Interview with Meaghan Morris, November 3, 2012
Interview conducted by James Hay
Interview edited by James Hay & Meaghan Morris

James Hay: There are many places where one might begin this interview. I am less interested in getting back to origins than in revisiting the moment—the context—when John Frow and you decided to assemble a group of essays that you represented as “Australian Cultural Studies.” In the book Australian Cultural Studies: A Reader, John and you explain various tendencies of doing Cultural Studies, and provide a rationale about how those tendencies developed and gained traction in Australia. Particularly noteworthy in your Introduction to that book was your emphasis on Cultural Studies’ interdisciplinary, methodologically eclectic ways of examining the “everyday” and ordinary: “Cultural Studies often operates in what looks like an eccentric way, starting with the particular, the detail, the scrap of ordinary and banal existence, and then working to unpack the density of relations and of intersecting social domains that inform it.” You demonstrate what would be involved in a study of, for instance, shopping malls—a surprising example because Cultural Studies in those years often was associated with a way of doing Media Studies.

Another noteworthy emphasis in your rationale for that book had to do with the “Australian-ness” of the Cultural Studies that the book represented. You point out that Australian cultural studies was a response to various debates and historical contradictions surrounding “national culture” in Australia. You mention the debates pertaining to Aboriginal culture but also to the ways that “Australian culture” was implicated in the global circulation of cultural products. You contend that Australian Cultural Studies was a response to and engaged with social and political movements over Australian history and Australia’s place in global economies. Your wonderful
essay on the film, *Crocodile Dundee*, explained what was complicated about that film’s relation to Australian history and its circulation in a global economy of cinema. And your essay in the *Australian Cultural Studies* Reader, “At Henry Parkes Motel,” demonstrates what is dense and complicated about “encountering” and “engaging” Australian history through an economy of tourism.

Precisely because you have sought (for a long time) to explain cultural studies at the intersection of history and geography, I want to begin by asking about your thoughts on the historical and geographic formation of cultural studies in Australia. To the extent that Cultural Studies is a response to a history that shapes one’s encounter with that past in the present, and to the extent that Cultural Studies sometimes involves thinking about history and geography through one another, what are your thoughts about the formation and legacy of an “Australian cultural studies” now?

**Meaghan Morris:** I am inclined to say the person you should be asking that question to is Graeme Turner, not me, because my involvement in the Reader only came about when John Frow asked me to help bring into the book writings from a much earlier period, the late 1970s to late 1980s, which were in no way produced in any formation called “cultural studies.” They were critical studies that came out of small independent magazines. I’ve recently done an interview about this with Mark Hayward who is working with Ted Strifpas on a project about the “pre-professional” culture of critical life. At the time when John formulated *The Australian Cultural Studies Reader*, and brought me in because I knew this off-campus literature better than he did, Cultural Studies as an academic enterprise was initiated under that name in universities in Perth, but not much in Sydney or Melbourne. John had worked in Perth with John Fiske and Graeme Turner on the *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies* (AJCS), which later became the journal *Cultural Studies* which Larry Grossberg now edits.

Perth and Sydney in those days were very, very distant. Not just an abstract 3,000 miles; in practice, most people didn’t travel very often between the two. So I guess at that moment around 1990, when a more “national” space was forming across the hitherto states-oriented media and institutional formations of Australian cultural life, John thought, rightly, that I had a grounding in the informal urban intellectual life involving feminism, gay liberation, art world stuff, and film and media things. During the 1980s I was only a part-time academic. I was primarily a media-based film critic, so I knew a lot about the independent film and media critical scene and I also taught part time at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), which is now in retrospect regarded as a homeland of cultural studies in New South Wales. We taught a BA Communications there, but I don’t think we taught courses in “cultural studies” and I certainly didn’t teach cultural studies. We primarily used semiotics, literary theory, anthropology, we used French feminism, we used Baudrillard, Foucault, etc., what became the theory canon.
JH: European critical theories?

