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a decade of work from
meaghan morris

MEAGHAN MORRIS

Identity Anecdotes: Translation and Media Culture

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Meaghan Morris is officially an icon in Australian cultural studies, since her career has been read by Tania Lewis in 2003 as a genealogy of the development of the field of Australian cultural studies.¹ Reviewing her latest book in *Cultural Studies Review*, a journal of which she is founding editor, requires a certain amount of homage, which I'm happy to pay. Having just read Angela McRobbie's *The Uses of Cultural Studies*,² it's something of a privilege to read Meaghan Morris's newest text, *Identity Anecdotes: Translation and Media Culture*. It's exciting to read McRobbie but there's a whole other sense of immediacy and relevance to reading Morris in Australia, especially after I have just spent a week in Hong Kong teaching cultural studies. If McRobbie's text is decidedly northern hemisphere in its scope and theoretical leanings, then Morris takes the south and the east as her territory to chart a position that can probably only be made available by being 'outside'.

Morris's extraordinary mix of feminism and Marxism, local and global, national and quotidian, in her brand of cultural critique, and her geographic and intellectual mobility, have an impact on her particular ongoing interest in cultural translation. Having spent time in France, the United States and Asia as well as Australia has meant Morris has been a conduit of theory and its application across cultures and locations in quite momentous ways. She now divides her time between Lingnan University, Hong Kong, where she has been Chair Professor of Cultural Studies since 2000, and more recently the Centre for Cultural Research at University of Western Sydney. Morris's regular material relocations have the effect of sharpening

her view of Australian culture and identity in relation to being elsewhere, and certainly give her an edge on critique from within and without. Working in Asia has also altered Morris's addressee at times: in the introduction she mentions that some chapters were written for an inter-Asian audience rather than a Western or Australian readership. It certainly differs from the self-assured centredness of McRobbie's text. Morris is always questioning, forcing apart assumptions about nation, identity and cultural translation, as she brings a sense of being on the brink of shifts in Asian power relations with the older economic empires of Britain, Europe and the United States.

Morris pays homage to two journals and audiences which have had an impact on this book but in which she has also played considerable roles: *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* and *Traces: A Multilingual Journal of Cultural Theory*. The emphasis on language, or 'speech institutions' as Morris prefers to think about them, is a preoccupation that inhabits these essays; this consideration of 'heterolingual tensions and pleasures inhabiting everyday English' (10) must surely be pressing to a scholar living in Hong Kong. The translation of culture, of meaning, of theory, crucially becomes a 'question of address' (13) at times, and always uncertain. Indeed, identity is also 'a matter of address; that is, as produced by desire and, undoubtedly, history, in an encounter with others'. (6) Interestingly the volume is dedicated to the historian Donald Horne (1921–2005).

Like *Too Soon, Too Late* (1998) and *The Pirate's Fiancée* (1988), *Identity Anecdotes* is a collection of Meaghan Morris essays, all of

which have been previously published in earlier versions during the decade of the 1990s. The earliest critiques the televised version of the Australian 1988 Bicentennial celebrations while the latest examines the 1997 *60 Minutes* television report on former politician Pauline Hanson. As such, the essays can be positioned as historical, as part of an archive of critical cultural thinking about Australia and national identity but also its place and translation in a globalising media culture. The title indicates the broad range of essays under the rubric of 'identity', but the introduction functions to stitch together Morris's enduring interest in the movement of cultural currencies that is threaded through this decade of work. And so we are told that the volume firstly critiques 'identity',

understood as an institutionally productive circuit of demand and, second, an argument for a translative (rather than narrowly trans-national) practice of cultural work that can attend to institutional differences, moving, when need be, from one institution and/or speech situation to another. (5)

Nation and subject formation are relegated to a time before and instead the movement of ideas, economies and legacies through cultural media is the focus of Morris's interest. The book is structurally divided into three parts that constitute not a linear narrative but rather a development of rhetorical, theoretical and institutional facets of Morris's work. 'Rhetoric and Nationality' is the first part, and includes her 'Afterthoughts on "Australianism"' reflecting on a 1991 conference panel, the piece on the

1988 Bicentennial, one on the Hollywood blockbuster *Mad Max*, and another on Tracey Moffat's short film *Night Cries*. While those particular media-texts bring structure to each chapter, they function to introduce issues and theories of translating identity within global politics and theoretical positions. This first section, Morris writes, 'focuses on the *work* of translation involved in the bother of producing identity for discourse markets'. Next is a section called 'Translation in Cultural Theory', which acts as an umbrella for chapters on *models* of translation that are significant for Morris's thinking, including chapters on Naoki Sakai who founded the *Traces* journal, filmmaker Paul Willemen, Deleuze and Guattari on *Muriel's Wedding*, and a reading of David Harvey on postmodernity. The final brief section, 'Institutionally Speaking', includes four essays that address specific media debates or polemics in an effort to demonstrate the *constraints* on translation, including a piece on stereotypes, *The X-Files*, xenophobia and television.

As well as introducing the chapters and transnational circulations of identity production, the introduction ranges over a number of everyday media topics, including the place of academia in the world today, the industrial conditions of being an academic, the effects of global changes in economic powers on theoretical positions and, curiously, the debates around Helen Garner's 1995 book *The First Stone: Some Questions about Sex and Power*, a media circus that ignited a debate on generational feminism. In part these observations ground Morris's work in its changing institutional environment, and also do the work of situating Australia and

its intellectuals within a global knowledge economy that continually translates identity and its problems.

There's something very dynamic about these sets of ideas, especially read through Morris's intoxicatingly personal essay style, as if she is speaking directly to the reader and assuming they are a friendly, similarly sympathetic political subject. It's intimate and deeply appealing and, as she forewarns in the introduction, this is partially constructed through the use of anecdote. Several theorists of the anecdote are glossed, including Jane Gallop's *Anecdotal Theory*, Joel Fineman's 1989 essay 'The History of the Anecdotes' and David Simpson. Morris is careful to distinguish her work from the academic 'personal', and yet these aspects are still appealingly present. This doesn't negate her claim that 'anecdotes need not be true stories, but they must be functional in a given exchange'. (21) It works for me.

If there is one criticism I would make of this book, it is that some of the essays feel almost nostalgic now, referring to the disgraced politician Pauline Hanson (who now only appears on television celebrity dance shows—now what does Morris make of that?), *Mad Max*, Scully from *The X Files*, and the brief anecdote that appeared in an exhibition catalogue I still have memorialising the thirtieth anniversary of television in 1992. The world changes so fast it seems, that this book is almost an historical text of Morris's 1990s decade of work as soon as it is published. It is worthwhile, though, that her work is collected. Besides being one of 'the most formidable and original thinkers in cultural studies today', as the back cover claims,

her collections bear the traces of Australian culture and its theorising as transnational and translated.

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1. Tania Lewis, 'Intellectual Exchange and Located Transnationalism: Meaghan Morris and the Formation of Australian Cultural Studies', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2003, pp. 187–206.
2. Angela McRobbie, *The Uses of Cultural Studies: A Textbook*, Sage, London, 2005.