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ARTICLE

## Meaghan Morris: Cultural Historian

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Meaghan Morris was celebrated at the Meaghan Morris Festival as a mentor, a cultural theorist, a much-loved colleague, a lecturer, a polemicist and a stirrer, a teacher, an internationalist, a translator and much else besides. Here, I want to add to that chorus by making a very specific case: that Meaghan Morris is the most significant and innovative living Australian cultural historian. This characterisation is, in part, rooted in my own investments in work at the intersections of cultural studies and cultural history but it is of much greater significance. An influential contemporary characterisation of cultural studies is that it was a boomer reaction to existing disciplinary constraints, a manifestation of anti-canonical impulses that choose instead to celebrate marginality while at the same time making an innovative case for the ways in which culture matters. It follows that if, today, academic disciplines in the social sciences and humanities have become highly flexible (rather than canonical) and maintained their institutional hegemony while simultaneously becoming irrelevant to much knowledge-work *and* that, today, margins and mainstreams seem like next-to-useless terms to describe cultural topographies or flows *and* that, today, culture matters nowhere so much as the rapacious industries of media cultures, then perhaps the moment of cultural studies seems of historical interest only.<sup>1</sup>

However, this argument relies on a desiccated caricature of cultural studies, an image that is simply not recognisable in the work of Meaghan Morris (or many others for that matter). So, my argument for Meaghan's research as a major contribution to cultural history is, in part, a gentle plea for a respectful acknowledgement of the rich and variegated legacy of work in cultural studies. Finally, by way of prefatory remarks, while I want to make this case primarily on the basis of what, here, can only be a brief sampling of Meaghan's published academic scholarship, I'd like you to hold in mind some of the quite remarkable array of institutional work, occasional utterances, network building, polemic and much else besides

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that supplements what I explore here. To that end, I begin with a 2017 Morris Facebook post that gestures to some of the intellectual questions I'll be exploring in this essay. Deeply rooted in Australian historiography, attentive to how we feel politics, richly idiomatic and unapologetically polemical, Meaghan opined: 'Bill Shorten. You spineless, sleazoid, creepy-crawly unmitigated scumbag. Spew on you.'

It's no accident that *The Pirate's Fiancée* begins in a historical register: 'Some time in the early 1970s, a Women's Film Festival in Sydney tried to screen Nelly Kaplan's film *La Fiancée du pirate (A Very Curious Girl, 1969)*.<sup>2</sup> The specific 'turn to history' in the book's introduction is described in these terms: 'The history that I want to return to here is one in which the question of rewriting "discourses" emerges from a political critique of the social position of women.'<sup>3</sup> This project, written from within the territory of women's movements, is one generated by both a specifically temporary experience and a deeply historiographical gesture. In her disputation with how 'postmodernism' is framed, understood and elaborated, Morris refuses to complain (nag) about the routines and presumptive authority that saturates the patrician exclusion of scholarship by women. Instead, she offers a historiographic argument; that 'feminism acted as one of the enabling conditions of discourse about postmodernism'<sup>4</sup> and in response to the occlusion of that condition of possibility, comes a deeply empirical archival gesture; listing more than one hundred and fifty texts by women which would enable a reconsideration of debates about postmodernism.

The historical concerns of the opening essay are no anomaly; in fact, the very structure of the book could be described as historical in that it's a collection of essays published over a period of nine years, essays often produced for various and highly specific occasions that map a personal journey of work in reviewing films for newspapers, part-time teaching in higher education and an immersion in contemporary political culture. However, again and again, what distinguishes the essays is a concern to historicise cultural politics. The essay 'Politics Now' is worth reading for this passage alone, which characterises 'petty bourgeois intellectuals' as:

unstable, undependable, selfish, tunnel-visioned, sectarian, impatient, easily discouraged, easily swayed; able to get violently angry about the minute details of theological disputes and yet remain deaf, dumb and indifferent in the face of mass suffering.<sup>5</sup>

More broadly, the essay considers the shifting terrain of scholarship in relation to cultural politics by considering a letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* from Frank Hardy (a famous communist fiction writer), attacking the baneful influence of Leone Kramer (a professor of English at Sydney University and a leading intellectual supporter of the conservative politics) on the study of Australian writing. But what makes this such a wonderful piece of cultural history is that it takes as its object a sense of nervousness about politics that is elaborated by characterising Hardy as invested in a nostalgic fantasy:

the trouble with cultural travel and fellow-travelling today ... [is that] there's a shuttle service in the hyperspace between the cultured halls, the college walls, the prison walls, and the traces, and there's a lot more baleful riff-raff on the road than there used to be.<sup>6</sup>

And Meaghan offers an alternative in contrasting that kind of historical imagination with her remembering of a large meeting of feminists in 1975, a meeting that seemed invested in a different version of both the historical past and the work of politics in bringing into existence possible futures.