MM: Yes that's right. European critical theory, but making up our own stuff in a context where the degree also delivered practical qualifications. There was a very poorly equipped studio, a training degree, great filmmakers teaching, lots of mature age students and work not necessarily attached at all to an academic research project. My two areas for part-time teaching work were art schools and this UTS communication degree. It was a time of teaching to people who wanted to be practitioners, and writing for a world of "little magazines", an amateur critical and cultural tradition with a history in Sydney going back to the nineteenth century. Communists did it, anarchists did it, feminists did it; the little magazine was a native intellectual formation. Melbourne had this tradition too, but again in those days people in different Australian states had very little contact so I knew less about that. So that's how I got involved in the reader. It would be fair to say that some of my involvement in academic forms of Cultural Studies came out of the reader rather than feeding into it. Graeme Turner is the stable figure who was active from the beginning of Cultural Studies through the present moment in Australia. He's the one who knows all of its changes.

JH: Your reference to the journal is interesting and significant because it underscores, in part, that as cultural studies in Australia developed it came to be represented in a formalized way through the Australian Journal of Cultural Studies.

MM: Yes, but I had nothing to do with that. John Frow worked on that journal when he lived in Perth and then he moved over to Brisbane, which is a long, long way away. And the material of the reader does not come out primarily of AJCS. It comes out of the other journals which were thriving in the previous decade on the east coast.

JH: The other thing worth underscoring about your account is that once the journal is published by Routledge, and the editorship passes to Lawrence Grossberg and Janice Radway, a journal which may have represented "Australian cultural studies" loses the Australian prefix. And that's an important way of thinking about the genealogy—the material production and circulation—of a project recognized as "cultural studies."

MM: That's right. The move to Larry's editorship with Janice Radway in the USA and the move to Routledge in the UK were the same. That became the typical pattern for people who started journals in Australia. You might have local funding—some support to start with. It was not necessarily university support, I don't know about the AJCS case. When I edited journals myself, it was back when you sold subscriptions and the subscriptions funded the journal. But inevitably, if the journal was successful, you would reach a point where you could not cope with the work. I think AJCS was one of the first to realize it had an asset that could be sold to an international publisher. That's when it lost "Australian" in the title. Before this time,
usually what journal people would do was simply shut down when you got fed up, you know? This is interesting, because you are making me realize that probably AJCS was the first journal in my environment to reach that critical point at a time when the university offered a way forward for critical work, and to hand the journal over to a serious publisher. That never used to happen before. We just used to close them or give them to another collective and then a couple years later start another one. It was very vibrant, but pretty exhausting.

**JH:** Was the term/title *Australian Cultural Studies: A Reader* one that John came up with or the publisher came up with? And do you now think that it was more of a product of its day, an identity that is *any longer* useful?

**MM:** I don’t remember about the title. The main thing is that the reader was produced for Australians. We weren’t thinking that this book might speak to anybody else. The publisher was a local commercial publisher, Allen & Unwin, and I think it was their idea to initiate a co-publication with the University of Illinois in the US, though I’m not sure about that. Perhaps a friend in the US arranged that. In the beginning, though, we never thought about having an international readership. What John wanted, and I liked this idea a lot, was to salvage the best work from the independent critical sector in the 1980s and put that work in a reader, in an accessible form, for all the new Australian academic courses which were sprouting up at the time. You could already see this horrible formation developing, where Australian students would not be given Australian work to read and would end up having no clue what Australian scholars had done before them. And they would be spouting all this American stuff, which very often had no relation whatsoever to the reality of Australian institutions or our political and cultural history. So doing the reader was an intervention in that sense. We wanted to bring back all this locally oriented stuff and make it available to kids doing these new courses; kids who were not especially political, just regular undergraduates who would never go digging through obscure, inner-city, Marxist, lesbian, feminist, media journals. So that’s why it was called the Australian Reader.

