is just as important as *what* you're producing" (Courtney). For us, the *how* started with interrogating the production, interrogating the process. But there was also a negotiation between what we challenge, what we (re)produce, and how we negotiate between "flinging open the doors" (Ike), meeting our own understandings of academic standards, and getting our credentials (we came for the degrees, dammit!).

> Brandelyn: How do we reconcile our movement away from traditional norms of research and information, sharing as a marker of doctoral-level preparation and defining doctoral work without the trappings of what it's *supposed* to look like?

> Courtney: Yes.

> Josie: Yeah. I mean, those two go together because you look at the beautiful questions, right? Like when you allow the product to reflect the process, you fling the doors open to all these amazing, beautiful products that are currently held outside or othered away from what is knowledge. And at the same time, the reality of the academic field, in which there are lots of institutions and lots of individuals who don't recognize that beautiful knowledge as good enough. And so how do you both/and it (Collins, 1989)? I mean, I prefer the method of just going 'deal with it'. But that's not really everyone's thing.

> Tynisha: If you think about how people used to become lawyers, how people used to become blacksmiths. It was

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apprenticing. In the traditional PhD process, you are apprenticing. You are working on your chairs' projects with them. They are passing on their knowledge to you. You are learning how to do the things. And I don't necessarily think that that was problematic. That's one of the key distinctions between this EdD program and how traditional Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) programs work. Because our critiques are not what they produce in terms of their dissertation. It is what they are able to do. It's like they're making progeny, "Go replicate me and my way!"

I personally do not think all of it is bad. What I think becomes the problem is that my work does not have value because it doesn't look a certain way. And your work does have value because it meets this formulaic way. But we both have the same ability to do, to scan the environment, to make assessments, to organize a method, to gather information and make meaning of that information, and then to let that information guide how we show up in our spaces. And that's what I think is what's important and what we're critiquing. Because usually what happens on the back end of the PhD - in terms of the document - is that it doesn't go anywhere. It's behind the paywall. But that skill set - that application of the things that were transferred from that tutelage - that's how people teach or that's how people organize their experiments or whatever.

Courtney: I was looking for the question that you asked me, Brandelyn. When writing my dissertation, that kind of opened up the door for like, "Oh!" Because I was getting an EdD, and I thought about a PhD at a point. I think there was a part of me that was subscribing to some… 'whatever' that thought it had to be a certain way to prove even *more so* that my scholarship was valid, or that this [knowledge] matters too. Because for whatever reason that was just in my mind. And then I stepped away from that. But what that [conversation] elevated for me is… there's something in what questions we are asked as those who are creating or adding to the scholarship. We do it to be able to 'speak truth to power'. To provide a different experience outside of what has been maintained as these orderly structures, and what has been in some ways protected or named as more valid.

Brandelyn: Your *why* dovetails with what Tynisha was saying: it's what people are able to do and how we show up in spaces, not to prove that you can do research on your own. I think the *why* of a traditional dissertation is to show that you have mastered the content and can now conduct your own and analyze your own independent, scholarly contributions to the literature. And our *why* doesn't have very much of that in it. Certainly not the independent part. But there's nothing about what we're saying that privileges the independent over the collaborative. And it's not about demonstrating what you know and can do in an isolated study separate from the world. It's about what you know and can do in context and in collaboration with those who are also in that same context. And that's a very different *why*.

The ideas of what doctoral-level work is, who defined it, who reproduced its meaning, and who determines if *our* work was doctoral work was a theme throughout our dissertating processes. A challenge of challenging the traditional norms of dissertations is that we also challenge the rubrics of completion, of evaluation. What are the metrics of a successful dissertation? How are they evaluated, and to what, and maybe more importantly, who's standard? This negotiation remains forefront as we continue to expand our own

understanding and further flocking around our own scholarship and influence others' dissertations.

Tynisha: I have a couple of feelings and reactions. To be clear, I believe that our current structures are fucked up. That's the best, simplest way to say it. I also feel like the rules change. And there are people who, when the rules change, they can navigate that. And then for other people, it's not true that I get to do that. It's not true for everybody.

