Re-Imagining the Conditions of Possibility of a PhD Thesis

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Reimagining the conditions of possibility of a PhD thesis at the Institute of Education, University of London

ABSTRACT

This chapter attempts to interfere with the ‘conditions of possibility’ set by an Institute of Education (University of London) PhD thesis through digital re-imaginings. Drawing on my own doctoral research I propose a framework for showing how the matter of a PhD is selected, classified and recontextualised into a doctoral thesis. By reconceptualizing analytical tools from social semiotics (Hodge and Kress 1988; Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996; Van Leeuwen 2005; Kress 2010) I suggest that the way research is assembled (Law 2004; Latour 2005) and the implications for what is included or excluded is influenced by a negotiation between the interests of the researcher and the virtual-actual affordances of the research text. After presenting this conceptual framework I apply it to my own doctoral research to show how the social-material affordances of an Institute of Education PhD thesis interacted with my own personal, professional and political interests to influence the form of my research output. I conclude by exploring how digital modes of representation might challenge these conditions of possibility, opening creative pathways to non-linear, collaborative and multimodal texts.

1. Becoming PhD thesis: selection, classification, recontextualisation

How does a PhD thesis emerge from the matter of doctoral research? And what is the influence of the social idea of the thesis-as-text and the ‘conditions of possibility’ set by the material actualisation of the thesis on the doctoral research process? Philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze have referred to any instance through which social-material matter (such as that of doctoral research) is fixed (into forms such as a

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1 Latour and Woolgar (1979) Mol (2002) and Law (2004) all adopt the notion of ‘conditions of possibility’ from Michel Foucault (see for example Foucault 1970 and 1972) who argued that the apparatuses of scientific production sets limits to what is possible. In his earlier work Foucault (1970) argued that these limits (as well as the social practices which set them) are established by historical epistemes. Later on he altered his position (see for example Foucault 1972) insisting that there is endless potential for variation and creative innovation within these limits (Rose 1999). The notion of ‘conditions of possibility’ as used by Latour and Woolgar, Mol and Law differs slightly from Foucault's use in that it is drawn on a more modest scale suggesting that “the limits to scientific knowledge and reality are set by particular and specific sets of inscription devices” (Law 2004: 35 emphasis in original) rather than by larger epistemes. It is therefore probably closer to Foucault's later notion (1980) of the dispostif (see Savage et al 2010) which includes an array of material, human and behavioural elements and so extends beyond the discursive reach of the episteme.
PhD thesis) as ‘virtual-actual becoming.’ In some of his earlier work Deleuze argues (against Plato’s transcendent assumption) that life does not rest on an ideal or original model, but rather that all social and physical matter exists on a plane of difference and the boundary-setting through which social or material identities are defined occurs through discursive practices which act as copying devices (Deleuze 1994: 38). In this way the real is always actual-virtual (Deleuze 1994: 207-12). An actual thing is produced only from virtual possibilities. There must already be some general image of a PhD thesis in order to build, recognise and perceive an actual PhD thesis. What something is (actually) is also its power to become (virtually). A PhD thesis can become a reference in a library search engine, a citation in another publication, a chapter in a Sage Handbook, a justification for postdoctoral funding or any number of other possibilities. Virtual potentialities are only recognised once they have been actualised and an actual thing has also a virtual dimension: a plant is not just its matter but is also a need or expectation of light and water and a PhD thesis is also an expectation of (amongst other things) a viva. So while academic standards might result in some measure of what constitutes a PhD thesis, there is always evolution and deviation whether this occurs on an individual, institutional or societal level. Colebrook (2002: 99) refers to this philosophy as an “ethics of potentialities.” However, it is important to note that a focus on becoming does not preclude attention to being. Or to put it another way, what is needed is both attention to the processes through which human, material and conceptual identities develop and to the ways in which they are fixed or defined to serve particular purposes. It is here that a distinction made by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) between ‘rhizomatic’ maps and ‘aborescent’ tracings is helpful. A tracing replicates existing structures and is linear:

2 Bergsonism, first published 1966; Difference and Repetition, first published 1968
“All tree logic is a logic of tracing and reproduction” (1987: 12). In contrast, maps are creative open systems producing an organisation of reality rather than reproducing some prior representation. “The map is... detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group or social formation” (ibid). Later on in this chapter I go on to suggest how a digital thesis might facilitate new mappings of the PhD identity against the institutionalised tracings of the traditional thesis. I start, however, by proposing a conceptual framework to show how doctoral matter is fixed into a PhD thesis through the interrelated processes of selection, classification and recontextualisation.

