

Bookreview: Identity anecdotes: translation and media culture

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cultures of media production and the texts they create – many of which represent a powerful challenge to prevailing discourses of gender, sexuality and identity. As Kearney observes, through their insistence to be both seen and heard, ‘girl media producers are a disruptive force, and we do well to consider the changes to popular culture and dominant society their presence is provoking’ (p. 13).

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Meaghan Morris, *Identity Anecdotes: Translation and Media Culture*.
London: Sage, 2006. 250 pp. ISBN 9780761961154 (hbk) £70.00;
ISBN 9780761961161 (pbk) £21.99.

This latest collection of essays from Meaghan Morris brings together a body of work written between 1988 and 1999, dealing with what Morris calls in her introduction ‘nationality, translation and “speech institutions”’ in order to sketch out a ‘pragmatics of identity’ and a ‘*rhetoric* of critical practice’, first provoked by the invitation to write a piece about her relation to national identity and feminism for *Camera Obscura* in 1984. All the essays, with the exception of the substantial introductory essay, have been published before in a range of locations both popular and academic, but most appear to have been revised and updated for this volume.

Meaghan Morris has remained one of the leading figures in the international field of cultural studies for many years; she is among its most formidable scholars of positions and yet one of its most accessible, engaging and personal voices. The ‘identity anecdote’, indeed, is echoed in her own performance practice: the personal story or confession elaborated in elegant and surprising ways as a means of mediating between her view of an issue and that held by those with whom she has chosen to engage. These essays are among the most impressive examples of that practice. They were written over a period when Morris was what is often euphemistically called ‘an independent scholar’. Over this period, she literally lived off the quality of her published or presented work – usually performed as public lectures or seminars before her peers rather than her students. This must have been a financially precarious existence, but it also lacked the distractions of the full-time academic position that Morris later took up. As a consequence, these essays have the finely-crafted and highly-nuanced finish of the very best work in cultural studies.

Many readers will be familiar with individual pieces in this collection. The bicentenary piece ‘Panorama: The Live, the Dead and the Living’ has been anthologized before, and ‘White Panic, or Mad Max and the Sublime’, has also appeared in various forms: it formed the basis for a series of memorable public lectures that Morris presented in Australia and



elsewhere in the early 1990s. The critique of David Harvey's *Condition of Postmodernity* has for many years been compulsory reading for anyone wanting to understand the rise of postmodernism; and making it available within this collection is performing a valuable service. Others, perhaps, are less widely known, such as 'Crazy Talk Is Not Enough: Deleuze and Guattari at *Muriel's Wedding*', which I had not come across before. Throughout these pieces, from the most academic – such as her foreword to Naoki Sakai's *Translation and Subjectivity* to the most playful and personal, such as the account of her early experience of television, 'Uncle Billy, Tina Turner and Me' – there is the directness and fearlessness (and the sense of humour) that many of her comrades in Australian cultural studies have found so inspiring over the years. Along the way, there are also the rich and resonant accounts of the movies and television texts which so often form the ground upon which Morris's arguments are built.

What this collection seems to mark is Morris's sense of the importance of a truly transnational cultural and media studies' commitment to translating its arguments, analyses and experiences across cultural, national and historical 'identity' boundaries. The crucial importance that Morris attaches to translation appears to have emerged in response to something quite specific about the character of cultural and political debate in western societies in the latter half of the 1990s. As she puts it, at this time she was repeatedly provoked to find ways of understanding

why so many appeals to history at this time (whether in tourism, action cinema or televised national politics) were trying to *manage* a profound transformation of the relations between professional, public and popular cultural spheres of national life. (p. 3)

She goes on to point out that

this was the period in which 'globalisation' not only became a key issue in public debate but also began to reshape the institutional contexts – journalistic, cinematic and televisual as well as academic – in which this issue could be formulated and discussed. (p. 3)

Protesting at some of the negative effects of these changes – the 'Taylorization' of the humanities, for example – Morris points out how socially disengaged academic debates (especially in the humanities and especially those about identity) have subsequently become. What is required to counteract such a trend, she argues, is for the cultural critic to embrace a 'critical *proximity*' to their objects of study rather than maintaining a critical distance from them:

Each chapter [in the book] at some point uses a more or less (often much less) personal anecdote as an allegory of this 'proximity', a term I use not only in the sense of establishing a position of nearness to a problem or an object but also in the sense of translatively trying to *touch* (address) a mixed audience; as any journalist knows, anecdotes *work* to make contact and catch people's attention, although they can fail in their nudging, insinuating mission. (p. 5)



Such an allegory of proximity is at the core of a model of cultural studies practice that Morris regards as the 'distinctive emphasis of the book'; its demonstration of the 'value of translation' both for media practitioners and their critics.

Resituating these essays in the academic context of 2006 does enable them to resonate in new ways that are simply useful. For me, however, coming back to most of these essays, there is another great benefit: they remind me of just how much can be achieved by the expert use of the tools of cultural studies engaging with such varied modes of textuality and such contingent forms of identity, while maintaining such a clear focus on the cultural politics of both.

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