And so, Brandelyn and I have had this conversation about grades. For me, grades were a way for me to know that I was doing a good job and for me to demonstrate that I had learned the things that they asked me to know to be able to move to the next place. And now everybody's like, "grades are trash". Forget that. So, this thing that I did. I did the things. I jumped through all your hoops. And now you telling me that all of my work doesn't mean anything because we changing the rules.

I don't think all rubrics or expectations or ways that currently exist are bad. I do not get to only operate within the space that we co-created and the things that we agreed upon. I feel like it is my responsibility, particularly when I'm talking to my students, like, absolutely, throw all of this shit away. But until we throw it all away, they have to go into this world, and they are bound by these things. And Black children don't get the same opportunities to be willy-nilly and have it be okay. We have zero-tolerance policies. We have, "You don't meet the mark."

Unless we are saying we don't want to play in academia at all. Academia has a way. And the ways that we challenge it are to name and say in my practice, particularly when I'm in this space and outside of it, the leader that I am at my job is the same leader that I am when I am in my classroom, which is why I have trouble, right? Like I'm gonna tell you the truth, whatever space that I'm in. But there is a cost for me in that. And there is a cost for our young people who haven't even made it to this place to be a doctor, and it's gonna be a cost for people who are in the program trying to do the things like, just because we don't agree that these rules

… they're bullshit! But they exist. And until we burn down and rebuild every place that our people are gonna be, we can have this conversation, but we have to be mindful that this is not what happens in real life for everybody.

Brandelyn: Mmmm.

Tynisha: And so that's why I am saying like, what is it that you are supposed to be able to do? There is a level of intellectual curiosity and rigor that is inherent in being a doctor. What does it mean to show up in a space and operate in these ways so that these things, these results are replicated? People feel seen, heard, and valued. People know how to have conversations across lines of difference. People know how to be resilient in the face of adversity. People produce whatever it is that they choose to produce, despite dual pandemics and family loss and loss of jobs and all the things. How do you contribute in this world? How do you keep showing up in the face of brutal facts[7]? That is what I think doctoral work is. You have a question, and you answer it. And you meet the minimum of the criteria that help you sleep at night.

Brandelyn: Yes.

Tynisha: We know that the American Psychological Association has done a lot of harm, so I don't think that they should be arbiters, but I also don't disagree that [using]

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[7] To paraphrase scholar and activist Brian Stevenson.

complete sentences and periods is a problem. So, I think another part of the conversation is this tension that exists.

Brandelyn: What you're saying makes me wonder - Do we say, "Yes, we're going to stick with these like APA writing, like writing in complete sentences." And which ones are we going to let go of? How do we prepare people to simultaneously be free and also be able to operate outside of the space that we've co-constructed? I think I'm saying, how do we do both of them? And I think what I heard you say was we talk too much about doing one or the other instead of how do we facilitate being able to function across spaces?

Courtney: As you were talking Brandelyn and Tynisha - What was coming to mind is like this is a process of like unveiling as a valid experience, navigating maintenance of systems and expansion of systems. And this process is like lifting the veil off of what it *should* look like and leaving space for what has already been said. But the words maintenance and expansion came to mind cause… So, where things need to be maintained, the periods and the grammar, but there is room for expansion. How do we also encourage expansion? And I think that's where the professors, at least to me, were instrumental in doing both/and. Like, okay, you gotta make sure this is cited correctly per APA 7. *And* why are you not using more yourself in this particular chapter, like more of you can come alive in your chapter 3. And I'm like, *really*, I thought, *okay*. And so, having somebody push both/and for me helped me to maintain the things but also expand where there was freedom for me to be alive and full and whole in that space.

Brandelyn: It seems to me like maintenance and expansion is the central both/and here. How do we maintain our identities and expand our credential as doctors? How do we be true to who we are through the process, and even in how we conduct and distribute knowledge? How do we maintain those things that will give face validity outside of the program while expanding what the process and product can look like at the same time?

Courtney: Yeah, that feels right to me, cause it's like a dance. How do I maintain the beat and the rhythm?

Brandelyn: This reminds me of a webinar I recently attended. The presenter described her capacity as expanding and contracting. Similarly, I don't just want to expand. I also *do* want to get rid of some other things. Like, I want to get rid of the idea that a solo-authored dissertation is better than a collaborative-authored dissertation. I actually want to contract around that. The expansion is around authorship. The contraction is around expectation of what looks like rigor. And so, there's that which is maintained. There's that which is expanded into and then there is that which is contracted from, because actually, we're not here for that. That's not our thing.