The PhD thesis like any research text materialises, to paraphrase Karen Barad (2003) through an ongoing process of mattering. As Law points out (2004b: 2) Barad’s play on words gets to the heart of the relationship between matter as material, stuff, mess and matter as significance, value, concern. This relationship has been formulated in a range of ways by social theorists. Latour, for example, has distinguished between ‘matters of fact’ and ‘matters of concern’ (Latour 2004); Kress has explored the motivated translation of ‘stuff’ into the analytical category of ‘data’ (Kress 2010) and Law (2004) has unpacked the relationship between ‘mess’ and ‘method assemblage’. Importantly, Barad’s pun emphasises the interrelationship between the material and meaningful dimensions of ‘matter’ (both in terms of the putative realities which form the ‘raw’ data of research and the research apparatus or the methods and texts which configure and represents these realities). Her formulation of matter as a verb or process (rather than a noun or thing) also suggests a performative dimension – that
mattering is something which is done rather than something which exists independently of social interaction.

For doctoral students, matters of concern might be grounded in personal and professional interests and may well also be influenced by the interests of other actors such as supervisors or the research council that might be funding the PhD. As students confront the other type of (material) matter that emerges through their processes of data collection and engagement with the ‘literature’ (human bodies, spoken words, artefacts, statistics, graphs, diagrams, references) these matters of concern manifest as assumptions that guide the students’ selection and classification of what they are absorbing. Assumptions about the distinction between theory and methodology; assumptions about the aptness of particular theories and conceptual models; and assumptions about the interest of different thematic foci, for example. Such choices about what of the matter matters to the students (selection) and how those matters relate to each other (classification) are also highly political in nature. But decisions about what matters also relate initially to the virtual idea of what a PhD thesis looks like and later to the actual materiality of the realised thesis which plays an inevitable role in recontextualising the stuff of the research. These interrelated processes are complex and deserve some elaboration.

1.1 Selection (or how things are included or excluded)

In his influential handbook, After Method: Mess in Social Science Research, John Law (2004) proposes an expansion of Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) notion of the
'assemblage' into the concept of the ‘method assemblage’ in order to show how research performs and in doing so makes selections which include or exclude. A method assemblage might be defined as “the process of crafting and enacting the necessary boundaries between presence, manifest absence and Otherness” (Law 2004: 161). So, for instance, a method assemblage based on a survey approach will generate presences (for example, data about a sample of a particular population at a specific moment in time); manifest absences (for example, data from those of the sample who did not respond to the survey but are acknowledged as ‘non-respondents’ in the survey methodology); and produce Others (for example, data which cannot be contained as individual reports of attitudes and behaviour, or data which is not captured by the ‘conditions of possibility’ set by the survey instrument). In questioning why certain things are Othered or de-selected, Law suggests that Otherness tends to take three key forms. Firstly, what is ‘routine’ might be Othered. For example, in the survey approach assumptions about how individual statements can be aggregated to account for societal trends is taken for granted. Secondly, what is ‘insignificant’ may also be Othered. For example, a survey may collect ‘background data’ based on factors such as age, gender and ethnicity but is less likely to collect data about whether a respondent is an oldest, youngest or only child. Thirdly, Othering can also serve to ‘repress’ certain things which might risk compromising present things. For example, a survey which is interested in explaining the influence of class on a particular phenomenon may Other the influence of gender, age, ethnicity or language in order to strengthen the explanatory power of socio-economic background.

3 Law highlights the disjuncture between the French ‘agencement’ (the term used by Deleuze and Guattari) and the English translation ‘assemblage’ with the result that the English translation “has come to sound more like a state of affairs… than an uncertain and unfolding process” (2004: 41)
While Law focuses exclusively on the performativity of method in research, I would argue that another aspect of the research apparatus: the research text also plays an important role in distributing presences, absences and Others. For example, the representation of research as a PowerPoint presentation tends to condense lengthy analysis into a list of bullet points or visual diagrams (Othering the more complex elements of the process, authorial style, lengthy quotations etc.) So selection is about decisions relating to what is included or excluded in a text. These decisions are not based on comparative evaluations of discrete things alone but also on the nature of these things in relation to each other and the form of the text(s) into which they will be assembled – an issue which is really a matter of recontextualisation.