For the second part of your question... I think cultural studies in Australia today is generating all kinds of positive and useful initiatives, but they are not so useful for North Americans. They are useful in Asia, for example; they are useful in countries with strong, centrally administered, national public education systems. For me one of the great achievements of Australian cultural studies over the past 10–15 years is to show that even when a centralized, neoliberal administration of universities is locked in at the national level, it is still possible to do the political work of negotiation to make spaces where you can still do critical work, imaginative work, as well as delivering useful vocational tools to your students. With my Lingnan colleague Mette Hjort, I’ve just co-edited a book about this called *Creativity and Academic Activism: Instituting Cultural Studies*, where institution-builders tell their own stories of making things happen, often against frightening odds; the book has a strong Asian focus. I think that is an area where cultural studies in Australia has done really, really well, and that pragmatic orientation to public education values is what people in Hong
Kong, Singapore, mainland China, pick up on.

**JH**: So if I can just clarify, you are saying its residual force in some ways has a role still to play in Australian universities...

**MM**: But why do you say residual? I mean, cultural studies is much bigger than it was before. I don't understand, can you explain a bit more?

**JH**: You said that it is still a term which can be used at universities to create a space for certain kinds of work.

**MM**: Not just the term, I mean the pragmatic reality of cultural studies in Australia—because of the nature of things now. For example, our professional association is called the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia (an old term which means “Australia and New Zealand”). People are much more aware these days of the need to build international alliances in the region; one line of activity goes toward New Zealand and the Pacific island nations, and one goes north toward Asia. As China’s influence in the South Pacific grows eventually they should join up. But what I was saying is that cultural studies in Australia, which is institutionally probably one of the most successful and largest per capita clusters of the discipline in the world, has also folded itself into various levels of governmentally administered higher education practice (research councils, national consultative committees, learned academies, and the like) and it has achieved and maintains this though a process of constant struggle. It's political, seriously political; meaning, you’ve often got to go around and start again. So while there are not that many stand-alone programs of cultural studies in Australia, as a dispersed formation it's very strong. So that's not residual, it's a transformation of, maybe a direct result of, that earlier effort. I'm just saying that with the reader, the idea was that you have to be familiar with your own history, your own institutional structures, political ethos, and cultural history. Know the place in which you hope to intervene. Because if you don't, your interventions will be ineffective; there's no traction.

**JH**: I agree that's a crucial point.

**MM**: So, that's what I'm getting at. And this phase doesn't seem to inspire North Americans so much, I imagine partly because of such a long history of funded radicalism there. I don't want to sound like one of those anti-PC people. But not having to fight strategically every inch of the way for your space (and I'm thinking here of the whole of the Humanities in Australia, not just a few small fields), fighting not just with moral argument but with locally informed institutional smarts, means you don't readily have the imagination to expand it, except when money is already available.

The other thing that I see as the big difference between Australia and the US emerging from after the time of the Vietnam war is the greater American investment
in revolutionary rhetorics which are morally stirring but also impractical in the US. I remember when, at the Champaign-Urbana conference, Frederic Jameson stated that Ian Hunter's work on government and culture made his blood run cold or something like that, and yet this is a man who spent much of his professional life funded by Big Tobacco. Forced to choose, I'd rather work with a vaguely social democratic government that's hooked on neoliberalism than spend the rest of my life using money from Big Tobacco.

So that [the relation of State administration, funding, and cultural studies] probably weakens the appeal of Australian cultural studies to many North Americans today, I don’t know, but it's a divergent situation. The conversations we've been having across Asia, where strong central government runs the full political spectrum from democracy to totalitarian government, but also where even the latter knows that they need to invest in creativity and develop soft-power strategies... that's not prettier than being funded by Big Tobacco, but in taking this on you must know what you are doing and you always think about it. You can't bracket it as though the source of your support has nothing to do with your work. That bracketing to me is the problem in the US, especially in the private university system. It makes successful strategic thinking and action on behalf of a discipline very difficult.

JH: Well, speaking then of divergences, and a map of divergence, leads me to ask about your involvement in cultural studies in Asia, and specifically in developing a program in Hong Kong under the banner of cultural studies. I'm wondering if you could describe that just briefly, pulling forward some of the points that you were making about the historical contradictions surrounding cultural studies in Australia, or in the US context. I think that it is useful, as you have been suggesting, to reflect on the multiple, convergent and divergent, moments and the places of the formation of a cultural studies.