Courtney: I like that.

Brandelyn: Yeah?

Courtney: Yeah.

Ike: It feels very much like you're describing a living thing. *We* are, the program itself, it's a living thing. It grows and it shrinks and it moves. Like we are rooted in this thing, and we grow out of it. But we, we grow around obstacles, or we shift away from things or toward things that give us energy. It feels very much like a living model.

Courtney: Yesss. I love that, Ike. I was just thinking that our work is living work. Like, for a lot of us, our work is continuing to breathe and move, and…

Ike: And, at least for me, it's work that I live for, right? Like it's not, it's, it provides me with you know, with the energy to do these things. It's in that concept of a living work.

Brandelyn: It may also be the work that gives us the ability to live in a capitalist society, like me. It's our living work. It's work that we live for, and it may also be the work that is our living.

Courtney: Yeah. All three!

In the excerpt above, we engage in a discussion around the ideas of maintenance, contraction, and expansion. In EdD programs, with regard to the dissertation, what do we maintain? What do we contract around? What do we expand upon? How might our view of rigor and acceptable organization (e.g. a 5-chapter dissertation) evolve if we did not insist upon there being one right way? What if we grow and shift and change, are malleable, as our capacity and the complexity of our problems of practice allow and/or demand?

BEING IMPACTED BY ONE ANOTHER'S WORK/INFLUENCING AS A COMMUNITY

Having first pursued a PhD in a different discipline, I (Tynisha) entered the EdD program with an idea of what a dissertation looked like. Upon meeting Rae and learning that she was writing a collaborative dissertation with four other women, Tynisha's view of what was possible expanded tremendously.

Tynisha: I literally did not know one could do that!

As we embarked on our respective dissertation journeys, we were all impacted by each other's work. Someone going before us, pursuing an unconventional path, gave others permission to imagine another way. Working alongside others with visions for their dissertations that did not adhere to the 'traditional' 5-chapter format was affirming and spurred our creativity. And for those who followed us, they had examples of people who'd successfully pursued uncharted paths, including those who ultimately became dissertation members on subsequent committees, as Josie (Evans-Phillips, 2021) became for Kayla (Ritter Rickels & Fallon, 2023) and as Tynisha (Worthy, 2021) became for Courtney (Walton, 2023). What had once been mere possibility, was actuality, thus, what they envisioned as possible, felt most probable.

Rae: Josie, I'm thinking about the ways that I have been influenced by all y'all's dissertations (Evans-Phillips, 2021; Hilpp, 2021; Ritter Rickels & Fallon, 2023; Walton, 2023; Worthy, 2021) still as a scholar, and that is ongoing. Even though we didn't write necessarily together, the influence of still knowing that all of these dissertations have come out of our program have still influenced me in how I write and view myself as a scholar and the scholarship that I'm interested in.

Ike: It's like when you open Pandora's Box, you expose scholars to different formats and different ways of thinking, and you know, the idea that this is possible. What other ideas and what other things spring out of it, you know? Once you kind of start cultivating that, what else grows? The collaborative is a critical part. Not only that, it's like we're saying that we're not necessarily concerned about the independent singular, but that actually the collaborative creates this environment for all of these things. Without the collaborative, would any of us have produced these products or these processes?

Brandelyn: Which then goes back to things like a cohort-based model and LSCs[8] and the social components woven through the program. What we're saying is this is about how we each bring something to teach, and we each bring something to learn, and together, when we all bring what we can teach and learn, we create something more powerful than the sum of all of our individual creations.

There is the collaboration inherent in a program with a cohort model–working alongside and partnering throughout coursework. There are those of us who collaborated as thought partners, readers, feedback givers, and cheerleaders in LSCs. There are those of us who collaborated on dissertations, co-authoring with at least one other person. In the varying ways that we engaged in collaboration, we discovered how vital collaboration is. We each made important individual contributions; however, our collective contributions–how we learned from and taught each other, how we built upon and expanded together, is far greater.