1.2 Recontextualisation (or how matter is transported from one text or media to another and how things change as a result)

To the three forms of Othering catalogued by Law above I would like to propose a fourth. Things are excluded simply because they don’t fit with the (social or material) form of the text into which they are packaged. Or conversely, things are included – in part – because of the ease with which they can be moved from one media to another. So for example, if a conference PowerPoint presentation is represented in the notebook of a student in the audience it is less likely that the student would attempt to replicate a photograph from one of the slides than a series of bullet points from the same slide— even if the purpose of both bullet points and photograph was to illustrate the same argument. Similarly, a policy report emerging from a quantitative research project is likely to represent the data as a series of graphs and charts rather than in its ‘raw’ form of pages of statistical annexes.
The movement of meaning across contexts is an issue which has preoccupied social scientists from a variety of disciplines who have developed innovative concepts and methods through which to trace flows and reconfigurations of people, concepts and things as they travel across multiple sites. Scollon and Scollon (2004), for example, employ the notion of ‘nexus analysis’ to trace pathways and trajectories of texts, actions, practices and objects, of people and communications across time and space and multiple modes. Iedema (2003) uses the term 'resemiotization' to explain the movement and transformation of meaning across events, spaces, times, modes and media. Others such as Callon (1986), Bernstein (1996), Silverstein and Urban (1996), Wenger (1998), Lemke (2002), Thibault (2004), and Barton and Tusting (2005) have used a variety of terms (such as ‘translation’, ‘traversal’, ‘recontextualisation’, ‘reification’, ‘entextualisation’, and ‘reinvoicement’) to capture different aspects of this process (see Scollon in Bhatia et al 2008: 241).

From a social semiotics perspective Kress (2010) has provided a helpful distinction between two types of movement of meaning across time and space. In the first, called *transduction*, meaning moves across modes (for example, from speech to thought to writing) or genres (for example, from a PhD thesis to a conference presentation) or cultures (for example, from Spanish to English) and in doing so, changes its entities and its logic too. In the second, called *transformation*, the movement of meaning involves no change in mode and so the process operates on and with the same set of entities – though these entities are reordered. So for example, the translation of my written PhD thesis into this written chapter is an example of transformation. The

⁴ Indeed, some have suggested that (at least within the school of Science and Technology Studies) academics in recent years have tended towards “reificaphobia” or the fear that anything within the discipline should settle or solidify for too long (Halfman in Wyatt 2007).
mode remains that of writing and (broadly speaking) the same elements manifest in each. However, the ordering of the elements has changed and this ordering is reflected in selection (what is included and excluded in the transformed text) but also classification (how the different elements of the text are positioned in relation to each other.)

1.3 Classification (or how matter is sorted and how things are positioned in relation to each other)

As scholars have pointed out (Kress 2010; Bowker and Star 1999) classification is an intensely political activity and very much related to selection and recontextualisation. Once classification systems are established, anything that does not fit into one or another category is likely either to fall through the cracks of recognition and become Othered or to be mutilated or torqued (Bowker and Star 1999: 223) until it resembles something that meets the conventions of a particular category. As such, Bowker and Star suggest that classifications are intrinsically linked to standards and that each standard and each category valorises certain points of view and silences others. Choices regarding classification are consequently highly ethical (1999: 5). They are also attached to institutional discourses and broader social orderings. Kress (2010: 122-123) suggests that classification stabilises the social world in particular ways, reflecting the social organization which has produced them and which is constantly reaffirmed, remade and naturalised through them. The seemingly innocuous character of classification also helps to make its political effects more effective. In their book Sorting Things Out: Classification and its Consequences, Bowker and Star explore the ways in which classification systems (ranging from medical classifications of tuberculosis to classifications of race in apartheid South Africa) manifest as innocuous by becoming ‘naturalised’: “The more naturalized a type of classification
becomes, the more unquestioning the relationship of the community to it; the more invisible the contingent and historical circumstances of its birth, the more it sinks into the community’s routinely forgotten memory.” (Bowker and Star 1999: 299)

Examples of this type of naturalisation in academia include the highly political yet taken for granted boundaries of many ‘core’ disciplines. On a somewhat smaller scale the classification of elements of a thesis (literature review, methodology, findings etc.) provides a further example of this process at play.

So classification is fundamentally related to selection and recontextualisation as a means of explaining how matter is reduced, ordered and packaged. All of these interrelated processes involve political negotiations around what of the matter is significant and why it matters. In the following section I introduce the concepts ‘interest’ and ‘affordance’ from social semiotics to show how these processes are influenced by the social and material form of the texts into which they are packaged.