Many of *The Pirate's Fiancée* essays of the 1980s, then, could be described as historical situated accounts of the contemporary that insist on the challenge posed by both the unoriginality of the present and the need for criticism to acquire 'a few good gardening tools' as she argues in the final words of 'Tooth and Claw: Tales of Survival and *Crocodile Dundee*.<sup>7</sup> These concerns persist into the 1990s but are supplemented, in 'Ecstasy and Economics (A portrait of Paul Keating)' for example, by a new set of questions around the historicity of feelings. In this essay, Meaghan brings together two modes of historical thinking; an 'entirely new emotion: adulation of a national leader'<sup>8</sup> and memory-work around familial class-based politics. Unlike any historian I know, Meaghan in this essay considers fundamental questions of cultural politics as they arose in watching Keating on television, a technology which—we shouldn't have to be reminded—was the most significant mass cultural form of the second half of the twentieth century. This is how she writes about watching television:

If hardly anyone watches television like intellectuals who analyze television (journalists and political commentators, as well as poets and cultural critics), then the poem [John Forbes's *Watching the Treasurer*] is a study of a particular way of watching.<sup>9</sup>

The next half-dozen pages of *Ecstasy and Economics* consist of an extraordinarily nuanced and evocative reading of the Forbes poem. It's an analysis that recruits, Mark Twain and Debbie Harry, Paul Foss and Julia Kristeva, Michelle Rosaldo and Walter Benjamin in order to think about television viewers in these terms:

using television as a way of becoming 'involved' ... in a 'social world' ... [of] ethical and political dilemmas traversing everyday cultural practices [such as] ... spreading tea, watching television, talking economics.<sup>10</sup>

In terms of theory then, the essay is centrally concerned with shifting relations between affect and ideology.<sup>11</sup> It becomes a deeply historical account of Keating's promise to 'narrow the gulf between the social values (egalitarianism, solidarity, compassion) mythically upheld as national ideals in white working-class popular memory, and the *realpolitik* of economic rationalism—elitist, divisive, competitive'.<sup>12</sup> And Meaghan concludes the essay by a lovely piece of memory-work, recalling how Keating:

act[s] uncannily as after-images of stories that my *mother* has told since I was a child about her early life ... [that point to] something vital about the power of mediated public figures now to orchestrate multiple (as well as communal) and *discordant* (as well as consonant) desires and 'ordinary' memories.<sup>13</sup>

What this essay does so successfully is treat television—a generally disregarded form—as itself genuinely historical, a form that can be thought about not only through poetry but in relation to memory and everyday practices, and the affective dimensions of the political.

In relation to Meaghan's great twentieth-century work on cultural history, *Too Soon Too Late: History in Popular Culture*, I could simply defer to Hayden White, the influential author of *Metahistory*, who concludes his back-cover blurb: 'This is the way history will be written in the future.'<sup>14</sup> Well, it hasn't quite turned out like that yet, but this collection adds another string to Meaghan's bow; her capacity to so skilfully use what is sometimes dismissively called recollection—or perhaps the personal more generally that Meaghan tended to disavow in *The Pirate's Fiancée* or deploy judiciously in *Ecstasy and Economics*—as a mode of interrogating the terrain of social memory in the present. The introduction to the collection, 'History in Cultural

Studies’, begins with acknowledging, via Carolyn Steedman, that ‘cultural studies is enabled by ... “the general flight from the historical”’.<sup>15</sup> Yet despite the endless ‘crises’ of ‘blockbuster theories of History’ and the waning hegemony of ‘historical understanding’, and in the midst of cultural studies seeming to desire the historical, Meaghan:

turn[s] to history for a context prolonging the life of the ephemeral item or ‘case’; saturating with detail an articulated place and point in time ... This is a literary solution and it favours, however domestic the setting, a picaresque form of narrative: in an endless series of miniscule events, popular heroes act out theoretical logics of formidable complexity against a more or less well-defined social background.<sup>16</sup>