MM: I've spent the last 12 years in Hong Kong. I went there to be the first Chair Professor (that's a title, not a dual role) of the first cultural studies department in the Chinese world, delivering a BA Cultural Studies as well as higher degrees. Lingnan people are very proud to have started the first cultural studies department in China. In fact by 1999, when programs across the Humanities in the West were already under threat, it was unusual anywhere to have a new stand-alone cultural studies program being created. What attracted me was the prospect of developing an undergraduate degree for students who would not be seeking to become research academics, in most instances. Along the way, with changes in government policy, we saw some of the students taking self-funded MAs, a few have begun PhDs and otherwise gone further into continuing education. But the program itself has never been about churning out people who are going to write another PhD on Walter Benjamin. We were teaching the future citizens and cultural workers of a place undergoing the immense transition of returning from British rule to China. So part of our work from the beginning was imagining what a cultural studies curriculum that was also nationally oriented could mean in the Hong Kong context.
So we always had three prongs to the program: the local involvement in Hong Kong, requiring a lot of thinking about how to create a useful degree for young people; a national dimension about how to educate our students to be citizens in the People’s Republic of China; and then third, an “international outlook”—building regional alliances with cultural studies outside China and Hong Kong. Cultural studies in much of Asia is a very dynamic formation, and I am now the Chair of the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Society, trying to bring Australian work perhaps more into that (although Australians have been involved from the beginning of the IACS movement in 1992). So it’s been an extraordinary experience for 12 years to be working with that densely practical set of issues.

JH: Did working in that context and at that job lead you to rethink curriculums in cultural studies and media studies? What were the surprises for you in transporting/ translating cultural studies to that context? You mentioned those three prongs of the curriculum, and I’m wondering whether that was something that you went there wanting to do or whether you experienced a period of self-questioning after you arrived.

MM: Yes, lots, although I had not been a full-time academic anywhere before I went to Hong Kong so I had never given curriculums much thought. Let me mention just two things that were revelations to me and changed how I perceived cultural studies as an educational project. One was teaching in English as a second language to students whose English was quite poor, and also whose Chinese cultural capital was pretty proletarian. The other was seeing what happened when colleagues loved to teach the theory that had excited them when they were students. Some of my colleagues had completed higher degrees in Australia or America where they picked up what I think of as the “theory-virus.” Because it excited them, and because they already had lots of Chinese cultural capital, and Western cultural capital, it really set fire to their imaginations. But then along comes a problem which is not Hong Kong specific, it happens everywhere, when teachers start out imagining that something that excited you when you were 25 and already highly educated is going to excite a terrified 19-year-old who has just scraped in to University a decade later.

We all talked about this a lot. I’ll never forget walking into some lectures, back in the day when people used overheads instead of PowerPoint, and I saw on the wall “difference,” “heterogeneity,” and “syntagm,” or something like that. The lecture was in Cantonese, but those words were in English and they were defined in English, with a bit of Chinese in there. And yet the students at that time couldn’t talk about the weather in English—they couldn’t make a joke or talk about breakfast or what they did last night in English. But they learned these lumps of jargon—sometimes in ways that were garbled. So I thought, ok, we need to rethink from the bottom up what these students need in order to become capable of having agency within this discipline. In the early years we had long, wonderful collective discussions about this and many other pedagogical problems in the BA Cultural Studies. And one thing that came out of that for me was a critical perspective on the Western environment, asking what we do when we just fill a curriculum with canonical, theoretical stuff for students who have yet to actually
acquire any positive academic knowledge and who end up incapable of doing anything but writing about Žižek, Agamben, whoever, and doing what I think of as “finger-painting” with this mess of quotes and proper names.

JH: Are you still talking about the Hong Kong context?

MM: No, James, this made me reflect back on what we were doing in the West. One moment that returns to me vividly is when I was reading an exam paper from a student in Hong Kong who said that “Foucault teaches us there is no hope and there is nothing we can do”. Now I know that this was the opposite of what the teacher was trying to convey. And yet I understand absolutely where that reading is coming from. Now the minute that’s happening for ordinary undergraduates, you need to do something.

