REVISING ACADEMIC GENEROSITY

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ENTERING THE ACADEMIC WORLD is hard. From the very first moment we enrol as research students we are bombarded with statistics on a job market in crisis, told we have to publish or perish, advised to present at the right conferences, and encouraged to participate in the academic community, all while tasked with producing original work that should make a substantial contribution to our fields. With what feels like an ever-increasing pressure bearing down on us, academic work does not always seem like a process of discovery but instead like a long and arduous labour. After two years of reading about the dire future for the humanities PhD student, we wanted to ask: What could we do to have a positive impact on our futures and on those of our HDR peers?

The answer came from several sources, but the first and most impactful opportunity was a wonderful workshop put together by a professor in the University of Sydney's English department, Dr Anya Adair.[1] In this workshop, Dr Adair suggested that we, as fledging academics, should craft our own opportunities to grow, and to take responsibility for producing the much desired 'outputs' section of our CVs. From attending this workshop, and after participating in two inspirational postgraduate conferences in 2017—an interdisciplinary conference titled "Peripherality" based at the Department of English, and the annual Department of History postgraduate conference—we came up with the idea

1. In 2017, Dr Anya Adair, now Assistant Professor in Law and Humanities at the University of Hong Kong, led a workshop titled "Research, Teaching and the Professional Portfolio: A Workshop Series for the English Postgraduate." With those attending, Dr Adair shared invaluable skills regarding how to utilise one's time as a PhD candidate and how to pool resources with other students to generate opportunities and support each other.

to organise our own conference. Given the difficult and often precarious nature of academic work, we wanted to shift the focus of this conference on to the play and imagination that goes in to academic work but is rarely discussed or embraced.[2] We asked ourselves a range of questions: What if we saw possibilities instead of limitations? What if we focused on the joy of discovery? And how might this focus on possibility and joy affect our work? In late 2017, the result of these inquiries emerged in the form of a conference titled "'What if?': Reading Worlds of Possibility," an event that has now transformed into this special volume of *Philament*. If we acknowledge that there are considerable obstacles to building an academic career, then remembering why one begins such a difficult endeavour and the joy that accompanies it is important. To that end, before moving into the interesting works that comprise this volume, we would like to spend some time revisiting how we approach, define, and practise academic work.

What reason does one have to undertake a PhD in the humanities? Perhaps the simplest answer to that question is that PhD candidates feel an intense passion for learning and harbour a deep love of research. However, for most of us, this zest for knowledge will dim while producing a PhD thesis. In fact, academic communities have formed around and been reinforced by the "trouble talk" which we engage in around the lunchroom table.[3] The intense focus required by the often solitary condition of academic work makes these lunchtime sessions cathartic. However, when the ritual of commiserating over the tension, anxiety, and stress of academic work becomes our primary mode of communication, we postgraduates put our ability to celebrate at risk. Holding on to our initial exuberance for research is what gives us the resilience we need to survive as early career academics. In interviews with over five-hundred Australian early career academics (ECAs), Bosanquet and others used a "collective narrative approach" to capture the experiences described by the

2. For further discussion on the precarity of the early career academic see Ben Eldridge, "Institutional Peripherality: The Many Deaths of Humanity", *Philament* 24, no. 1 (2018): 1–13; and Eldridge, "The Peripherality of Optimism; or, This Time It's Personal," *Philament* 24, no. 2 (2018): 1–14.

3. Inger Mewburn, "Troubling talk: assembling the PhD candidate," *Studies in Continuing Education* 33, no. 3 (2011): 331.

ECA community.[4] The themes that consistently arose in their interviews were "uncertainty and insecurity of casualisation; pressures to prioritise research over teaching, administration and community engagement; the challenges of workload and work–life balance; and a love for academic work."[5] While three of these four themes highlight the difficulty faced by the changing academic workforce, what seems to keep people going in the early stages of their research careers is a desire to maintain a positive engagement with their academic work. Taking time to share issues and developments in their work with peers is an important part of preparing for the precarity of academic work; but, equally, taking time to share joys and successes with our peers is a vital way to remain inspired.

Where do public-facing publications and teaching experiences fit in among grant applications, the humanities monograph, and the alleged end goal of permanent work in the form of a lectureship (or what our American counterparts call the "tenure track")? Teaching is a valuable way for a PhD candidate to think about themselves as a scholar. After all, while research-only positions exist, many humanities professors spend a good proportion of their semester time lecturing, tutoring, and marking. It should be noted that teaching itself can lead to a precarious situation in which ECAs receive no more than ongoing casual employment ("casualisation") in the current university model. However, teaching can also enhance the research and writing activities to which we return after a day in the classroom. Teaching forces the scholar—whether new or experienced—to always be thinking about others in the room. Gathering feedback, modelling scholarly attitudes, and anticipating challenges and excitement alike: all of these are essential in the classroom—as well as outside of it. And what is peer review if not a rigorous, formalised mode of such scholarly feedback? What is the business of any department or faculty if it

4. Agnes Bosanquet, Alana Mailey, Kelly E. Matthews, et al.,"Redefining 'Early Career' in Academia: A Collective Narrative Approach," *Higher Education Research & Development* 36, no. 5 (2017): 890.

