

ARTICLE

Reflections on the afterlives of a PhD thesis

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Funding information

There are no funders to report for this submission.

Abstract

Most readers of this paper will likely have written a PhD thesis, will be in the throes of writing one, or perhaps will be aspiring to write one. There is a huge literature on the practice and experience of PhD research – on designing a thesis, on writing and research, on the student–supervisor relationship, on the doctoral student experience, and so on. In this paper, however, I reflect on a specific question less often asked: in what ways does a PhD thesis live on beyond the time when it can only be thought of as “work in progress”? I develop an answer to this question along four dimensions – the material, instrumental, epistemic, and personal afterlives of a PhD thesis. For this reflection I use my own PhD thesis, awarded in 1985, as the case study. While the paper is therefore autobiographic, it is intended to provoke more general considerations about the longevity of PhD theses and their formative role for their authors and their authors’ subsequent careers. While a PhD thesis can be understood as having a variety of afterlives, those that matter the most are perhaps also those that are less easily recognised.

KEYWORDS

academic careers, autobiography, life story, PhD theses, Sudan

1 | INTRODUCTION

The late Italian philosopher Umberto Eco, in his famous treatise from 1977 on how to write a thesis, offers this prosaic definition of a thesis: “A thesis is a typewritten manuscript, usually 100–400 pages in length, in which the student addresses a particular problem in his [sic] chosen field” (Eco, 2015 [1977], p. 1). But a thesis – whether a Bachelor’s, Master’s, or doctoral – is so much more than this. A research thesis is not just the product Eco describes. It also reflects a process of learning for the thesis writer. In the same work, Eco observes two longer-term uses of a thesis, “a student can write a thesis that becomes the foundation of a broader research project that will continue into the years ahead” and “writing a thesis develops valuable professional skills that are useful after graduation” (2015 [1977], p. 5). These are both rather instrumental functions of a thesis. In this paper I wish to reflect in broader terms on what I call “the afterlives” of a PhD thesis.

The PhD thesis is ubiquitous across the higher academy. It serves as an “obligatory passage point” for the aspiring academic, more so today than a generation or two ago. Within the UK, there are around 26,000 new doctoral graduates each year, about 6% of the global total (Taylor, 2021). From available published sources, I estimate that between 300 and 400 of these UK annual doctoral graduates are in the discipline of Geography. It is also estimated that just over 1% of

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the OECD workforce holds a PhD degree. Most people reading this paper will likely have written a PhD thesis, be in the throes of writing one, or perhaps be aspiring to write one. Or perhaps you have read someone else's thesis. If so, you are likely in a minority. Theses are not widely read. But maybe you are in the process of designing or executing your own PhD project and find the experience overwhelming. Maybe as a recent recipient of a PhD degree you look back with feelings of pride or relief about your PhD thesis; perhaps you still carry scars and wounds from the experience. Or perhaps, like me, after the passage of several decades, your PhD seems to exist as part of a different life, something that exists in "a foreign country", it exists only in the past where "they do things differently" (cf. Hartley, 1953).

Much research attention is given to the experience of completing a PhD thesis. There is a torrent of books about how to succeed at PhD level (e.g., Feibelman, 2011; Phillips & Pugh, 2015) and, since 2010, there has been a dedicated academic journal for research on the doctoral experience, the *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*. In a review in that journal, Jones (2013) surveyed nearly 1000 academic papers about doctoral studies dating back to 1971. He identified six central themes evident across these studies, namely: teaching, doctoral programme design, writing and research, employment and career, student-supervisor relationship, and the doctoral student experience.

