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ARTICLE

## We Don't Need Another Hero: A Personal Celebration of Meaghan Morris

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It was a great pleasure and an honour to be asked to contribute to the Meaghan Morris Festival at the University of Sydney in 2016, to acknowledge and celebrate Meaghan Morris's foundational contribution to cultural studies in Australia, and internationally. What follows is, more or less, what I said at the time.

For many years now, Meaghan has been my most valued colleague in cultural studies; she has been the firmest of friends, and a doughty comrade-in-arms for a critical, politically engaged and explicitly located cultural studies. I have to admit, though, that our relationship didn't begin all that well. I first met Meaghan Morris when we were both speaking at the now legendary Cultural Studies Now and In The Future conference that Larry Grossberg hosted at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, in 1990. Meaghan was already an international star by then, and her presence at this event is evident to anyone who reads the book which came from that conference.<sup>1</sup>

Back in Australia, at that time, there was something of an East–West geo-theoretical split. On the East Coast was the cultural studies identified with Sydney and in particular with the New South Wales Institute of Technology, which later became the University of Technology, Sydney (Sydney University was yet to notice the existence of cultural studies). Cultural studies at NSWIT/UTS was European-facing, focused primarily on theoretical critique, and keen on French theorists such as Baudrillard. On the West Coast, was the cultural studies identified with the group in Perth who founded the *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies* in 1983, including John Fiske, John Hartley, Bob Hodge and myself—who oriented themselves around British cultural studies figures such as Stuart Hall, and were at the time especially besotted with Levi-Strauss and Althusser. Each group disrespected the other from afar, although there

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were a few figures who were accepted by both camps: John Frow, Stephen Muecke and Noel King were among these. I had moved to Brisbane in the mid 1980s and was now more directly connected to those working in the Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy at Griffith University—Tony Bennett, Ian Hunter, Colin Mercer—so I had fallen among Foucauldians, but I think I was still seen in Sydney (if they thought of me at all) as a protégé of John Fiske because we had published together and I had continued to orient my work around the British tradition of cultural studies. So, at that time, Meaghan and I belonged to opposing camps within the development of cultural studies in Australia.

It was not particularly surprising then that when I met Meaghan in a coffee shop on the campus of the University of Illinois in 1990, she made it quite clear that she was actually only interested in talking to the person I was sitting with—Ian Hunter, who was himself something of a rising star in the United States at the time. Ian introduced me to her, nonetheless, and she acknowledged me with a nod. My interpretation of that nod was, roughly, ‘I know who you are, and I think you are probably a dickhead, but I am not going to waste time finding out.’ I sat with them, as an audience, for a while anyhow; after all, I had now met the famous Meaghan Morris.

Later that year, I saw Meaghan at the opening reception of a cultural studies conference back in Australia. Coming towards me from the other side of the room, she waved and smiled. I thought, ‘Oh, that’s nice, maybe I am acceptable after all’ and smiled back. Then she walked straight past me and gave John Frow a hug!

Our next engagement was in print, and fortunately this was much more productive. Meaghan had responded to one of those foolish anti-theory pieces that were routine in humanities journals in the 1990s, criticising something she had written about an Australian studies conference she had attended for its ‘spaghetti-like prose’. At one point in her essay (which she titled, ‘A Small Serve of Spaghetti’), she took a short detour from her chosen route to (as I put it then) ‘back over’ a book that I had written with John Fiske and Bob Hodge called *Myths of Oz: Reading Australian Popular Culture*.<sup>2</sup> She used it as an example of the kind of cultural studies of which she disapproved. That was disappointing, of course, but some of what she said about the book was demonstrably wrong, I thought, and much of the criticism I rejected. *Myths of Oz* had turned out to be quite a contentious book because of its explicitly popularising intentions and so I had encountered criticism on quite a few occasions without choosing to rise to its defence. However, this time, on receipt of an invitation from the journal editor who saw the possibility of a good stoush looming, I decided to write a reply.

At this stage, I hadn’t read a lot of Meaghan’s work so I thought I should do some research on the enemy before I went into battle. I read just about everything she had ever written, but most importantly I returned to give her book, *The Pirate’s Fiancee: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism*, a proper reading.<sup>3</sup> By the end of that process, most of my original animus had evaporated. The work was extraordinary; her writing, and the manner in which her arguments gradually unfurled, was in a class of its own. Engaging with her was going to be much more interesting than just writing a defensive reply. So, while I certainly wrote an essay that defended our book as it went along, it mainly focused upon contributing to the wider debate in which she had originally engaged (to do with the relation between Australian studies, cultural studies and the challenge of making theoretical work accessible), finding points of agreement and disagreement with her along the way. Meaghan responded as the excellent intellectual she is: in her reply to my reply, she accepted some (not all, I should stress) of what I said about her criticism of *Myths of Oz*, and then went on to engage with some of the broader arguments I had made. The result was that we both thoroughly enjoyed a debate in which we ended up

standing, more or less, side by side against the anti-theory residue of a clapped-out version of humanities scholarship.<sup>4</sup> That provided the foundations for the mutual respect upon which our friendship has been based ever since (that, and, I should say, the discovery of a shared passion for the noble but much-maligned sport of Rugby League).