2. Interests and affordances

According to a social semiotic perspective (Halliday and Hasan 1985; Hodge and Kress 1988; Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996; Van Leeuwen 2005; Kress 2010) a PhD thesis-as-text might be understood as a momentary fixing and framing of (doctoral) semiosis guided by the interest of the text-maker – most probably the doctoral researcher. The idea of ‘interest’ here is important. In social semiotics, the notion of the arbitrary sign developed by Ferdinand de Saussure is replaced with the motivated sign in the design of “semiotic resources both to produce communicative artefacts and

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5 As Kress uses the term, ‘interest’ in an instance of sign-making arises out of the sign-maker’s position in the world and shapes attention which in turn frames a part of the world and “acts as a principle for the selection of apt signifiers.” (Kress 2010:70)
events and to interpret them – which is also a form of semiotic production – in the context of specific social situations and practices” (Van Leeuwen 2005: xi). To understand the social and material conditions of possibility of meaning making, social semiotics offers the reformulated concept of affordance\(^6\). All instances of communication involve the use of semiotic resources or modes (such as speech, writing, gaze, gesture). According to van Leeuwen (2005) these modes have a theoretical semiotic potential (constituted by all their past uses) and an actual semiotic potential (constituted by those past uses that are known to and considered relevant by the users of the mode and by potential uses that might be uncovered by the users according to their specific needs and interests). Since all instances of communication take place in a social context, different contexts may have different rules or best practices that regulate the ways in which specific semiotic resources can be used, or alternatively, leave the users relatively free in their use of the resource (van Leeuwen 2005: 4). So ‘affordance’ in this context is shaped by the different ways in which a mode has been used, what it has been repeatedly used to mean and do, and the social conventions and material possibilities that inform its use in context.

In this way the affordance of a mode is related both to materiality and meaning (or matter in both senses of the word). It is also related to the specific logic of each mode (Jewitt 2008: 25-26). The sounds of speech for instance unfold sequentially in time, and this sequence in time shapes what can be done with (speech) sounds. This sequence constitutes an affordance: it produces the possibilities for ordering things in

\(^6\) Jewitt explains that the use of the term by social semioticians evolved from work on cognitive perception by Gibson (1977) and design by Norman (1988, 1990) see Jewitt (2009: 24) though she argues that neither Gibson nor Norman’s notion of affordance adequately acknowledges how tools (conceptual and material objects) are shaped by people’s use of them in specific social situations (Jewitt 2008).
relation to each other. Conversely, (still) images tend to be governed by the logic of space where the mechanics of ordering play out very differently. (Jewitt 2009: 25)

Distinguishing between the notion of ‘affordance’ and Halliday’s similar notion of ‘meaning potential’, van Leeuwen argues that while the latter notion focuses on meanings that have already been introduced into society, ‘affordance’ also includes meanings that have not yet been recognised: “no one can claim to know all the affordances of a given [mode or semiotic resource] yet as semioticians we do not need to restrict ourselves to what is, we can also set out to investigate what could be…” (van Leeuwen 2005: 5) This distinction is not dissimilar to the distinction between Deleuze and Guattari’s map and tracing discussed in the introduction to this chapter and also embraces Deleuze’s notion of virtual-actual becoming. However, van Leeuwen reminds us that the fact that resources have no objectively fixed meanings does not mean that meaning is a free-for-all: “In social life people constantly try to fix and control the use of semiotic resources – and to justify the rules they make up – although more so in some domains than others.” (van Leeuwen 2005: 5) The question is, how are these conditions of possibility set in the domain of doctoral research and what is the mapping-affordance (as opposed to the tracing-affordance) for those students engaged in designing and producing research texts which matter? As a response, social semiotics provides a set of tools for unpacking textual affordance in two key ways: firstly, by showing how the affordances of a text interact with the process through which texts are assembled; and secondly, by showing how the affordances of a text interact with its content and form.
With regards the first set of tools, social semioticians have suggested that texts are assembled through the somewhat sequential stages of rhetorical process, design and production (see Kress 2010). *Rhetorical processes* occur before (though are also concurrent with and can conceivably follow) the moment of design (when a text is fixed and framed). In these processes the sign maker “makes an assessment of all aspects of the communicational situation: of her or his interest; of the characteristics of the audience; the semiotic requirements of the issue at stake and the resources at stake and the resources available for making an apt representation; together with establishing the best means for its dissemination.” (Kress 2010: 126) In other words, this stage involves an assessment of the virtual and actual affordances of the text to be designed. So before developing a PowerPoint presentation for a conference, presenters will assess the theoretical, methodological, empirical and ideological messages they want to send (negotiating between their own personal interests and what they imagine will be the interests of the conference); the integrity of their data and how best to represent it; and the texts and media into which their messages will be packaged (or the conditions of possibility afforded by the presentation software). The rhetor’s task is therefore a political one, namely “to provoke and produce the rearrangement of social relations by semiotic means.” (ibid p.121) In contrast, the *design stage* involves the transformation of “political intent into semiotic form.” (ibid p.121) So in this stage the presenters start to navigate the virtual affordances of the media of the PowerPoint presentation (in terms of issues like how to condense pages of dense academic writing into a single practitioner-friendly slide and how to order the text as a linear presentation); and the virtual affordances of the conference itself (in terms of issues like how to respond to the timing of the conference, the nature of the audience and the topical focus). And finally, the *production stage* constitutes the
stage in which the virtual is actualised (for example, a PowerPoint presentation is created in space and a conference unfolds in time). So:

Design meets the interests of the rhetor … in full awareness of the communicational potentials of the resources which are available in the environment and needed for the implementation of the rhetor’s interests. Design gives shape to the interests of both rhetor and the designer… Production is the implementation of design with the resources available in the world in which the communication takes place. In production meaning is made material.” (Kress 2010: 26-27)

If the rhetorical, design and production stages explain the process of text-making, how then might one identify the various configurations within the text (classification) and the implications for what is included or excluded (selection)? To answer this question, Kress proposes the concept of ‘fixing’ (which involves choices about mode and of genre7) and argues that these choices are always interrelated. According to social semiotic theory, texts are the products of communicative interaction and are multimodal (Kress 2001). This means that there is always a choice of modes (or semiotic resources) through which to fix meaning: “Depending on the media involved there are different possibilities: do you wish to realize meaning as image or as gesture, as moving image or as speech or as ensembles of these?” (Kress in Jewitt 2009: 64). Kress shows that the choice of mode or multimodal ensemble in which the text is realised (which might include speech, writing, image, gesture, gaze, movement, music or components of these such as colour, volume, pace, font, layout) and the generic

7 Kress also considers the role of ‘discourse’ which is less to do with the form of the text and more about the content.
form that the text takes (e.g. a PowerPoint presentation, PhD thesis, or a chapter in a handbook) matters. “Once particular means of ‘fixing meaning’ have become habituated… it is likely that the world as represented through the affordances of mode and genre will come to seem like this ‘naturally’” (Kress 2009: 66). So genre addresses the semiotic ‘emergence’ of social organisation, practices and interactions. It names and ‘realises’ knowledge of the world as social action and interaction and occurs through participation in events (like academic conferences or doctoral vivas) formed of such actions experienced as recognisable practices (like presenting a PowerPoint or defending a PhD).

Together the interrelated concepts of genre and mode can help show how meaning is fixed. Genre answers the question: ‘Who is involved as participants in this world; in what ways; what are the relations between participants in this world?’ and so fixes meaning socially (as a conference where participants are ascribed roles such as ‘organiser’, ‘chair’, ‘presenter’, ‘audience member’). And Mode answers the question: ‘How is the world best represented and how do I aptly represent the things I want to represent in this environment?’ and so fixes meaning materially and ontologically (as a diagram in a PowerPoint presentation, for example) (Kress 2010: 116-121).

So to summarise, the notions of ‘interest’ and virtual-actual, generic-modal ‘affordance’ help to explain the relationship between doctoral matters of fact (the raw data or ‘stuff’ of research), the doctoral researcher’s matters of concern (assumptions, agendas, ideologies, ethics, epistemological frameworks) and the representation of this social-material matter in the social-material PhD thesis. This relationship is visualised in Figure 1 on the following page.
In the following section I provide examples of some of the tensions between my own interests as a doctoral researcher and the affordances of the Institute of Education PhD thesis before going on to show how they might have been mitigated by a representation of my PhD as a digital thesis.

3. Negotiating interests through the affordances of a PhD thesis at the Institute of Education (University of London)

My PhD involved collecting, analysis and representing multimodal ethnographic data on the (different but overlapping) ways in which a selection of academic and community-based researchers enacted the same migrant community through their research practices. One of these case studies was a community-based oral history project which resulted in a number of research texts including a museum exhibition. In this section I show how the processes of selection, classification and recontextualisation which informed my design, analysis and representation of this
case study were influenced by a negotiation between my doctoral interests and the conditions of possibility set by the affordances of an Institute of Education (University of London) PhD thesis.

3.1 The influence of my doctoral interests

As a doctoral researcher my personal and professional background and the ideological, epistemological and ethical frameworks I had inherited from previous research experience had a profound influence on my PhD interests. Three sets of interest were particularly significant.