When I look at the Australian scene today, I see primarily the difference made by people like Graeme Turner who have created “cultural research” networks encouraging cultural studies scholars to collaborate with geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, environmental thinkers—people who’ve got positive knowledge and can do something else besides comment on media representations and the theory canon. This engagement is really vital and for me it’s the way to move forward. I think that filling up a degree with canonical sub-philosophical readings is absolutely toxic at the undergraduate level.

The second thing that came out of my experience in Hong Kong involves something my colleague P.K. Hui said in a paper he was doing with Stephen Chan. Not long after I arrived, they began working to get a voice in the high-school education reform in Hong Kong, because high schools are where all the problems start to emerge. It took a while but they have been pretty successful; this initiative was partly influenced by Tony Bennett’s ideas about culture as a “reformer’s science” and by the attitude that you try to get into the institutions, not out of them. On this occasion P.K. was irritable because somebody had just mentioned neoliberalism casually, the way I just have, and he snapped that “our problem is not neoliberalism, it’s cynicism—including our students’ cynicism.” He argued that cynicism destroys energy as well as encouraging a belief that anything delivered by any kind of authority is bound to fail. So in this spirit people started to think about the history of cynicism in Hong Kong, and it became clear that the tradition of “critique” we inherit from the Western tradition is actually not all that helpful in current Asian situations when what you end up with is a further set of reasons to disinvest in agency and to be cynical.

So that also I think has been a factor in designing curricula which have small doses of the Western canon and which look much more to, not just “indigenous” currents of thought, but to currents of thought that come from wherever but are constructive and positive, that talk about what it takes to make a good life rather than just denouncing the evils of capitalism and imperialism. People in post-colonial situations already know those things, one way or another. I understand why in the US you might want continually to refine your understanding of the insanity of your country. In Australia it’s
important to ask continually how we got into this mess—those sorts of questions matter. But in genuinely post-colonial environments that are also fragile I think critique is a potentially very conservative instrument.

**JH:** That's very helpful. It leads me to a couple of other topics that I wanted to ask you about. Did the program with which you were involved in Hong Kong develop out of the Liberal Arts and Humanities, or through Media and Communication Studies? I have heard that cultural studies and critical work is not at all represented in media or communication studies in China. You find it instead in English departments or literature departments. So could you say something briefly about cultural studies' relation to media studies, or to creative industries as it intersects at that moment in Hong Kong with the program and curriculum that you were shaping.

**MM:** Your description of the situation in mainland China is quite right. As a formal institutional presence, cultural studies is mainly only at the University of Shanghai, where Wang Xiaoming has a Center for Contemporary Chinese Culture Studies. But there is a lot of dispersed activity in other cities, media and communications concentrations in Ningbo, for example, and in some Sociology departments. Things move very slowly on the mainland, where people will very cheerfully embark on a 20- or 30-year project of development. I think we will see more courses and programs coming through over time.

Creative industries comes in as something quite separate. I think some people at Queensland University of Technology got a lot of support from the central government in China to collaborate on creative industries projects. That kind of initiative in China is linked very strongly to economic national planning, about transforming the basis of the Chinese economy in the ways Deng Xiaoping outlined on his Southern Tour in the early 1980s, when he set out a long-term vision for China to shift from a productivist to a consumption-oriented economy. Deng knew this meant cultural change as well as economic reform.

Both in mainland China and Hong Kong, much of the energy for cultural studies begins in comparative literature. English Departments in Asia are primarily language teaching departments, and most of the staff in any given English Department might be socio-linguists or linguists. Often there's just a little margin of people who teach literature, and maybe one of those might teach theory or be interested in cultural studies. In their heyday the comparative literature programs were usually small but energetic, and that would be where energies gathered and things began. In Hong Kong, media and communication studies are based at the City University of Hong Kong, which has got all the funding to have serious equipment, so that's much more about producing practitioners. There is Communication also at the Chinese University of Hong Kong which has a strong journalism unit and leans toward a social science approach to studying popular culture, and some Cultural Studies combined with Religious Studies. One negative of having a strong central administration of education is that the boundaries can be quite heavily policed, as they are in Hong Kong. Institutions are not allowed to use resources that duplicate...
what another institution already does or encroach on its “mission.” So that's why when you look at it, unless you know what the lines of collaboration are between people, you won't see the dispersed but real presence of either cultural studies or media studies, as they seem to be separate.