Stubb et al. (2012) analyse the perceptions of doctoral students about the meaning of a PhD, concluding that those who see a PhD as a process of developing expertise rather than as the making of a product generally experience better well-being and study engagement. Chakraverty (2020) investigates the phenomenon of imposter syndrome among PhD students, while Thompson (2012) and Kawase (2015) study the distinctive textual characteristics of PhD theses (compared to research articles). Robins and Kanowski (2008) evaluate the specific mode of PhD by publication. Other work has investigated good PhD supervisory practices (Ali et al., 2016; Davis, 2019) and there is a considerable literature on how PhD theses are examined and how examiners apply different criteria to the examination process and report writing (Hodgson, 2020; Mullins & Kiley, 2002). Beyond the PhD experience itself, there is a substantial literature on the economic value of PhD-qualified graduates in the workforce (e.g., Zolas et al., 2015) and rapidly expanding literature on the role of PhD theses in structuring knowledge, a research agenda pursued through network analysis, prosopography, or bibliometrics (e.g., Larivière, 2012). And there are the perennial commentaries reflecting on the changing nature of the PhD in the academy and its possible future evolution (e.g., McCook, 2011; Woolston, 2019).

2 | APPROACH

In this paper I am interested in a rather different line of inquiry. I wish to explore a more introspective question concerning the nature of a PhD thesis' existence beyond the few years during which it is being crafted and examined. In what ways does a PhD thesis "live on" for the individual beyond the time when it can only be thought of as work in progress? What are the characteristics of these afterlives? What is the legacy for the individual of completing – or indeed failing to complete – a PhD thesis? I undertake this reflection using my own PhD thesis from the discipline of Geography (Hulme, 1985). The reflection can be read against two strands of geographical scholarship. One is the genre of autobiography in geography, represented for example in Pamela Moss's edited collected *Placing Autobiography in Geography* (Moss, 2001). In this context, the PhD becomes part of a geographer's life story and self-identity. The other is to position this reflection as a sort of "biography of a book" (cf. Keighren, 2013), in which the PhD thesis is interpreted as a particular type of printed text. In this latter approach, I am reflecting on what types of knowledge are contained within a PhD "book", how this knowledge travels, who reads it, and with what effect.

The paper is necessarily personal. I cannot of course escape my positionality as a privileged white, male British geographer, whose entire educational experience was paid for by the state. Nor can I escape the ways in which the afterlives of my PhD have been shaped by my subsequent life course (of which more later). But this reflection is intended to provoke some more general considerations about the longevity of PhD theses and their formative role for their authors and for their authors' subsequent careers. I draw some implications at the end for readers at different career stages. After a very brief contextual statement about my own thesis, I pursue this reflection by considering the material, instrumental, epistemic, and personal afterlives of a thesis.

3 | MY PHD EXPERIENCE

Since I am using my own PhD thesis as my case study, a word about its context and content is appropriate. My thesis was titled "Secular Climatic and Hydrological Change in Central Sudan" and the degree was awarded in 1985 from the

University of Wales. The project was undertaken in the Department of Geography at University College Swansea (UCS) between 1981 and 1984 and was funded through a three-year Natural Environmental Research Council Studentship awarded to my two supervisors, Dr Rory Walsh (hydrologist) and Dr Allen Parry (climatologist). The project benefited from being part of a Joint Research Project initiated by the Departments of Geography at UCS and the University of Khartoum, Sudan, a collaboration formalised in 1977 under the sponsorship of the British Inter-University Council for Higher Education Overseas (Davies, 1986). This cooperative project was created as part of the United Nations University programme on desertification and land degradation, a priority programme for the Government of Sudan in the 1970s and 1980s (Davies, 1978). This Joint Project enabled me to make two research visits to Sudan, one for six months and the other for two months (Figure 1). It also meant that I became part of a larger group of PhD students, variously British and Sudanese, who during the early 1980s were undertaking their doctoral research projects on various aspects of the physical and human geography of Sudan. My PhD analysis followed what would now be called a mixed-methods approach, embracing climatological analysis, field hydrology, historical aerial photography and site-based observations, and interviews with rural inhabitants of the White Nile Province of Sudan.

