

A Decolonizing Essay on Decolonizing Dissertations

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Four Arrows (Wahinkpe Topa), aka Jacobs, Don Trent. (2008). *The authentic dissertation: Alternative ways of knowing, research, and representation*. New York, NY: Routledge.

In this article, I will follow several of the decolonizing structures modelled by Four Arrows in his work, *The Authentic Dissertation: Alternative Ways of Knowing, Research, and Presentation*, published by Routledge in 2008, beginning with an introduction of who I am. Like many Indigenous scholars, I position myself up-front in my research and writing (see Kathy Absolon and Cam Willett in *Research as Resistance*, edited by Leslie Brown and Susan Strega from 2005). I am Métis with family ties to the Red River Settlement in Manitoba, and I currently live in High River, Alberta, with my family. I am in the fifth year of doctoral studies at the University of Calgary.

It is unconventional to write a book review essay for a publication that is more than one or two years old, but I believe that doing so, in this case, is also a decolonizing act. Just as the dissertations shared in the book were controversial and ground-breaking for their time, I see *The Authentic Dissertation* in the same light. As discussed in the text, sometimes writing of this nature may challenge the

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audience's expectations and assumptions of what academic *can be*. If it does not resonate with the beliefs and experiences of the reader, the book may be easily dismissed or ignored. With the increased attention to Indigenous research methodologies, knowledges, and practices in recent years, I anticipate that the perspective *audience* for a book, such as *The Authentic Dissertation*, has also grown. Thus, I humbly and unapologetically offer the following review.

Early in my academic journey, I read the chapter “‘Seeing Red’ Pauline Sameshima’s story, with Patrick Slattery, Howard Gardner, Elliot Eisner, Rebecca Carmi, and Gregory Cajete” an expert from *The Authentic Dissertation* as part of a Conceptualizing Interpretive Inquiry course. I was in awe of the writing structure employed by Four Arrows. The book is presented as a *conference* where dialogues ensue after many of the *presentations*. The *presenters* describe their—often award-winning—dissertations, as well as the challenges and criticisms they faced when engaging with *alternative ways of knowing, research, and presentation*.

While significantly varied, the research projects build upon and contribute to the existing body of qualitative research methods and discourses, including but not limited to: phenomenology; hermeneutics; arts-based research; autoethnography; mindful inquiry; critical methodology; anti-oppressive research; decolonizing methodologies; Indigenous research; participatory action research; narrative inquiry; and more. The dissertations may be: situated in experience; creative; interdisciplinary; comfortable with subjectivity; aligned with sustainability priorities; attending to the wisdom of the natural world; critical of hegemonic systems; service-driven; honouring Indigenous ways of knowing; and/or, seeking to make the world a better place.

Four Arrows resists colonizing models of writing by presenting a multi-voiced, fictional narrative. His citations are numerous, but do not follow standard APA conventions. All but two *characters* presented in the book are real, living academics. The two fictional characters, Runner and Mr. Samson, serve as the protagonist and antagonist respectively. Both are presented as respected scholars. Runner is an “American Indian” woman, with deep knowledge of Indigenous scholarship and perspectives; while Dr. Samson is a Western gatekeeper who brings forward traditional academic beliefs about research. These well-employed literary figures spark discussions that are interspersed between the *presentations*, asking questions of the *audience members* and offering divergent points of view. They provoke dialogue that opens spaces for continued learning, while also keeping the conference moving.

In my initial reading I thought that Four Arrows had taken significant liberties to form the dialogues as he attributed different sides of the debates to significant, known scholars in the field. The style is both bold and effective. I often felt like I was a listening-in at a *real* conference, but I caught myself wondering, *what would the actual scholars think of Four Arrows putting words in their fictitious mouths?*

As it turns out, Four Arrows reached out to each of the scholars represented

in the text and requested their participation in the *presentations* and *discussions*. He used “personal communication” as a clever means of circumventing the traditional rules for academic citations and referencing. Just as Four Arrows obtained permissions and voice from the academics in the conference story, I have gained insight into the text through personal communication with Four Arrows, himself. Introduced by our mutual friend, Shirley Steinberg, Four Arrows and I have been corresponding about various publications and projects. It is more than happenstance that brought us together at this time. As Four Arrows explains: one honors the Spiritual phenomenon often referred to by Jungians as synchronicity.

Through synchronicity, I am brought back to *The Authentic Dissertation*, as I write my own dissertation. I am at a point, now, where I know most of the authors, conferences, and publications that are mentioned in the book. The prospect of writing an alternative dissertation is both enticing and daunting. The people who have experienced success in the pursuit of alternative research and presentation, faced significant challenges and scrutiny. They were successful because they were courageous, rigorous, and unrelenting; their work, exceptional.

The Authentic Dissertation is worth re-visiting, perhaps now more than ever. There is a growing readiness and receptivity, within academic and societal structures, for alternative ways of knowing. I believe that the book would make an excellent course text for use with graduate students. As Amy Scatlif suggests in her letter to Four Arrows that is shared in the Introduction, alternative dissertations should be introduced early on in academic studies, allowing time for students to experiment with and learn from these models. Some professors might be concerned that this type of text could “muddy” the graduate students’ learning early on. Like many early career scholars, I learned a lot about academic writing from the examples that were shared with me through my coursework. Appreciably, other professors might foresee that using such a text could create extra work, requiring them to provide additional guidance and critical feedback in order to support the students to be successful in these “dangerous” pursuits.

While I can see the challenge of introducing alternative ways of doing research alongside traditionally accepted forms of research and dissertations, I can also see the potential benefits of opening up spaces of greater possibilities within academic work. An early introduction to alternative forms of dissertation may provide a rhizomatic complementarity in the teaching of research and writing that would embody and enliven what Barbara Mann describes as the cooperative binaries that are endemic to Indigenous ways of understanding and knowing the world (explored extensively in her work titled, *Native Americans, Archaeologists, and the Mounds*, 2003). Thus, teaching both the widely-accepted *and* alternative approaches to research and presentation may contribute to more flexible and creative thinking individuals and more robust and dynamic academic communities.