I've been able to observe and often participate in Meaghan's career since then, and so I have a pretty clear view of just how valuable she has been to cultural studies—in Australia and internationally—and how fearlessly and astutely she has led the way for so many of us over the years. Meaghan's contribution to cultural studies internationally has been outstanding, of course, but I want to talk here about her contribution to cultural studies in Australia. And I want to focus on two aspects. The first is to do with the role she played as an independent intellectual in the days before she moved, relatively late in her career, into a full-time position within the university; and the second is the highly significant role she has played in brokering what has now become a fundamentally distinctive feature of Australian cultural studies: the engagement with Asian formations of cultural studies, with colleagues based in Asia, and with Asian research locations.

Meaghan is the only one of those who might be regarded as among the founding cohort of cultural studies scholars in Australia who has never had a full-time continuing teaching and research position in a university here. She really was an 'independent intellectual'. This is not in the sense that this is most commonly used now, when people describe themselves as an 'independent researcher'; regrettably, that has become a way of saying 'I don't have a job at the moment'. But, for Meaghan, this was a deliberate choice: she did not want to be part of the university system in Australia, and she believed she couldn't do her intellectual work properly if she was. Meaghan financed her early work initially by journalism, in particular by writing as a film critic for Sydney newspapers, and then, as she became better known, she would pick up semester-long visiting appointments mainly in the United States as a means of funding six-month blocks of time devoted to her writing back in Bundeena. While most of the rest of us were building our personal careers and advancing the cultural studies project within the Australian university system, Meaghan was establishing herself as a major intellectual and advancing the cultural studies project on an international scale. Her focus on ensuring that she had the time to write properly, and her steady management of the inevitable precarity of that existence, was principled and courageous. At a time when the Western academy was just beginning the process of professionalisation that has marked the last twenty years, Meaghan was still holding out for another, earlier, model of intellectual work. I don't recall her ever complaining about the difficulties that caused for her. But I do recall how often those of us who had continuing and secure positions in the system complained about *our* conditions. The contrast is pretty telling, and Meaghan's chosen mode of prosecuting the cultural studies project seemed to me, then and now, to be simply inspiring.

The work upon which she built this career, and which gained her access to the American academy in particular, is extraordinarily distinctive. Nobody else had written the kinds of essays she was writing at the time. They were long, intricate, highly readable and exciting; polished and perfected over months of writing and trialled in presentation after presentation—where she seemed never to be referring to a written script as she circled around the ideas, teasing them out, until right at the end, when she would pull it all together. Always theoretically driven, the starting point was usually grounded in a specific film or television text, which set the process of observation, analysis and critique on its way. Or at times she would work from an anecdote that was drawn from her experience of the vernacular; Meaghan was almost as likely to tell us something about the behaviour of her Uncle Billy as she was to

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unpack a set of comments from Deleuze. The ease with which Meaghan worked across the landscape of her own everyday experiences of Australian life in order to articulate key areas of cultural theory is in many ways still unique. It was also something that was unproblematically Australian; Meaghan spoke to an international readership from a very particular place, without apology or moderation. So many of these pieces have become monuments to what cultural studies in Australia could do, if it really did its best; for instance, the essay set in the Henry Parkes motel, the discussion of *Crocodile Dundee*, the critique of the bicentenary's television event, *Australia Live*, that moves in and out of her biographical work on Ernestine Hill, and the series of presentations which led to that wonderful essay on *Mad Max*. It is hard to overstate the significance of such pieces for the field, and for the international standing of what was emerging as an Australian formation of cultural studies.

These became landmarks, then, but it was hard to live off them. Eventually, there needed to be some security for the future, and Meaghan decided she had to get a proper academic job. But it was not to be in Australia. When she took up her first full-time teaching position in Hong Kong, it was regarded as a great loss to Australia (there is the widely distributed graphic that accompanied *The Australian Higher Education* supplement's story on her departure, which depicted her in a little rowing boat, bravely heading off into the distance). For Meaghan, it certainly was an adventurous move, but it was also a massive cultural transition—not only dealing with another culture and its histories, but also and probably even more daunting, having to deal with the culture of the modernising university, something she had resisted and critiqued for many years. So, Meaghan embarked on her second career, as Chair Professor in Cultural Studies, the flagship program for Lingnan, a small liberal arts university in the New Territories of Hong Kong. Although she had the full backing of her university's president, there were still major challenges in setting out to build something substantial in a context where there were few other female professors, where she did not have the language used by many of her colleagues and where she needed to acquire very quickly an understanding of the politics of the university.