4 | PHD AS MATERIAL OBJECT

As Eco observed, a PhD thesis is both an intellectual achievement and a research training/academic apprenticeship. It is a form of disciplining with a certain academic tradition. But a PhD thesis also exists as a material object. In the mid-1980s, I was required to submit six bound copies of my final approved thesis, one each for the British Library, the University of Wales, my Department, the University of Khartoum, and my two supervisors. Plus one for myself. Do all seven copies of the thesis still exist? I don't know, but at least the British Library displays a digital record referring to their archived copy (Figure 2a). Since the 1980s, the additional requirement to submit a digital copy of the PhD thesis has become routine. In some cases this now supplants the need to create and submit physical copies of a thesis. This obviously has implications for accessibility and legibility – although see below. MacDuff (2008, p. 2381) proposes the analogy for the traditional thesis is a dark secluded room located in an exclusive neighbourhood (material access only) versus the welcoming aura of “a virtual guest house” (digital access) to contrast these two cases.

The materiality of my PhD thesis was important for me – and remains so today. At the time of submission, the material thesis fulfilled for me an important psychological and performative role. It was shown – in its earliest months and years – to friends and family. While they may not all have grasped the abstract content of the thesis, they could grasp something



FIGURE 1 Mike Hulme outside the Department of Geography, University of Khartoum, December 1982

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| | | | |
|----------------------------|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Title: | Secular climatic and hydrological change in central Sudan | | |
| Author: | Hulme, M. | | |
| Awarding Body: | University College of Swansea | | |
| Current Institution: | Swansea University | | |
| Date of Award: | 1985 | | |
| Availability of Full Text: | <div>  Full text unavailable from ETHOS. Please contact the current institution's library for further details. </div> | | |
| Abstract: | No abstract available | | |
| Supervisor: | Not available | Sponsor: | Not available |
| Qualification Name: | Thesis (Ph.D.) | Qualification Level: | Doctoral |
| ETHOS ID: | uk.bl.ethos.637343 | DOI: | Not available |
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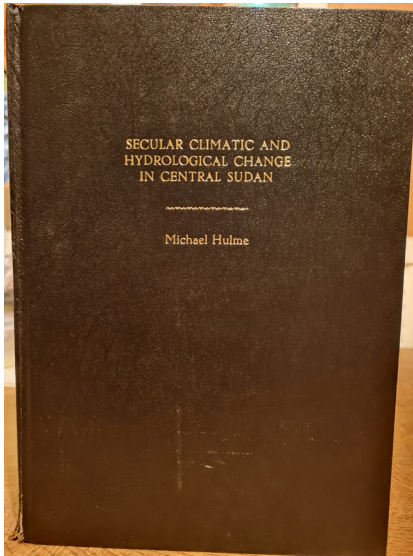


FIGURE 2 Digital and material life. (Left) The online digital evidence of this thesis’ existence within the British Library and (right) a copy of my finally approved and registered PhD thesis

of the gravitas of the thesis through its materiality. This materialisation of the thesis in a physical object offered a tangible sense of achievement following three and a half years of labour, without which the thesis would possess for me and for others a more tenuous “lightness of being”. There was also an important aesthetic quality to the material thesis: the tactile nature of the solid jet-black coverboards and the sombre gold-coloured lettering which inscribed the thesis’ unique identity – title, name, and date (Figure 2b). As material object the thesis could travel with me through physical space – as opposed to mere digital mobility – and so it travelled with me from Swansea to my subsequent homes in Salford and Norwich. The materiality of the thesis therefore offers me a sensory quality of connection with the remembered experience of the PhD in a way a digital thesis could not.