Firstly, my pre-doctoral professional familiarity with participatory frameworks prompted an ethical and methodological emphasis on the importance of collaborative research. This led to an interest in the different representational properties of researcher-generated, participant-generated and collaborative texts and prompted me to question how my own representations of events and practices compared to those representations of my research participants. In the oral history project case study I attempted to capture the representational texts that the lead researcher had generated (in the form of exhibits in the museum exhibition); generated my own texts (in the form of photo-collages of the exhibition); and created a collaborative text in the form of a guided tour of the exhibition by the lead researcher which I filmed.

Secondly, my research agendas were also significantly influenced by my ethnographic methodology and particularly by the six-month exploratory fieldwork I conducted at the start of my study (which elicited the emic frameworks of my research participants). While the advantages of ethnography as a method include its flexibility (enabling the
emergence of an iteratively developed research question); its mobility (allowing research practices to be identified across a variety of ‘physical’, ‘virtual’ and imagined spaces); and its self-conscious reflexivity (holding to account the researcher herself as primary research instrument) the method inevitably generates an enormous corpus of data. And since at the time of collection it is not altogether clear which of the data will be useful, it is very difficult to reject anything on the basis of relevance. Consequently, the matter of selection becomes critical. However, the selection of data is also informed by the shape-shifting etic classification systems which inform collection and representation as well as analysis. In the oral history project case study I collected data in the form of video, photographs, interviews and observation of events such as the curation and launch of the exhibition. As I go on to discuss, very little of this made it into the final draft of my PhD thesis.

Finally, my interests were also influenced by the theoretical frameworks I developed over the course of my PhD. The work of my supervisors nudged me in particular theoretical directions and the all-important doctoral aim of making an ‘original contribution to knowledge’ prompted me to merge their approaches with a third theoretical perspective. This final agenda relates in part to the generic affordances of the PhD as an institution and to the corresponding primary interest of any doctoral researcher: to successfully obtain a doctoral degree. In line with this agenda, the time allocated for the study (and the corresponding duration of my ESRC studentship grant) delimited the parameters of my fieldwork. Moreover, the ascribed audience for this type of text (supervisors and examiners) also played a role in my rhetorical positioning as the author of my thesis.
3.2 The influence of the affordances of the PhD thesis-as-text

In addition (and at times in tension) to these interests, the generic and modal affordances of the PhD thesis conventions set by the Institute of Education (University of London) also had a profound influence on both my research process and output. So what exactly are these affordances? For a start, the PhD is constrained both spatially and temporally. According to the conventions set out in the Institute of Education doctoral handbook the thesis should not exceed the length of 80,000 words (including footnotes, endnotes, glossary, maps, tables and diagrams) though extensions of up to 100,00 words may be requested in advance. Appendices are not included in this count but “should only include material which examiners are not required to read in order to examine the thesis, but to which they may refer if they wish.” (p. 91) Interestingly, the guidelines state that “if appropriate to the field of study” a candidate may submit a portfolio of their “artistic or technological” work accompanied by an extended analysis or dissertation which amounts to no more than 40,000 words (p.53). Candidates are also allowed to submit “illustrative material” (p.53). While guidelines are given for audio recordings (in the rather out-dated form of the “compact cassette tape C60 or C90”) and photographic slides (measuring “35 mm in 2" x 2" frame”) candidates are advised to enquire “well in advance” about the inclusion of illustrative material in other forms (p.53). The thesis should also be presented as a bound document typed in double-spaced English on one side only of “good quality” plain white A4 paper with margins of not less than 20 mm (p.52).

These conventions inevitably embed a series of assumptions: that the thesis is

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8 See the Institute of Education MPhil/PhD student handbook 2010-2011 available at: http://www.ioe.ac.uk/MPhilPhD_handbook1011.pdf
physically recognizable as a thesis; that the thesis is fixed and transportable in a hard form (precluding devices such as embedded video and audio); that written language is of a higher (explanatory or analytical) order than images (which serve only as illustrations); and that the thesis is ordered uni-directionally (precluding the use of devices such as hyperlinks which might result in more multidirectional navigation).

Generically, the thesis is also expected to meet a variety of social conventions. While acknowledging that “this does not work for everyone,” the doctoral handbook sets out a model structure which “organises the content [of the thesis] in a conventional manner” (p.23). This structure (represented in Figure 2 on the following page) is interesting for its exclusion of an explicit theoretical framework and for its separation of the presentation of data from a theoretical discussion of findings.
Generically, the thesis is also shaped by the criteria through which it will be evaluated. These include: demonstration of the candidate’s proficiency as an independent researcher; evidence of an original contribution to knowledge; demonstration of critical engagement with the relevant academic literature, a coherent argument and structure; and evidence that the thesis is of an overall standard to merit publication in whole or in part or in a revised form. (p.88-91) While the evaluation of the PhD is made primarily on the basis of the thesis-text, the viva (as a secondary representational text) is used to demonstrate the candidate’s ownership and understanding of their work.
3.3 Selecting, classifying and recontextualising a community-based oral history project

With the duel influence of my doctoral interests and the affordances of the thesis-as-text described above, what then were the implications for the way that my doctoral matter was selection, classified and recontextualised? And crucially, what was Othered in the process?