Of course, Meaghan conquered all these obstacles in record time. She set up a strong and astutely customised cultural studies program at Lingnan which has proven to be extremely successful; many people in this room have direct experience of that program, of the wonderful group of colleagues Meaghan collected together with the unstinting support of Stephen Chan, and of the environment at Lingnan. Many of her students were the first of their family to enter university. They had little cultural capital, but they had plenty of what we might call 'street capital' in their engagement with the popular culture of that extraordinary city. What the cultural studies program did was enable them to access the value of what they knew, and to turn it into useful knowledge; and it gave them modes of critical practice that allowed them to productively engage with the cultures they inhabited. I was an external examiner there for a number of years, and I can attest to the dramatic development the teaching program produced in these students over a very short period of time. From my point of view, coming from a long career teaching the British tradition of cultural studies in Australia, it was fascinating to see how cultural studies could be put to work in such a different environment from that in which it was originally developed, and how it seemed to be even more useful there.

And so that takes us to the second aspect of her career I wish to acknowledge. I have suggested elsewhere that one of the most positive shifts in Australian cultural studies over the last fifteen to twenty years is its gradual engagement with Asia, and with colleagues in Asian cultural studies.<sup>5</sup> This has enriched Australian cultural studies, decoupling it from its dependencies on Anglo-American trends and tendencies, and reinforcing it as a key mode of

academic engagement within our region. Meaghan has played a major role in this, serving as a personal, intellectual and institutional bridge between cultural studies formations in Asia, Australia and, to a lesser but still important extent, in the United States. She invited Australian colleagues to visit, put them on examiners and advisory boards, held symposia and conferences (including what I think was the most memorable Crossroads of all!). She also played a significant role in developing the project of Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, doing the hard yards of making contacts across East Asia to see what she could learn and how she could help what was still an unevenly developing academic community. At the same time, she was making sporadic raids back to Australia, telling us to start paying attention to the exciting things going on to our north. Her advocacy for the specificity of Hong Kong, and for the Inter-Asia project, was matched by her vigilance in assuring that those she brought there should behave in ways that signified respect—woe betide anyone one who brought their embarrassing Western ways with them.

That is not all that could be said, of course. Meaghan is not just a CV of achievements; she is also a whole category of experience for those of us who have been fortunate enough to read her work, and to hear her present, to work with her as a colleague, or to enjoy her friendship. There are many elements to the Meaghan Morris experience, so let me just mention a couple of favourites in closing.

On a personal level, it has included having Meaghan as a texting co-presence during State of Origin Rugby League games, no matter where each of us are in the world. In case you can't fully identify with that, on a professional level there are plenty, too. There is that moment at the beginning of every Meaghan Morris presentation when, somehow and always in a different and context-contingent way, she says something that magically eliminates the distance between Meaghan and her audience. She has the gift, and the instincts, to be able to make that instant connection. Sharing a podium with Meaghan, as I have done on so many occasions, you can see the effect of that. You see the faces of the audience as she talks, and their expressions are different for her than they are for any other speaker: there is not only engagement, attention and expectation, there is also great affection. For so many there, and for so many reasons, she is their hero.

But don't get me wrong. The Meaghan Morris experience is not one of sweetness and light; as a thinker, and as a person, she is tough, rigorous, forthright and, when required, formidable. My favourite site for watching this in action is when she is a member of the audience and has risen to ask the Meaghan Morris question. This the one that often begins with what might seem to be a compliment—as in 'I was taken by how eloquently you etc. ...' If she says you were eloquent, it means you are talking glib rubbish, and the compliment is purely to set you up for what comes next, for the series of sentences which are introduced by 'But...' (and sometimes accompanied by a slightly exasperated sigh). I think the pink boxing gloves many of us will have admired on her Facebook page serve as an appropriate symbol for her practice as an intellectual.

As I reach the end of my allotted time to speak, I have to come up with a final sentence through which to articulate my personal tribute to Meaghan. Not at all easy to do, so let me just say this: that I find myself easily identifying with the mode of attention I described seeing in the faces of the audiences she addresses. When it comes to Meaghan Morris, my response is just like theirs: engaged, expectant, attentive, and full of affection. She's my hero, too.

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## About the author

Graeme Turner is Emeritus Professor in Cultural Studies in the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Queensland. His most recent publications include *Reinventing the Media* (2015), *Television Histories in Asia* (2016, co-edited with Jinna Tay), and the forthcoming *Making Culture: Commercialisation, Transnationalism and the Decline of Nationing* (co-edited with David Rowe and Emma Waterton).

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## Notes

1. Larry Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (eds), *Cultural Studies*, Routledge, New York, 1992.
2. John Fiske, Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner, *Myths of Oz: Reading Australian Popular Culture*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1987.
3. Meaghan Morris, *The Pirate's Fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism*, Verso, London, 1988.
4. Meaghan has brought together the series of essays referred to here and uploaded them, slightly edited, onto Academia.edu, under the title of 'Early Days in Australian Cultural Studies: A Productive Skirmish between Meaghan Morris and Graeme Turner', [https://www.academia.edu/34285051/ARCHIVE\\_Early\\_Days\\_in\\_Australian\\_Cultural\\_Studies\\_a\\_productive\\_skirmish\\_between](https://www.academia.edu/34285051/ARCHIVE_Early_Days_in_Australian_Cultural_Studies_a_productive_skirmish_between).
5. Graeme Turner, *What's Become of Cultural Studies?*, Sage, London, 2012.