5 | PHD AS ACADEMIC PASSPORT

This is the most instrumental of the various afterlives of a thesis I consider. The PhD thesis serves as a formal academic qualification, signalling a certified educational achievement, much like school qualifications (GCSEs, A-levels in the UK) and Bachelor's or Master's degrees. In public surveys one may be asked to state one's level of educational attainment and the PhD often serves as the highest specified category. There is no higher formal academic qualification that can be *earned* as opposed to being *gifted* (e.g., as an honorary award). This academic accomplishment is marked in various ways: with the endowment of the title “Dr” (to distinguish the PhD degree from lesser qualifications), through a graduation ceremony where doctoral graduands are often marked by different attire, in the issuance of a certificate authenticating the conferral of the degree, and so on.

Following the award of the PhD degree, the thesis first enters the professional CV. The thesis thus becomes part of one's academic identity and biography. If nothing else, the PhD thesis lives on through the CV as a signifier of an academic qualification. In my case, 36 years later the thesis is still on display within my CV:

1985 PhD in Applied Climatology, University of Wales, Swansea

Thesis title: *Secular Climatic and Hydrological Change in Central Sudan*

A PhD thesis exists as an academic passport, an accreditation, a proof of an apprenticeship served. It opens the door for an individual to apply for certain jobs – not least academic ones¹ – that would otherwise be foreclosed. Although in fact in my case this was not quite so. I was employed by the University of Salford in September 1984 only on the *promise* of a subsequent PhD qualification. My thesis was only partially written at the time; it was a further seven months before it was submitted and two months beyond this before its approval. Thus there exists a liminal zone between the pre- and post-PhD award where the thesis exists as a promise of achievement and competence, a liminality recognised in job adverts where candidates might be welcomed whose theses are still in “the final stages of writing or revision”. Yet this accreditation function of the thesis is very self-centred; it accredits the individual through their subsequent career, but not necessarily those others who, inevitably but often less recognisably, were part of its co-production.

This instrumental afterlife of a PhD thesis can of course be threatened by subsequent challenges to either the integrity of the thesis – for example through plagiarism – or through exposure of fabrication of the degree award. I have never been requested to prove my accreditation; indeed, I do not know where my PhD certificate is should I be asked to present it, nor how I would go about authenticating my degree if challenged. Neither have I been accused of plagiarism. The claim of a PhD thesis holder comes with its own authority. Yet there have been many notable cases of both plagiarism and fabrication among prominent public figures. Thus the population of holders of plagiarised PhD theses in Russia is apparently substantial enough for Abalkina and Libman (2020) to perform an analysis to show that Russian governors holding such plagiarised theses are more inclined both to dishonest behaviour and to possess poor managerial capabilities compared to a control group. And the case of Grace Mugabe, the wife of the late Zimbabwean president, reveals one of the many possibilities of fabricating a PhD thesis.

A PhD thesis also keeps giving – sometimes for years or decades – through the academic networks and individuals which the thesis cultivates and solidifies. These might be supervisors, examiners, research subjects, partner organisations, academic collaborators, and so on. At the beginning of my career, my PhD supervisors became my chief sponsors and guarantors, acting as referees in job applications – although with time they receded from view. Similarly with examiners, although my external examiner – A. T. Grove – proved a valuable interlocutor for at least a decade after he approved my thesis. The thesis inducted me into a community of Africanists (through the Sudan Studies Association of the UK), the loose network of British and Sudanese doctoral students who had studied with me, and a less well-defined network of empirical climatologists. These individuals and networks, gifted me by the thesis, faded with time. But this afterlife of a PhD never entirely disappears. It slowly takes on the form of a palimpsest: successively overlain with newer colleagues and networks that bisect and interweave with those formed during the PhD. As an exercise in research training, the PhD thesis also lives on through the analytical skills developed through the design, execution, and writing of a thesis. In my case, these included computer programming, statistical analysis, aerial photography, and water-quality sampling. Some of these skills were put to subsequent use, others hardly at all. But even after 36 years, there remains a lingering residue of some of these skills.