In addition to collaboration, relationships and community played a critical role in our dissertating. With regard to relationships, Ike expresses how the relationship he formed with a classmate was critical to his successful completion of his dissertation. The exchange also examines the nuances of how one might conceptualize community–a person or people one might be in community with, membership in a community based upon identity or group affinity, and also community more broadly, external folks with less proximity or access but still a community one might center or seek to engage. It is our belief that the dissertation should be in service to the community, should derive from and foster meaningful relationships, and should result in freedom and liberation.

Courtney: I think there's something to elevating like proximity to personhood or proximity to lived experience, you know, or proximity to personhood. I think that's something too, like, traditional scholarship is like, "Distance yourself, look at the thing," where here, there was a lot of permission, encouragement to be a part of the thing.

Brandelyn: This relational component is proximity to personhood. It's not proximity to the individual, it's proximity to the relational, to something personal, personhood, person-centered.

Ike: Proximity to the community, too. We are vested in both our own personal community and the communities we build around this. And I know that for me, I mean, particularly without Josie, I would not have finished without her. Community seems to be in and throughout our conversations. We are always coming back to the collective and the community.

Brandelyn: When you said community, you were thinking about Josie, like internal community, but I was thinking about how proximate your work was to the queer community in Kentucky and the 4H community and Indigenous communities (Hilpp, 2021). And all the ways that you took this work and made it proximate to communities. So, there's the internal and the external. Like Courtney's research in terms of proximity to Black women leaders' experiences (Walton, 2023). To the point where your [speaking to Courtney] research was also an intervention. It wasn't intended to be, but that's what occurred from it.

Courtney: Yesssss.

Brandelyn: And proximity to change, proximity to applying the knowledge rather than proximity to sitting on a bookshelf somewhere and never being read.

Courtney: Yes. Being accessible, utilized, actionable.

Brandelyn: Yes. It's like Tynisha said: "Behind the paywall." It is liberating knowledge from behind the paywall. It's liberating the way that knowledge is constructed from behind the paywall. It's liberating the process of constructing knowledge from behind the paywall. It is liberating the sharing of information. Traditional academia exists within the walls of the paywall. The paywall are its bounds. And we're saying we're not interested in doing a better job of living within the paywall. We're interested in the freedom that exists outside the paywall.

During this line of conversation, we examine the question of how we replicate or reproduce for others what we have been able to do. What needs to happen or what do folks need to know in order for the lessons learned or findings that emerge in the classroom to go beyond the walls of the institution? How is information shared with relevant communities? What can or should be done to create an environment where students see the utility in essentially recreating the conditions where relationship and collaboration and community are paramount?

Josie: One of the things I think Brandelyn I said to you was, how do we teach our students that we have now, that we have the honor to facilitate, for them to be able to navigate a situation, a circumstance, and communicate it in a way that is outside of the classroom so that we don't become this echo chamber of just the way that we all think, and the way that we all design these ways of thinking. It really is, how do you take it out into whatever your community, or whatever your realm of influence looks like?

Brandelyn: Yes.

Josie: And so it, to me, makes me think about, yes, what skill sets was it? And not skill sets, but what was, what was the environment like for us then to have the opportunity to do it in that space? And how do we replicate it outside of when we're not in this one space?

Our conversations above elucidate the journey we took and the vital lessons learned along our respective and collective dissertation journeys. We individually applied to a doctoral program with a vague sense of how we might approach our dissertations and discovered that so much more was possible. In choosing a program with a cohort model, we found meaningful community that galvanized and supported us in the development of unique, out-of-the-typical-bounds dissertations that we are proud of. Further, our approach to our dissertations, our values of collaboration, community, and relationship, offer a pathway for others to follow. Moving away from people and/or communities as subjects and seeing people and communities as co-authors, collaborators, or knowledge producers is as rigorous, and arguably more important, than the status quo.

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[8] LSC is an abbreviation for Leader Scholar Community, which is the 'cohort within a cohort' structure we utilize during years 2 and 3 of the program to support dissertation completion, a structure previously discussed by Olson & Clark (2009).

THE EXPLORATORY CONTAINER

> Tynisha: It's kinda like we're unicorns because we didn't subscribe to doing things in the traditional way; we're saying that way is fucked up.