Given the material affordances of the PhD thesis described above, the process of selection is imperative but ethically charged. Like any other doctoral student, as my writing developed I became increasingly aware of the ill-matched relationship between the capacity of my chapters and the data I wanted to fit into those chapters. The ‘oral history project’ case study posed a particular challenge since I had just a few chapters to analytically represent a dynamic, colourful, emotive exhibition and in doing so to reconcile my hours of video footage with photographs, interviews and fieldnote observations. However, my process of selection had started even prior to my data collection of the exhibition. In fact, the oral history project was to be represented as three distinct texts: the exhibition but also a documentary film and a book. I selected the exhibition as the focus of my study for a number of reasons. Pragmatically, because the publication of the book was delayed until after the expiration of my doctoral funding. Methodologically, because the curation of the exhibition was a more collaborative process (involving the project participants as well as the lead researcher/curator) and easier to observe than the editing practices of the lead researcher/documentary maker which occurred in isolation at her home and often late into the night. And empirically, the exhibition provided an excellent example of
an ‘unconventional’ research text and an interesting point of comparison to the other research texts I was analysing. However, as I go on to discuss in relation to recontextualisation, squeezing an entire exhibition into a space of approximately 15,000 words was far from easy. In response, I selected matter largely on the basis of the lead-researcher/curator’s guided tour which I filmed. This data served to condense the exhibition according to the researcher-curator’s own representation of her project (and in line with my own ideological interests which emphasised a participatory approach to research). However, in doing so it also Othered certain elements of the exhibition (such as the dynamic audio-video exhibits which could not be accommodated by the timing of our tour) and while it represented the exhibition from the perspective of the curator it nonetheless Othered the representations of the other participants whose artifacts and interviews constituted the matter of the exhibition.

Another selection practice involved my choice of visual data (which I represented as a series of ‘photo-collages’ – see Figure 4). I drew on photographs and stills from my video footage to provide a feel of the exhibition as a sensory experience and also to illustrate the visual manifestation of some of the discursive patterns I had identified through the language-based data of my interviews and the written information plaques that framed the exhibition. As such, my selection mirrored the generic affordances of the PhD thesis-as-text which suggests the use of the visual to illustrate language-based analysis rather than providing a source of analysis in itself. In this way, language-based data might be regarded as the primary presence in my analysis of the exhibition while my visual data is a manifest absence (there but lacking analytical power) and other data – such as audio extracts is Othered.

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9 Examples include the contrast of colour and light to illustrate dichotomies such as ‘now and then’; ‘visible and invisible’ etc.
Selection is of course also deeply influenced by classification systems. To represent the exhibition in its entirety I started by mapping the layout (see Figure 3 on the following page) resulting in a spatial classification of the exhibition into 10 sections. This initial classification process was primarily guided by the structuring of the exhibition through the information plaques which introduced each of the 10 sections. I initially planned to represent each section through a photo-collage (see Figure 4). However, the material affordances of my thesis-text implied that 10 discrete sections of description would impinge on my space for analysis. Consequently, I decided to condense the sections further into just 5 categories (Acknowledgements and Introduction; The History of the Community; Cultural Identities; Economic Impact; and New Generations). As a result, elements of the exhibition were manifest as absences or Othered. For example, the ‘carnival event’ which constituted a large focus of the exhibition but was less relevant to my interests in the history-making practices of the community was significantly reduced. Moreover, my classification also Othered the documentary film (another of the research texts which was shown in a small cinema within the exhibition). This was partly because the film was just too complex to summarise in the context of the exhibition and partly because the focus of the film undermined some of my analysis of the exhibition as the primary research output of the ‘oral history project’. Further classification was made of the exhibition matter itself. I differentiated personal artefacts (referred to in the exhibition as ‘objects of memory’) from artworks, interview extracts (in the form of written quotations, audio or video clips) and written analysis (in the information plaques). Once again my analysis drew primarily on the written data, using the visual artefacts for the purpose of illustration and Othering the audio artefacts (and particularly the non-verbal audio extracts such as music).
1. Welcome to the exhibition
2. Migration
3. Early History
4. Identities and Traditions
5. Documentary Film
6. Behind the Scenes
7. The Event
8. The Public
9. Economic Impact
10. New Generations