6 | PHD AS CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

Most institutions in their published criteria specifying the conditions for the award of a PhD degree have a formulation similar to this one taken from the University of Cambridge regulations:

A significant contribution to the field of study through the creation and interpretation of *new knowledge*, connection of previously unrelated facts or the development of new theory or revision of older views. [Emphasis added]

This attainment is to be judged by the examiners through a viva voce, but does the afterlife of a PhD thesis in fact prove their judgement to be sound? In what sense does a PhD thesis make a “significant contribution” to a field of study? Does the thesis create “new knowledge”? This is often the ambition of doctoral students as they embark on their research, the desire to make a discovery, to re-write a theory, to invent a device, or to register a patent. They perhaps are situated as generators of “middle-order knowledge”, which lies somewhere between “popular knowledge” and that generated by well-established academics (Philo, 1998). Only by analysing the afterlife of a PhD thesis can these claims of significance or novelty be meaningfully certified and, even then, they will be subject to the intellectual revisionism that occurs in most disciplines over the *longue durée*.

In my case, the thesis has been cited just twice according to Google Scholar (the thesis has no citation history in Scopus) – once in Carter and Parry (1986) and once in IUCN (1989). The thesis itself cannot therefore be said to have left its mark on any “field of study”. Some have argued that the move to digital theses and online repositories has altered this aspect of a PhD’s afterlife. However, a study conducted by Larivière et al. (2008) showed the opposite. The impact of PhD theses as information sources has been generally declining over the last century, with the exception of the period 1945–1975. These authors found no evidence of electronic theses having a more penetrating impact. In fact, the opposite: since the introduction of the electronic registration of theses, the evaluated impact of PhD theses has declined further.

There are many other ways of course in which the contents of a PhD thesis might be read and assimilated by others, might be said to have “contributed to a field of study”. In STEM disciplines especially, PhD theses may form the basis for new techniques, datasets, models, or patents, which then have their own afterlives. Some PhD theses form the basis for published literature reviews and some are constructed by publications alone. Even if not the latter, published academic papers or monographs derived from the PhD can become widely cited. (And this is apart from the broader public interest and general uptake of ideas developed in a thesis that may occur). In my case, between 1983 and 1990 I published seven academic articles, and two short “notes”, that derived exclusively or largely from my PhD thesis. (Interestingly, in none of these derivative publications did I cite my own thesis). In total, these publications have been cited 252 times with an aggregate longitudinal distribution of cites shown in Figure 3. Many of these papers existed for years at a time without being cited at all. Most have been largely forgotten from the “body of current knowledge”; at best, their significance is retained only for historians of the field of study. Nevertheless, it seems far more likely that journal articles – or monographs – derived from the PhD thesis will make a greater “contribution to knowledge” than the thesis itself. This would appear to support arguments in favour of PhD by publication (see Mason et al., 2020).

7 | PHD AS LIFE COURSE

Yet perhaps it is not the material or instrumental afterlives of the PhD thesis nor a thesis’ contribution to the body of knowledge or field of study that are the most important. A different way of reflecting on the afterlife of a PhD thesis is through the idea of life course theory (Elder et al., 2004). This places emphasis on the many ways in which individual circumstances and larger social events and experiences condition the lives of individuals. From this perspective, as also from Bourdieu’s notion of “academic habitus” (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 1), the PhD thesis represents a significant series of events and encounters which leave their traces on the researcher. These traces travel with them, embodied, through their subsequent life course. Ng (2017), for example, uses life course theory to explicate the emotional entanglement between researcher and research subject; she reflects on how such entanglement altered the knowledge which formed her thesis.

