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ARTICLE

Time is a Traveller: The Localness of Meaghan Morris

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My aural introduction was Peter Allen's song, 'Tenterfield Saddler'. And most of you will know that 'At Henry Parkes Motel', Meaghan's famous essay on mobility, comfort, desire and banality, is situated in Tenterfield where Meaghan's early childhood took place.

The overblownness of this song, the calculated ridiculousness of its nation branding via the melange of Australian animals—kangaroos, emus, cockatoos—all 'up ahead', only underscores the poignancy of the public secret of Allen's homosexuality and his early death through HIV.

The song, as you may have caught, may have felt, includes the heartbreaking camp of the transnational subject: 'been all around the world and lives no special place'. And the recognition by that subject that the figures of their hometown, the grandfather living on manners, and the grandfather's son—Peter Allen's father who took his own life—have no point of belonging, no line of connection, 'Except in this song'.

If only Peter had read, heard, interacted with Meaghan. Today I would like to salute all the ways Meaghan has made it possible for the queers, swats, smartasses, girls, women, and those of us from the country and from public high schools—to be here. Meaghan has made it possible for us to imagine ourselves as both 'here' and 'there'. And not just in a song.

This is not to ignore what Tenterfield was and was not to Meaghan. There is the understated suffering of being smart in a small town, and the 'disassociative states' of ordinary small country town life that crop up in Meaghan's work. And she did leave Tenterfield at twelve for the (sort of) big smoke of Maitland yet she also brought the small town back via 'At Henry Parkes Motel' and in many, many, other ways and places.

The wide brown blown-outness of Peter Allen's lyrics, the tear-making music, makes me think of Baz Luhrmann and makes me regret we could not afford to get him to direct today's

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events. And Allen's lyrics make me finally get Meaghan's most recent argument about why the film *Australia* worked. The unreal of the ultra-coloured camp of Luhrmann is something like the bathic accessibility of Allen, which is *something* like the spaciousness, the gritty being hereness, that is also an expansive being thereness that Meaghan is able to form on the page and practice off it. It is a kind of radical localness but it is also a highly evocative call to think harder in a space that she has made accessible to so many of us. A space that includes the university but isn't only the university. An environment that we could call cultural studies or a kind of feminism or possibly queer but something that includes country towns and Hong Kong living, research, teaching, French theory and Gay and Lesbian Liberation. If it were only a space we could call it the Meaghan Morris Motel. But it's not really somewhere we go, it's something she does. It's a practice. But what is it exactly?

She makes it 'local' where 'localising' is a complex act of admission, permission and expansion. Here is a little example. In a 2009 article about Facebook and a reformulation of the everyday, where 'everyday life is not a human universal', Meaghan mentions meat safes as an example of Lefebvre's 'unity of form, function and structure'. But let me pause to check that you know what a meat safe is? It's not an anti-vegan security device, although I can see the fake news items brewing with that possibility. It is a pre-mass refrigeration, pre-powered refrigeration thing, usually box shaped with mesh walls, hung in a cool place, in which meat was kept safe from flies and heat.

But let's return to Meaghan's article and Lefebvre's 'unity of form, function and structure' which is when Meaghan writes: 'I think of the Australian bush "meat safe": my grandmother's was cream and my mother's cacky green, but they worked the same way, they were not obsolescent, and they kept the blowflies at bay.' This aside has all the power of the longer anecdote that Meaghan has explored. It connects Facebook to a plethora of styled forms. It elongates the historical frame within which we imagine Facebook—from before refrigeration to an imagined future, and it acutely brings home the worlds of Facebook to issues of gender, domesticity, labour and ... meat!

A meat safe also reaches across cultures to what is or is not 'obsolete' elsewhere and what a meat safe means now. So in this moment we have the convened local, personal memory, imploding along its associative fissures to bring in hipsters drying beef in their backyard and classy butchers marking themselves as such by the cost and length of their aged cuts. We note along the way that meat making is a key area of employment in regional China, Australia, the United States of America and so many other places in the world where 'meat safe' has become a concern for 'safe meat' and moved well and truly out of the mother- and grandmother-run home and into the concerns of agribusiness and government bodies responsible for food safety, migration, housing and regional development.

As an intellectual legacy, this skin pricking localism demands that we be present in some version of ourselves on the page but never as the definitive subject of academic discourse. Remember this was an article about Facebook. We do learn about Meaghan's love of what Facebook can be. But we are also run into the realities of a transformed 'everyday', within which the mostly lost form of the meat safe lingers. When we teach this article it will be about the recent history of the everyday but it is the matter of fact associations with a particular materialised past that makes it so good to think with.