5. Ibid., 895.

is not the *modelling* of scholarship, a process that allows students and scholars to watch each other in practice, and thus to learn? In editing this volume, we learnt how giving and receiving feedback within our teams was another model of generous and collaborative scholarship.[6] Throughout this process we have experienced invaluable generosity from other students as well as members in and beyond our department, each of them providing valuable feedback. This kind of collaboration shows us the extent to which teaching and research are intricately linked. Although working in a precarious context, we turn with anticipation towards the work we are already doing as scholars, whether at our desks or in classrooms, and towards the work we might be doing next.

Although formally grounded in queer and affect theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work on paranoid and reparative reading can readily be applied to the kind of critical work done by postgraduates and ECAs. Thesis projects in particular require a paranoid and reflexive way of thinking. As Sedgwick writes, "In a world where no one need be delusional to find evidence of systematic oppression, to theorize out of anything *but* a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious, or complacent."[7] A higher degree research project in the humanities requires this kind of close reading. It demands that the scholar become the ultimate critical reader; they must anticipate that something significant will emerge from their research, and become a master in their chosen field. But such demands are difficult to shoulder: How can a scholar focus on discovery and mastery in the face of an uncertain future? The title of our conference, "'What If': Reading Worlds of Possibility," was developed in response to this push to become a paranoid critic. Instead of eliciting paranoid readings, we invited participants to produce generative—or what Sedgwick would call "reparative"—readings.[8] We asked postgraduates and ECAs to situate themselves not only as critical investigators but also as creators, allowing themselves to be vulnerable to discussion and

6. While peer review refers to a formal process in scholarly publishing, we are only more conscious now that it is in itself a model of generous and collaborative scholarship.

7. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 126, 148–49.

8. Ibid., 148–49.

feedback. Rather than invite paranoia, we designed a conference theme based on the exchange of ideas, encouraging presenters to find new ways of thinking about their research areas. With this edition of *Philament*, which we have titled "Revisions," we continue the work of this project, which aims to encourage and be hopeful. It is important to allow new researchers a space in which they might make revisions of their work and in their field, and to insert themselves into the academic landscape while they are still developing their perspectives.

While editing this volume it became clear to us that asking authors to be open to limitless possibilities and a sense of discovery in their research had resulted in articles that thoughtfully reconsider their objects of study, and even to deal with very vulnerable and sensitive topics. Samantha Lewis's article, "'Shut Up or I'll Shut You Up': Family Violence in Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children*," examines how Stead's novel represents and explores family and domestic violence. Nicole Ong's article, "The Language of Touch: Rethinking silence and Trauma in *Anil's Ghost*," engages with the field of trauma studies to understand how literature—as well as touch—may allow one to work through the deep and personal struggle of dealing with trauma. Cheryl O'Byrne's "'Betwixt and Between': Reading *Poppy* as a Work of Autofiction" offers a revisionist theory of how form is used to produce and read novels, asking the reader to consider how "autofiction" achieves its effects as a literary genre. All of these articles approach the texts they study from a new perspective, asking what it means to revise the critical consensus, and to think about these novels in new ways. We particularly appreciated how each contributor responded to our prompts, both at the conference and in their articles, thus revising their own positions. In addition to our peer-reviewed articles, Nanda Jarosz's review of Timothy Morton's *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* offers a new way to approach scholarly revision;

and this volume's Excursions contributor, poet Dashiell Moore, also provides a revisionist perspective in his creative work.

We would like to thank the many people who helped us stage the hold the initial conference and subsequently to produce this volume. We would like to begin by thanking Oliver Moore, our conference co-creator and organiser. Oliver's role in organising the conference, coming up with the theme, designing the posters, and chairing several sessions, was integral to the whole event. It is through their contribution that this was possible. We would also like to acknowledge everyone who helped make the conference possible. We give special thanks to the University of Sydney Department of English for its support, and particularly to Brigid Rooney, Sarah Gleeson-White, and Peter Marks, each of whom played a role in getting the conference off the ground. Many thanks to Georgia Holmes and Charlie Tapper for their administrative assistance, and to Brenda Zeng, Harry Nguyen, and SUPRA for their financial assistance. Thank you as well to Ben Eldridge for his support and advice, and to Dashiell Moore for his assistance. We also want to thank each of our invited guests, conference presenters, and anyone who contributed to our conference but whose names we have neglected. All of your contributions made this edition possible, and we hope to pay forward this kind of generosity in our own scholarly futures. A special thanks to *Philament* general editor Chris Rudge for supporting this special volume. Finally, thank you to our readers. We hope this volume demonstrates the generosity we seek to foster in our academic communities and that it encourages you to do the same in your academic practices.