Audio-Visual Station =

Figure 3 Map of the ‘oral history project’ museum exhibition
Finally, the affordances of the PhD thesis-as-text also played a strong role in the recontextualisation of data, or rather in my attempts to recontextualise data – since often, when things don’t fit they are simply omitted. This cumulative process of distilling the exhibition data occurred over several phases. In the first phase I reduced the exhibition as a whole to a 2 hour video of a guided tour by the researcher-curator. Since the tour was highly selective and since the mode of realisation was moving image (recorded through digital media) this resulted in a recontextualisation of ‘lived experience’ into a selectively framed and time-bound video artefact. However, the video footage was incompatible with the generic-modal affordances of the thesis-text and so I continued to recontextualise (and in doing so, to filter down) the data by generating a large number of ‘stills’ according to a selection of classification systems (for example, representations of the different sections, exhibits, artefacts, multimedia stations, and information plaques in the museum). From this archive (and drawing on my own experiences of the museum space) I then attempted to recreate some of the emotive response that I had felt by assembling a selection of ‘photo-collages’ to represent items in these different categories (see Figure 4 below). And finally, I selected just a few of these artefacts to illustrate my arguments. So my photo-collages might be considered (in the words of Bruno Latour - 1990) as ‘immutable mobiles’. They are transportable devices that retain their integrity as they move (in a way that a museum exhibition in its entirety can do far less easily). At the same time, however, with each stage of filtering things are lost and the form of the text is changed. As with the other processes of assembling the matter of the exhibition into the material PhD thesis-text, what is Othered is primarily the non-languaged-based elements and particularly the sensory, intangible experience of the exhibition which is hard to recreate in a video, never mind a written text.
4. Digital re-imaginings of a PhD thesis

This chapter has shown how the (virtual-actual) social-material affordances of a thesis-text interact with the interests of the doctoral researcher to influence the selection, classification and recontextualisation of doctoral matter into a PhD thesis. While it must be stressed that all research involves (indeed necessitates) reduction, simplification and Othering of matters of fact in line with matters of concern, there remain instances when the ‘conditions of possibility’ of the research apparatus risk undermining the central interests of the researcher. I offer here an example of this from my own doctoral research relating to the central interest of my research: to explore the (different but overlapping) ways in which a selection of academic and community-based researchers enacted the same migrant community through their...
research practices. As such, my thesis aimed to represent the ‘enactments’ of multiple participants but also to show how they related to each other and indeed to my own meta-enactment. As the discussion in the previous section has demonstrated, this was extremely hard to achieve. Merely describing the non-language-based representations was frustrated by their recontextualisation as written words and static images in my thesis. And as I have shown, my analysis of the representations was also influenced by the modal hierarchy implicit in the thesis-genre with the visual matter deferential to the language-based matter and the non-verbal audio matter lost completely. Moreover, my ethical interest in eliciting the response of my participants to my representations of their work was also undermined by the linear and bounded nature of the PhD thesis-text. While I might have included a section in my conclusion which consolidated the responses of my participants to my thesis as a whole, this would have at best involved a summary of quick interviews or questionnaire responses and would certainly have existed as a kind of appendage, separate from the data chapters and my own analysis.

How then might these ‘conditions of possibility’ be re-imagined in a way that would accommodate a more democratic representation of non-language based modes of representation, a more participatory engagement with the thesis my the research participants and a more flexible and non-linear reading of the text? I suggest that the limitations which derive from the affordances of my PhD thesis-as-text might have been mitigated by developing my thesis as a virtual document. Such a document might employ devices such as embedded video or hyperlinks (see Lemke 2002; Dicks et al 2006) to facilitate connections between text, image and sound as well as providing multiple options for navigation of a non-linear nature). This might have
better preserved the research texts of my participants in their original forms, capturing elements that are Othered through written language. Such a text would also accommodate participatory interests by allowing participants to respond to my representation of their texts, to re-configure the (re)presentations of their texts and to respond to each other’s texts through the use of discussion spaces. However, it is important to recognise the additional affordances which would be imposed by this re-imagining. The loss of authorial control over a research text may undermine the integrity research itself. Moreover, allowing editorial access to multiple contributors (particularly if tensions run rife among them) may result in non-participation or even incite further antagonism. Nevertheless, (re)presenting my thesis as a digital document would provide an interesting experiment in reconfiguring my data, process and outputs, contributing to a better understanding of the relationship between these aspects of research.

REFERENCES