All that said, the importance of Hong Kong cinema, television, and popular music all over Asia, as well as the success more recently the Korean Wave, has resulted in practice in a lot of intellectual convergence between people who do cultural studies, media studies, communication, and critical creative work. Many of these people share an anxiety about the impact of government-sponsored creative industries stifling debate and dissent in Asian countries. I recently heard a professor of Manga Studies in Japan talk about the fading of a sharp critical spirit in current manga production, and she felt that the push for creative industries there was developing an assembly-line culture that pushed artists to be more predictable and less confronting. These issues matter because artists can have enormous authority in some domains in Asian countries. Think of Ai Wei-Wei in China, for example.

JH: Do you see anything positive about the ascent of the program of creative industries?

MM: I have always wanted to. I liked the vision that John Hartley's early collection Creative Industries gave us of their democratizing potential. Anybody formed by the 1970s as I am is prone to think that you give people power by putting a camera in their hands. These days that would involve providing education and enhanced access in digital fields, and it should be like that. I do have to say, however, that it's not working out that way or that much. The creative industries program at the Queensland Institute of Technology has been interesting, at the level of having some terrific scholars who are critical of some of things that go on, and have been instrumental in bringing across a lot of students and scholars from China and other countries in the region and fertilizing in that way the Australian moment. But I also take the full force of Grahame Turner's criticism in What's Become of Cultural Studies? of the evacuation from creative industries programs of the sense of public purpose that marks cultural studies. You do need a critical agenda, and by “critical” here I don't mean critical theory, I mean a practical kind of political and social involvement.

JH: Let's talk a bit about media. One reason that I wanted to interview you is because your interests have sometimes been represented in relation to cultural studies, but also you've had a longstanding interest in film. I think that your essay on the film, Crocodile Dundee, in your book, The Pirate's Fiancée was extremely important for thinking about how popular culture matters in a particular stage of globalization, and how the nation matters. But it also was important because it pulled Film Studies in different directions, and it introduced questions that still are relevant for Media Studies. I'm wondering whether you want to address how your interests (the questions that you ask) about film and media have changed, perhaps as a result of your experience in Hong Kong.
MM: Asia is a good place to work if you are into cinema because you don’t strike the ideological reaction that “film is dead.” On the contrary, film tends to be where all the action is. Young people in Hong Kong walk around with very heavy cameras with very long lenses, partly because of their reaction against the saturated digital environment. I love that—the speed of fashion. Contrary to the tendency in the West, I think film studies across Asia is flourishing. I am interested, as I have been for a long time, in how film enters into different combinations of cultural experience to handle the historic crises of the day. When people ask me what I study, I still say history in popular culture. By “history” I mean how the past is caught up in struggles in the present. Clearly I am not a historian, but I do historical cultural studies and historical studies of culture, and film necessarily is a major part of that, but it’s not the only part.

I did work as a film critic for newspapers during years (1978–85) when the Australian film industry was strong; the industry and training schemes were government funded from a small population base and there were always all kinds of policy debates to consider. I’ve always been sympathetic to the view that if you want to study cinema or media you have to know about the industry, you have to know about the economics and the policy settings, you have to know about production. As I made clear when I first wrote “Banality in Cultural Studies” back in 1988, I am not an advocate of the proposition of “studying consumption.” I haven’t changed my mind about that. To me that’s just as bad as only studying the text.

JH: But you often pull those questions about the economies and business of film and media in different ways from the people who do critical political economy of media. I think you did that in the “Crocodile Dundee” essay, and it was a more complicated and nuanced account of Hollywood’s dominance in the world, of the global media economy, and of the argument that media imperialism is cultural imperialism than was typical of critical political economies of media in those years. And it was a compelling counter-point to Cultural Studies’ tendency not to address those questions energetically.