I encountered Meaghan through a cartoon. I am sure she will not remember. But as an MA student I sat down one day and poured out a longish graphic novelish story about textasexuality (my neologism) and sent it to the *UTS Review*. As you did back then. And I

got a note back from Meaghan praising its premise and saying they would look into how they could possibly get it into a form to publish. At certain times in our lives we do live off the professional manners of others. And this was my time. That kept me drawing and thinking about drawing for an awfully long time.

I actually met Meaghan in Albury. You can imagine the Meaghan Morris tote bags to read Sydney, Paris, Hong Kong and, in brackets, Maitland, Tenterfield, Albury etc. Meaghan came to conferences in the country. This one was one of those beautifully conceived film-focused events organised by Julie Marcus and it was the very first time I ever gave an academic paper—1996 maybe? The conference focus was the early Chauvel film *Jedda* and Julie had organised a mix of scholars, Indigenous peoples who had played parts in the film and a showing of the original film at the sumptuous Regent Cinema Theatre in the middle of Albury. It was a perfect trifle of an event. (The trifle dessert I mean—I am trying to load up this piece with regional references—a trifle is the best of all Australian desserts. It involves cake and custard and fruit and sherry, the trifle sherry being an early excuse in country Australia for having alcohol in the house and a pathway to sexual and emotional excess.) I gave my first paper and my girlfriend and I drove home totally exhausted having stayed in the cheapest possible room in Albury, which was over the front bar of the Sodens Hotel. We had not slept for seventy-two hours but did we care? Sometime after we got home a note arrived from Meaghan saying something good about the paper and it all seemed very worthwhile.

Sometime around this period Meaghan was known as an ‘Independent Scholar’. Now I worry that was one part of precarious employment before it became so ubiquitous but I hope it was a salute to where and how Meaghan worked, moving between university work, overseas paying gigs in American universities and unpaid journal and translation work. That is the model I had in my mind and it had a very powerful imaginative force. How should we do university work? What was lost and gained within that bargain for labour? And exactly what university employed us? One dedicated at some level to an idea of transformation, to the social project of the informed and active citizen, to engaged teaching OR a ‘quality’ treadmill dependent upon competition, operating amid a machinery of ‘accountability’ bloated with a managerial, pseudo-entrepreneurial class dreaming of mainlining international full-fee paying client customer students? Which one did we sign up for?

Now I am an ‘Independent Scholar’. I think a lot about that combination of unpaid university-related work (the journals, the working papers, the conferences) and paid international lectures and an earlier time of paid film reviews and wonder what Meaghan would say about what should endure where? Why are there so few people not absolutely fully employed by the university doing journal work? Why do we, like so many idiotic sheep keep on sending our articles to journals locked behind publishing pay walls? Pay walls that exist because our universities are forced to buy the expensive electronic databases from global publishing companies that contain the very work we have written? This is simple stupidity. And yes this is an ad for *Cultural Studies Review* but also for a kind of thinking/doing that Meaghan inspires. *CSR* is a key cultural studies journal not just because of the quality of its founders (Meaghan Morris and Stephen Muecke) or the absolute quality of its articles and reviewing but because its politics are written on its publishing sleeve. We can’t expect to fulfil a claim to engage with a community beyond the narrowly academic unless everyone can read our stuff. So stop hiding it in expensive, inaccessible databases and publish where the principles of review are real and the politics of engagement true. Think about whether your writing labour results in something being able to be seen by everyone. Think about what the politics of publishing means in your particular world. When I think about the HOW we do

our writing, not just WHAT we are writing, I see across to so much that Meaghan has written about finding the acute sites that are often banal activities, that are the new scenes of a politics that matters.

If I say kindness, care and encouragement Meaghan sounds like a sainted aunt so I have to add wine, sex, second-sight and sassiness—it has all been there always with Meaghan. But we would still miss the Meaghanness unless we can really imagine, intellectually and affectively, how feminist camp works. I think it's appreciating that thinking and people and place are all actions in a particular space but always remembering that thinking, feeling, people and place travel. And that time is a traveller. Tenterfield saddler. Meaghan Morris.

About the author

Katrina Schlunke is an Independent Scholar affiliated with the University of Sydney and the University of Tasmania. She is also a co-editor of *Cultural Studies Review*.