> Ike: If we look at it from how unicorns don't exist, right? We all created something that shouldn't exist in academia based on the standard. And so, our program and our experience in that program somehow created not just a unicorn, but lots of them. We don't do *alternative* dissertations. We do the development of knowledge. We can really tear at the system, in a way that's fun, because I like doing that. I like tearing at systems. It's my whole jam.

> Brandelyn: I love this idea that we don't do alternative dissertations like, let's just fuck with the framing altogether and reject the idea that this is an alternative to anything. *These* are dissertations. This is what dissertations *are*.

Many of us entered into the dissertation cultivation space from a location of interruption and disruption. Interruption in that we took up space outside the bounds of 'traditional' structures and disruption in choosing to create the intentional form of our work in a way that supported the specific research and unique stories we were revealing and sharing. Leveraging our positionality as credibility and accessing our creativity as agency, each of our scholastic journeys in the dissertation process were steeped in a commitment to the knowing within; a deep knowing of the rich substance and rooted significance of the internal methodological work. We deemed this work worthy of elevating in the landscape of kept norms within academia because the work carried deep meaning and the work mattered.

> Courtney: As I considered the purpose of my dissertation, I thought about it through three lenses that exist in the form of the following questions:
>
> - What does this work mean to me?
>
> - What did I want this work to do (in the world)?
>
> - Who would this work most actionably serve?
>
> It was important for me to be able to answer the 'What does this work mean to me?' question first because I was producing something that was tethered to my being. For me, the dissertation was not a thing to be researched, theorized, analyzed, and summarized for the consumption and approval of and dissection by those in broader scholastic communities. I pursued my dissertation from an up-close and inside-out perspective[9]. These intentional choices anchored my desire to not only elevate the experiences and voices of Black women, but to also make the work accessible and meaningful to those outside of academic spaces.

Centering what matters in the writing of dissertations is a purposely personal process that gives equal weight to internal musings and scholastic modalities. There is an opportunity to operate from a location of epistemological, values-centered exploration. Our flocking occurred within the confines of an 'EdD in 3' program, despite its seeming rigidity. Traditional academic programs often impose what scholars call heteronormative timing—fixed milestones tied to specific life stages. Instead, we embraced McCormack's (2014)

concept of queer time, which rejects such rigid structures and creates space for new possibilities. By rejecting these normative timelines, we opened ourselves to the freedom to meet our personal, professional, physical, emotional, financial, and spiritual needs, allowing us to meet our own dissertation milestones on our time. This resulted in some of us completing our dissertations in four years and others of us completing our dissertations in under three years—not because we adhered to institutional timelines, but because our authentic, vulnerable engagement with each other created a supportive flock that naturally enhanced our productivity while preserving intellectual creativity. The framing of personalized scholarship is emergent and always evolving along a trajectory of progressive revelation. Intentional ideation began to develop into clear thoughts that crafted works of meaning for each of us. What was uncovered came into formation through a scaffolded and iterative process, and that process itself was foundational to the core of the work that each of us produced.

The format of dissertating involves a navigational process that allows for new ways of existing, participating, and curating in scholarship. Knowledge production then has the opportunity to become a formless function, not privileging a specific structure but instead elevating as valuable and significant the fluid design and dimensions of what has previously been thought of as non-traditional. Thus, the container ceases to exist as an encased and fixed bubble and progresses to exist as a broad landscape of possibility. It is not boundary-less but the borders are not maintained by allegiance or policed by tradition. This knowledge production space is a site of intellectual roaming mixed with creative presentation that bucks the word alternative and norms all that has been produced through critical thought, informed theoretical musings, agentic praxis, and intentional curation.

The mold-breaking form of each person's work began to serve as a more accessible entry point for others to lean into exploration in scholarship production. As we individually pursued emergent and intentionally out-of-the box presentations of that work, we shared our experience with one another; we found discovery of the collective agency in the way that we chose to show up. That journey was celebrated and became a model for those embarking on their dissertation pursuits to think and work outside of previously maintained norms.