*Too Soon Too Late* is concerned with domains in which history is explicitly evoked—race and racism, nation building, nationalism, immigration and so forth—and with those domains in which history is rarely at issue in any explicit sense such as housing, health, community services, leisure facilities, the environment and new technology. It is deeply methodological in making sense of the mutability of her objects of study, most famously in the essay ‘Metamorphoses at Sydney Tower’. Yet, Meaghan writes modestly:

I do not presume to offer here a history *of* the present, my concern is with struggles over the meaning and value of history *in* the present, where ‘the present’ is assumed to have temporal depth—not least, because of the work of memory.<sup>17</sup>

So, her question becomes what to make of memory and being in history when a historical sense is no longer rooted in ‘enduring and stable relationships to place projected as “work”, “home”, “nation”’. Meaghan’s focus in the book is ‘on a tiny sample of popular cultural constructions of “history” in the double-edged colloquial sense of “significant past and present events” and “discourse on the past”’, a set of concerns that gradually and systematically becomes an effort to actually rethink the historicity of culture.

The project of *‘Race’ Panic and the Memory of Migration*, edited by Meaghan and Brett de Bary was, I think, the first in a series of volumes, essays and lectures connected to new experiences and priorities that emerged after Meaghan’s move to Lingnan in 2000.<sup>18</sup> Here there is a new set of historical questions:

our specific aim is to examine the historical and affective complexity of particular migratory and racializing movements ... The essays collected here explore the work of cultural memory as it responds to and *participates in* densely layered situations of conflict and displacement; they ask how memories and stories of conflict in the past inform the tensions of the present, as well as analysing the contemporary contexts in which memories of displacement are mobilized.<sup>19</sup>

I won’t go into any details about this collection as many of the contributors were, themselves, part of the Meaghan Morris Festival but I’ll simply observe that *Traces*, and the volumes *Hong Kong Connections* which Meaghan edited with Stephen and Siu Leung and the much later volume, *Gender, Media and Modernity in the Asia-Pacific*, edited with Catherine Driscoll,<sup>20</sup> are all organised around creative forms of transnational historical inquiry:

We also assume that the contexts of film production as well as reception must be studied not only from different perspectives but in historical depth; it is from within this ‘depth’—that is, of time, memory and experience—as well as in the encounters and the connections that form and unfold in space; that any popular cultural products are

invested with meaning by concrete communities and possibilities for innovation and change arise.<sup>21</sup>

These new historiographical dimensions of Meaghan's thinking emerge not just from Hong Kong, nor from the richness of InterAsia but also, I think, from her capacities to articulate the historical transnational flows between Shintaro in Maitland, Bruce Lee in Sydney, Cynthia Rock in the mid-west of the United States and *Ong-bak* in Lingnan.<sup>22</sup> I don't have space in this discussion to consider in detail the historical and historiographical significance of *Identity Anecdotes*, about the remarkable series of essays on films stretching from *Mad Max* to *Australia*, or many other aspects of Meaghan's work that can be deployed to substantiate my claim that her oeuvre is that of a great cultural historian.<sup>23</sup>

Let me conclude with an oblique aside in relation to the music I chose when I was asked to provide 'walk-on music' when I spoke at the Meaghan Morris Festival; The Drones tune, *Taman Shud*.<sup>24</sup> The final essay in *Identity Anecdotes*, 'Uncle Billy, Tina Turner and Me', is a piece of profound television history. It begins by contrasting the normative account of early television as:

Based on white middle class American experience (give or take a backyard with a Hills Hoist clothesline), they tell stories of the suburbs, the consumer society and the post-War nuclear family all growing round the TV set in the sacred place of home.<sup>25</sup>

The essay traces other histories of television as it was lived in different kinds of families, in non-suburban places involving shared narrative and other public pleasures. It recalls television as a companion to depression and incitement to take to the drink, a way of assessing attachments, to Rugby League and knitting. For Meaghan, 'watching television is a volatile business ... more as a process in time than an object in space'.<sup>26</sup> The essay concludes with these words:

I'm not sure why passages of joy and humour between diverse strangers can't also be creative of history ... At any rate, a sense of history was certainly what seized me on that day, when a memory of Tina Turner dancing recalled the lumbering ghost of Uncle Billy, a man who only ever seemed capable of 'getting' exactly what he saw. I thought about my memory of watching this child of the nineteenth century watch TV in the 1960s and, for the first time in my life, I wondered what *he* saw.<sup>27</sup>

Another way of thinking about this marvellous brief essay is that it's an effort to reinstate histories that have been erased by the conventional account of television arriving, fully formed, nuclearised and already belonging in suburban homes. What emerges instead are strange memories of parochial experiences: of Uncle Billy's odour, of the noise of talking to and about broadcasts, the misery of childhood holidays in front of the screen. These lost historical experiences, and the ways in which they can be articulated with collective experiences that erupt in the public sphere. The song, *Taman Shud*, references popular memories of the mysterious case of a body found on a beach in Adelaide in 1948. The identity of the deceased person and the cause of death have never been established. The title comes from a Persian expression meaning 'ended' or 'finished'. That was the word on a scrap of paper torn from the final page of a collection of poems attributed to a twelfth-century poet, Omar Khayyam, which was discovered in the dead man's trousers months after his body had been found. The song begins with an affective immediacy dominated by Fiona Kitschin's thumping bass and the lyrics:

Thud  
 Thud  
 My heart pumps blood  
 Whenever someone talks about my Taman Shud

Like much of Meaghan Morris's work, this song's a wild ride, sonically and lyrically. And the very last lines of the song that I take to be a response not only to white supremacists, Peter Dutton and perhaps Bill Shorten (they might have appeared in a Facebook post) but also a plea—against the hegemony of History—to remember the fate of 'nameless' men and women who are been forgotten because they're in morgues, detention centres or at the bottom of the ocean:

I ain't sittin' around being Gallipolized  
 One man's Barbeque's another's hunger strike  
 Well I don't give a rats about your tribal tats  
 You came here in a boat you fuckin' cunt

## About the author

Chris Healy teaches cultural studies at the University of Melbourne. His publications include *Forgetting Aborigines* (2008) and *Assembling Culture* (co-edited with Tony Bennett, 2011).

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## Notes

1. On these questions see Simon During, 'Is Cultural Studies a Discipline?: And Does It Make Any Political Difference?', *Cultural Politics*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2006, pp. 265–80; John Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995; Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2010; Meaghan Morris, 'Banality in Cultural Studies', in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1990, pp. 14–43; Jason Toynbee, 'Mainstreaming: From Hegemonic Centre to Global Networks', in *Popular Music Studies*, ed. David Hesmondhalgh and Keith Negus, Arnold, London, 2002, pp. 149–63. The development of new concepts such as Donna Haraway's 'naturecultures' and Jussi Parikka's 'medianatures' are also relevant in relation to these questions. See Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2016 and Jussi Parikka's *A Geology of Media*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2015.
2. Meaghan Morris, *The Pirate's Fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism*, Verso, London, 1988, p. 1.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 269.
8. Meaghan Morris, *Ecstasy and Economics: American Essays for John Forbes*, EMPress, Sydney, 1992, p. 23.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 67–8.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 74–5.
14. Meaghan Morris, *Too Soon Too Late: History in Popular Culture*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1998.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
18. Meaghan Morris and Brett de Bary (eds), *'Race' Panic and the Memory of Migration, Traces: A Multilingual Series of Cultural Theory and Translation*, volume 2, Hong Kong University Press, Aberdeen, HK, 2001.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
20. Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li and Stephen Chan Ching-kiu (eds), *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2005; Catherine Driscoll and Meaghan Morris (eds), *Gender, Media and Modernity in the Asia-Pacific*, Routledge, London, 2014.
21. Morris and de Bary, p. 14.
22. In fact, long before she went to Lingnan, I heard Meaghan give one of the most enthralling lectures I've ever attended on the Bruce Lee/Chuck Norris fight scene in *Way of the Dragon* (1972).
23. Meaghan Morris, *Identity Anecdotes: Translation and Media Culture*, Sage, London, 2006.
24. 'Taman Shud' from The Drones, *Feelin' Kinda Free*, Tropical Fuck Storm Records, 2016.



25. Morris, *Identity Anecdotes*, p. 241.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 243.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 244.