Abstract of "Tuneless Numbers: New Media, Poetry, and the Oulipo" by Ian Sampson, Ph.D., Brown University, May 2020

A list of everything a novelist ate and drank for a year. A book of poetry in which each chapter uses only a single vowel. A palimpsest of Shakespeare's Sonnets. Simple to describe, fiendishly difficult to execute, such texts are examples of potential literature – after the Oulipo, or Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle, a group of poets and mathematicians devoted to the art of writing under constraint. My dissertation reads the work of five authors in this tradition – Georges Perec, Italo Calvino, Christian Bök, Caroline Bergvall, and Jen Bervin – through the lens of new media theory, arguing that their use of literary constraints both resonates with and pushes back against the rise of digital automation. On the one hand, these authors subject themselves to routines and procedures that resemble the logic of an algorithm, forging analogies between rhetorical forms – the epic catalogue, for example, which seeks to enumerate information in a discrete sequence – and the data structures that drive computation. On other hand, by framing this algorithmic logic within the domain of literature, and by carrying out programmatic tasks by hand, these writers also resist the lure of the digital by revealing its capacity for failure and error. Read closely, their work reveals slippages and omissions that betray their procedural rigor, colliding with a world that is too chaotic, too granular, to conform to the protocols that govern digital logic. In this way, my dissertation challenges the commonplace view of potential literature as a cerebral practice that brackets the body and its social entanglements: on the contrary, I argue, these works bear witness to the embodied act of writing and the unexpected swerves and detours that define aesthetic

experience. Read through the lens of media theory, the art of écriture sous contrainte offers new strategies for defying what Tung-Hui Hu calls "the sovereignty of data" and its desire to quantify every facet of human endeavor.