When reflecting on the components that we redefined versus those we had to hold, Ike was reminded of the well buckets used to draw water when they were young. A well bucket is designed to fit in a standard well case. It is set and then dropped down into the well. Once it is full, the rope is pulled to seal it up and draw the water up. This is an effective tool to use when drawing from a standard well. But if the casing is too small, or the well is shallow and wide, the tool will not work. There is still life-giving water in these sources; it just can't be accessed with the well bucket. It is not that we are building new standard containers that will only fit standard wells; we are crafting containers with the source in mind. Containers that allow us to access the water as it is. When wrestling with containers, we did not start with a container to collect stories; instead, we started with the contents and constructed a container that honors and highlights

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[9] Courtney: I name *up-close* to describe a nearness to the subject matter and I name *inside-out* to describe the personal connection to the work based on my own identity as a Black woman, and it is only from the 'inside' place that I was able to produce scholarship that was birthed from reckoning with my own experience (Walton, 2023).

the knowledge. We ascribe to standard rules where they honor our work and break them with intention when they do not.

FLOCKING AS A MEANS OF LIBERATION

Each in our flock embodies multiple intersecting marginalized identities. However, the norms of educational leadership are very much grounded in the cultures of cisgender, heterosexual, White, and man (Waite, 2021). We wonder if our very status as those who live "in the ancestral imagination of others, with their longing for safety and abundance, a longing that didn't include us, or included us as enemy, fright, or other" (brown, 2017, p. 21) is inherently tied to our murmuration and flocking. Were we predisposed to murmurate because we have each been excluded by societal norms? (Is)Was our flock a response to the epistemologies and axiologies that have been used to justify genocide, enslavement, and eugenics? Were our collective murmurations informed by histories of organizing for intersectional justice? During this article's authors' involvement with it, people with marginalized genders and students of the global majority were better represented in our program than in the region or country as a whole. And yet, we recognize that many of our similarly-raced and/or gendered peers are not drawn to flocking. Yet.

The tension between holding and redefining norms must be navigated with great skill, particularly for those having to move through multiple worlds simultaneously. Individuals who exist in multiple worlds can either become tour guides (highlighting what is) or guides toward liberation (creating what can be). We can become compliant in our navigation of dueling worlds while collecting the benefits, or we can choose to work toward liberation, taking on the added labor inherent in this choice.

For us, compliance is not an option. We lose the stories of the people we care for if we comply. The containers we create must be through a liberatory lens because anything less is a betrayal to those whom we bear witness to, which is perceived as nontraditional by heteronormative academics.

> Tynisha: What becomes possible when you open the box? Where does the invitation to not conform (need to) start? With the program? Process? Students being recruited? Or do you teach the revolution for others to explore and jump in on? Enter the unicorns.

As guides toward liberation, we engage in the language and expertise of multiple places; we do not have the privilege of existing in a single location. We must both understand and navigate our own world, the academic world built to exclude us, and the larger world as a whole. We must exist in multiple places at once and so we challenge others to do the same. Lead toward liberation, not compliance.

We echo the Combahee River Collective's statement: "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression" (Taylor, 2017, pp. 22-23). Upon beginning to murmurate, upon joining the flock, we were each moved closer to destroying all the systems of oppression which colonize space in our

bodyminds[10] and within our loci of control. We trust in our individual and collective existence, knowing that "small is all… what we practice at the small scale sets the pattern for the whole system" (brown, 2017, p. 52). Our scholarly identities are grounded in murmuration; our signature pedagogy endures: flocking. We close with an invitation toward mutual accountability. "What we pay attention to grows" (brown, 2017, p. 19), so we challenge ourselves, our program, and other CPED-influenced programs to pay attention to what matters in dissertations, continuing to decenter forms, challenge processes, and (re)imagine dissertating.

Our collective murmuration reflects a conscious resistance against the hegemonic norms of scholarship. How can we issue a static conclusion if our very existence and movement are active verbs, continuously redefining spaces and possibilities? By embracing our intersecting identities and challenging oppressive systems, we strive to lead toward liberation rather than compliance. As we flock toward liberation, we invite others to join this dynamic process of dismantling systemic barriers and reimagining what is possible in academia and beyond.

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[10] "Because mental and physical processes not only affect each other but also give rise to each other – that is, because they tend to act as one, even though they are conventionally understood as two – it makes more sense to refer to them together, in a single term" (Price, 2015, p. 269)

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