MM: And that’s all more so now with digital culture. I think that one of the reasons that creative industry programs are going the way they are is the sheer size of the corporate money invested in that project. I mean it makes any pressure on film or television studies look slight. You need to study production, but you also need to understand production as something we all do as consumers and when we make our own texts. So that’s my argument. It’s been unpopular for a long time, but...

JH: Would you call that an alternative political economy—a political economic analysis of media that does not focus only on the big commercial and state institution, does not see “political economic” analysis as separate from or anathema to “cultural studies,” and/or that understands media production as part of a complicated context of everyday making and production performed also by consumers, citizens, amateurs, semi-professionals?
MM: Yes, I support that completely. Political economy has been one of the paths of cynical critique, but it also can be part of an alternative to cynical critique. If you are not just looking at the power of the big corporations, and you are looking at the power of people trying to imagine alternative political economies and alternative modes of production that are viable for people (rather than fantasies of research for academics who want a well-funded tenured job), that can be really powerful work. I deeply admire the work of J.K. Gibson-Graham along those lines.

JH: Indirectly, perhaps directly, this seems germane to your longstanding championing of the “anecdote” as way of performing cultural studies. In certain respects, anecdote pervades an “interview,” such as this one. And I must confess that my effort to bring a “conversational” framework or dimension to this journal (particularly for its first two issues) was inspired in part by your way or working and conceptualizing the anecdote in relation to critical practice and cultural studies. In Identity Anecdotes, a collection of your essays from over nearly 20 years, you state that “the point of an anecdote for me is not only the wider conversation in which it plays a part but also the import of the incident it narrates” (p. 13). In that sense, anecdote assumes the partiality and propositional thrust of “critical” work and of “theory.”

Your valuing of and way of conceptualizing the anecdote’s relation to critical practice and cultural studies dates back at least to your influential essay, “Banality in Cultural Studies,” wherein you pointedly reacted to the failure by theorists and critics of popular culture and popular media (Baudrillard and Fiske, for instance) to grapple energetically with the contradictions of a critical stance toward “the people/popular”—as “organic intellectual.” In the Introduction to Identity Anecdotes, where you discuss “anecdote” as a framework for linking your collected essays, you emphasize that anecdote is about “emerging a critical proximity to our object of study rather than distance from it.” And when that object is popular media/culture, proximity is “critical” for you. Making an issue of proximity in the study of a popular culture involves “bothering” with (and being bothered by) how the study has been shaped through a “critic’s” desires, pleasures, investments, and choices as a consumer—but also through a critic’s institutional dispositions and alignments, and the economies through which a critic works (for instance, as journalist, filmmaker, or academic intellectual). And there are echoes of this point throughout our interview, particularly in your concerns about the problems of theory-driven academic work and/or the failure of academic intellectuals to grapple with their implication in institutions, disciplines, and languages shaping critical work’s sense of its distance from, or proximity to, a popular culture.

MM: Yes, Identity Anecdotes has a lot about anecdotes, so I won’t repeat that here! But I will say, because this is part of our overall conversation, that by anecdotal, I have never meant the approach of the critic who says, “Oh I just saw this video clip and Madonna was ripping her jeans therefore…” or “Oh I talked to some men who live in cage homes and they’re real people, so…” I understand that is what an “anecdotal” approach can mean colloquially, but I’m not sympathetic to that cavalier
approach to evidence. To me it has been more valuable, as I explain in *Identity Anecdotes*, to think about how an anecdote is told to have an effect in a conversation. It makes no sense outside of a particular interlocutory situation. That can be a casual conversation on a bus drive, or it can be at a conference, or in the case of the fictional examples I just gave it can be a power struggle over the future of academic problem building. But an anecdote, if it's a good anecdote, always has a point. This is something I learned from my mentor, Ross Chambers. The concept of the event, like, what does this anecdote do, and the concept of the point, namely what are the social and political stakes of doing something—these are the two things that matter to me.