A life course perspective is also useful, I suggest, for re-evaluating the later significance of a completed PhD thesis for the researcher. Viewed thus, a PhD thesis is understood as much more than a product, or a result of a research process, or as an academic training. Rather, it is understood as formative of a researcher’s subsequent choices and sensibilities, hence their life course. Here resides perhaps the most interesting afterlives of a PhD thesis, but also those that are least

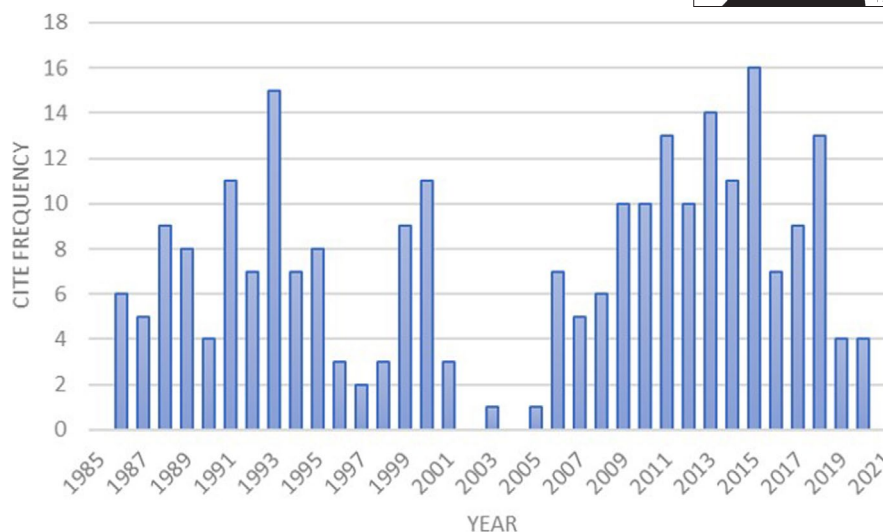


FIGURE 3 Frequency of citations (by year) to the published academic articles (7) and short notes (2) derived from my PhD thesis. Source: Google Scholar (March 2021)

tangible and self-evident. A PhD thesis inscribes itself in the researcher in multiple ways – some superficially, some more deeply – in the character, emotions, identity, and modes of reasoning of the individual. Some of these inscriptions may take years to surface or be articulated, if indeed they ever do. And these surfacings, when they occur, may variously be enlightening and surprising, uncomfortable and disturbing.

In my case, the inscriptions of my PhD thesis became evident only through the passage of years, the serendipity of subsequent events and encounters, and occasional external prompts that caused me to reflect on some of the arguments I made, or did not make, in the thesis itself. I mention three such examples here to illustrate. One of these concerned my relationship with data. The empirical part of my thesis research involved considerable time spent in repetitive tasks of (meteorological) data transcription in a (literally) dusty archive and subsequent data entry into a computer (this was before digital scanning technologies were widespread). My thesis introduced me to the arduous work of data digitisation, which shaped a considerable part of my subsequent work in the Climatic Research Unit at the University of East Anglia in the 1990s. But it was only 20 years later and with the emergence of large-scale projects of meteorological “data rescue” using citizens as mass data transcribers that I began to re-interpret my own experiences in the 1980s as an exercise in data rescue. I could re-imagine the hundreds of hours spent in the archive transcribing data as a contribution to a much larger social goal than I had imagined at the time.

Another legacy of my thesis is how it rendered for me a particular manifestation of the precarity of human life. My thesis refers frequently to the interactions between climatic variation and the vicissitudes of human life, not least mediated through water scarcity. At the time, the broader regional context for this set of observations was the Ethiopian famine of 1983–1985 and the globally mediated construction of that tragedy through subsequent public events such as LiveAid in the summer of 1985. But my first-hand encounter with the precarity of life in a dryland environment left emotional traces in me that, on occasions, were subsequently remobilised in the context of drought and famine in other parts of the world. For example, I remember vividly a workshop a few years ago at Bath Spa University when I was involved in a public discussion about the significance of climate change. In being charged with underplaying the prospective harms of future climate change, I found that my remembered encounters with the rural poor of Sudan and their daily struggle for water suddenly – and surprisingly and disturbingly – triggered in me a deeply emotional response to the discussant.

