Text Review

Now for the Genetically Modified PhD

review by Kevin Brophy

Courageous Research
Elaine Martin and Judith Booth (eds)
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In the March 2004 issue of the Australian Book Review Frank Bongiorno's letter to the editor addressed one perennial aspect of the puzzle of the PhD. He was alarmed that among non-fiction publications based on PhD theses, anything that seeks to move beyond anecdote to argument and analysis becomes fair game for reviewers. He was writing in defence of Clare Wright's Beyond the Ladies Lounge (MUP 2003), a feminist study that adopts an academically ignored aspect of history, and takes it seriously. Wright's book began its life as a PhD thesis. In Aviva Tuffield's review (ABR Dec/Jan 2003-4), the significance and innovation of this social history are recognised, but the thesis-like aspects of the book (repetition of the main argument, intricacy of detail, piling up of evidence) are said to bog the reader down.

This mini-controversy in the pages of ABR is indicative of a continuing series of puzzles over why anyone would attempt a PhD, how a PhD can be shaped, and what to do with a PhD. For each of these troubling questions there is of course a solid traditional answer. But in the humanities and especially in the emerging field of creative arts, fewer students are producing traditional PhDs. It is possible to write a novel, a film script, a series of poems, paint pictures, take photographs, produce installations, sculptures or virtual events in digital media as parts of a PhD project. The inclusion of creative work in PhDs in Australian universities over the past decade is now beginning to mutate the PhD itself. Alongside the effects of this innovation (an accommodation to the demands of students that PhDs be truly meaningful and invigorating inquiries) are the continuing self-reflexive effects of the radical practices of feminism, race studies, gender studies, post-structural critique and other meta-critical practices.
No one writing a novel wants to produce a manuscript that reads more like an academic thesis than a publishable piece of fiction, but more and more young men and women writing novels want to write them in the context of a PhD project. Why is this the case, and how is it possible? The answers to 'why?' will, I expect, fill a number of PhD theses over the next hundred years. More immediately students and their institutions of learning are attempting to devise ways to do these new PhDs.

_Courageous Research_ is both a resource book and a snapshot of the contemporary state of the PhD in the human sciences and the creative arts. There are eight chapters by eight students who have completed PhDs that are constructed against the grain.

The following examples of these chapters indicates the range of the collection of essays and reports. Doris Brett writes eloquently of the various strands of analytical, autobiographical and creative writing that contributed to her strangely-structured and later controversial book, _Eating the Underworld_. (Random House 2001). David Webb explores the possibility of including personal, spiritual and literary dimensions in a scientific inquiry into suicide. Deborah Wood, visual artist, writes with integrity and grit of her visual art as itself a painstakingly constructed argument. It is very often the relation between the creative and the analytical that becomes a source of trouble and anxiety in the production of the new, hybrid PhD. Wood quotes Bracha Lichtenburg Ettinger's observation: 'Painting produces theory and kernels that can transform it; theory does not alter painting in process; it can draw stalks out of it and translate them into its own language' (from _Inside the Visible_, edited by de Zegher, 1996). She uses this image of the stalk to locate her theoretical reflections on her work as she developed her 'art-practice based research method'. Tellingly, she concludes her discussion by noting, 'The challenges to traditional form in my thesis arose not out of a desire to be different but rather from the need to find a form that honoured and reflected my research practice'. This contribution is another example of the subtle and sophisticated manner in which artists are reclaiming the ground of theory as a basis and a product of their practice. And it is exciting to read an artist's engagement with theory in a way that is not possible when reading the theoretical output of critics who are not engaged in practice. Margaret Trail records the development of a PhD that investigates and performs the sounds of Australian Rules football. Like Clare Wright's book on women publicans, this PhD probes an unexplored but ubiquitous aspect of Australian social history. In addition it contributes to the growing area of aural or sound art. Russell Walsh dissipated most of his childhood in front of the television, but thanks to a lame joke delivered in an episode of _Robin Hood_, he is now conducting a PhD research project in the gay saunas of Melbourne. The project begins with
Claude Lanzmann's nine-and-a-half hour documentary film, *Shoah*, which, though it does not reveal new information does produce an 'effect of knowledge' not achievable through books or data. This film serves as a methodological model for an inquiry into the performance that constitutes the gay sauna scene in Melbourne, and linked with this an examination of the PhD thesis as a naturalised performance.

The purpose of this book is displayed through its title and the image on the front cover - a diver launching from a cliff into the sea many hundreds of metres below. The message is that it requires some courage to persevere with a PhD that does not fit easily into the longstanding scholarly model, but nevertheless must prove itself rigorous and valid. Valerie Walkerdine concludes the collection with a vivid essay of reminiscence and argument, reminding us that a PhD can begin as a niggling feeling that something we have been told is not quite right. To listen to these intimations, articulate them, interrogate them and tease them out requires courage. This is a book full of ideas and inspiration for anyone contemplating setting out on a PhD that is a little risky.

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