That's something quite different from... I don't like to call it "theory," because rejecting that wholesale sounds philistine, and anyway it makes no sense, like which theory? But "theory," as a euphemism for the canon, is something I think of as sub-philosophical when it is produced by people who probably couldn't cut it in the philosophy department. They might read one or two famous essays by Heidegger, but they don't know the whole of Heidegger's teaching, they don't know the critical literature on Heidegger, they can't look at a piece by Derrida and recognize all the conversations he is having in that piece with other philosophers who are not in the theory canon. It is sub-philosophical in that sense. Sometimes the result is wonderful but when sub-philosophy is all that is going on in a critical essay it tends to tell... I wouldn't say a narrative, I think the trouble is they are more like fairy tales. Cavalier or evidence-free fairy tales about the state of world. So to me the choice is between a pointed, smart, rhetorically successful anecdote that does something unexpected and a fairy tale, which most of the time just makes people feel shitty, you know, because it doesn't offer any practical way forward for 99% of the people who read it.

**JH**: At the end of your "Introduction" to *Identity Anecdotes*, you state that you are interested in "the rhetoric, textuality, and institutional location of media practitioners"—not only professional workers (journalists, program-makers, pundits) but also "people who work 'anecdotally' (occasionally, momentarily, eventually) as active participants in media fields." I'm wondering whether you have any thoughts on how this pertains to the current regime of "user-generated content"—a media culture that involves a different relation than in the past between professional and amateur. Isn't the current media culture one wherein self-expression and self-revelation have made the anecdotal (anecdotal identity?) profoundly central to the everydayness of what people make with media, through Facebook, YouTube, and other venues?

**MM**: I think the anecdotal always was central to everydayness and to popular creativity. This is one of the enduring lessons of feminism for me. I'm working on a project now with Catherine Driscoll and Elaine Lally about casual gaming through social networks, and we find ourselves thinking a lot about older forms of popular culture. We are also looking hard at the ways in which many accounts of contemporary media culture presuppose a very simplistic or even erroneous view of older practices like reading. Even a term like "user-generated content" forecloses
rather than raises questions that ought to be seriously explored in a comparative inter-medial spirit, like the nature of “content” and the relative meaning of “user.” I’m not saying that there are no differences between media culture today and 50 or 100 years ago. On the contrary, I’m saying we can’t get at those differences by construing the media past in simplistic ways. But to get to your main point, I argue in *Identity Anecdotes* that anecdotes aren’t necessarily personal, even when they’re organized rhetorically by an experiential or witnessing “I.” Good anecdotes are really all about “you” and “we.”

The once-trivialized practices of women’s everyday culture under industrial capitalism in the West, like chatting with neighbors over the fence or rehearsing family stories, are profoundly anecdotal but they are also community building and renewing the social bond. They’re not only about “self,” and I think neither are those new media when they’re used in interesting ways. Of course social media networks can be used in vastly diverse ways and some of these can be all about narcissism or exhibitionistic self-display. But such uses are necessarily colored by the non-digital aspects of the culture in which they occur (the “feel” of Chinese networks is quite different from American practices, at least those I encounter myself in a limited way). For another thing, within any online community the person who doesn’t give to others, the person who is always only exhibiting self, tends to be rhetorically “boring” in the same way as someone who tells endless personal stories. Self-absorption is very dull, you know? Anecdotes with flair are highly social. And so yes indeed, the massive popular take-up of new media platforms makes thinking deeply about anecdote pretty important.

**JH:** Many thanks for this thoughtful conversation, Meaghan. I deeply appreciate your willingness to converse about your work, and especially through a venue/genre—the “interview”—whose conclusion has led us reflexively to questions about identity as “anecdotal.” I would not have expected anything less than that you, of all interviewees, would help me make the point of an interview into a point about identity anecdotes. I will try to be an able “translator” of your thoughts as I harness them to my efforts to design an academic journal that is conversational, and that underscores why we should *bother* conducting critical and cultural studies that way.