Operating at a deeper subliminal level within my thesis was the conditioning of knowledge on cultural context. The empirical dimensions of my thesis were all established within a very different cultural context to my own, that of a rural Islamic culture in Sudan. My thesis says very little, if anything, explicitly about this context. Yet I can now see that the entire immersive experience of my thesis research and writing was conditioned by this cultural encounter. As the idea of climate change has evolved and mobilised the world politically in the years since my thesis was written, I have been prompted to rethink my reading of climate and its changes using cultural and sometimes explicitly religious lenses. My PhD thesis laid the seeds for this understanding, even though these seeds had lain dormant for many years.

It is only possible now, many years later, for me to see how my PhD thesis conditioned much of my later thinking about how climate and its variations, and its associations with different social worlds, should be studied: numerically, socially, culturally, historically. None of these lines of thought are explicit in my PhD thesis. Even less is any such analysis present. You could read all 280 pages of the thesis and not really be much the wiser about any of this. Yes, the thesis codified and represented certain knowledge about “climatic and hydrological changes in central Sudan” in academic forms of analysis and writing. It constructed “new knowledge” and in a certain sense made this knowledge mobile. But the deeper insights of the PhD thesis have lived on in much less visible and explicit ways. The personal and tacit knowledge of the thesis (Polanyi, 1958) – embodied in memory, thought, sensibility, and practice – has shaped all my subsequent readings, analysis, and writings on climate change. This then is perhaps the most significant afterlife of the PhD thesis.

8 | CONCLUSION

For long periods over the 36 years since its completion, my PhD thesis has been, or may appeared to have been, inert and lifeless. The thesis as material object has resided on my bookshelf, not read, referred to, or looked at. There is no evidence that anyone has read this thesis for many decades (if at all) or, if they have, their reading of it seems to have left no trace. Throughout this time, the thesis has held a prominent place in my CV, but this particular afterlife of the thesis has been passive and merely performative. For a few years during and immediately after the award of my PhD, I published a handful of papers derived from the thesis. These have, on average, each been cited in the academic and academic-related literature captured by Google Scholar less than once a year since the 1980s. And until excavating my relationship with my thesis for the purposes of this paper, the one person with whom the thesis might have had a lively relationship – in other words, me – had very rarely thought about it or, even less, opened its pages.

And yet it lives. My argument in this autobiographic paper is that while a PhD thesis should be recognised as having a variety of afterlives, the one that perhaps matters most is the one that is least tangible. I have reflected on some of the ways in which my thesis shaped who I am, my relationships with others, and how I have come to think about knowledge and about climate change. The examples used in this paper are of course unique to my particular PhD thesis and life course and they should be read against some of the wider debates in Geography about the future of the PhD (see Boyle et al., 2015 and the associated special issue of *GeoJournal*). But this “autobiography of my PhD” points towards some general implications or suggestions:

- For current doctoral students: look at the experience of doctoral study in broader terms than solely to secure an academic training, qualification, or passport – most important as these things undoubtedly are.
- For earlier career academics: recognise that there is more yet to discover than you perhaps realise in your PhD thesis and its various afterlives.
- For later career academics: it may be productive from time to time to reflect, with the benefit of years, and share with others who come after you what your PhD thesis has gifted to you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Diane Davis, University of California at Davis, for her talk on dryland climatologies in September 2018, at the Centre Alexandre Koyré, Paris, which provoked the reacquaintance with my PhD thesis described here. I also thank my graduate reading group – David, Freddie, Kari, Maximilian, Noam, Tom – for their comments on an early version of this paper. The helpful suggestions of two anonymous reviewers are also acknowledged.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available from Google Scholar.

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ENDNOTE

¹ But other career choices also. For example, in the USA about 40% of PhD graduates start work in the private sector, only about one third in the academy.

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How to cite this article: Hulme, M. (2022) Reflections on the afterlives of a PhD thesis. *Area*, 00, 1–10. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12779>