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Citation: Bennett1, T., Frow, J., Healy, C., Probyn, E. 2019. Twentieth Anniversary Colloquium: The Cultural and Communications Studies Section of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. *Cultural Studies Review*, 25:2, 52-54. <https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v25i2.6874>

ISSN 1837-8692 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <https://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrj>

GENERAL ARTICLES

Twentieth Anniversary Colloquium: The Cultural and Communications Studies Section of the Australian Academy of the Humanities

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v25i2.6874>

Article history: Accepted 30/09/18; Published 22/11/2019

In November 1991, the Australian Academy of the Humanities held a symposium under the title *Beyond the Disciplines: the New Humanities*. Convened by Ken Ruthven, the Professor of English at the University of Melbourne, and a member of the Academy's English Section, the symposium set out to explore the 'battering' that the traditional humanities had received 'from radical critiques of their methods and politics' in the context of the 'Theory Wars'.¹ It did so by bringing together representatives of the 'New Humanities' to address six topics. Meaghan Morris and John Frow spoke to the interdisciplinary aspects of cultural studies; Paul Carter and Sneja Gunew addressed the topic of multicultural studies; Tony Bennett and Lesley Johnson looked at the place of cultural policy studies within cultural studies; Judith Allen and Maila Stevens engaged with the place of feminist and gender studies within and beyond the disciplines; Simon During and Dipesh Chakrabarty brought post-colonial and subaltern studies into the conversation; and Michael Meehan and Hilary Charlesworth presented on new directions in legal studies.

The primary purpose of the symposium was to provoke debate within the Academy regarding the extent to which its existing array of electoral sections provided an adequate basis for recognising, and engaging with, the new directions that had emerged in the humanities since the Academy's establishment in 1969. As such, its chief legacy was the establishment of the Cultural and Communication Studies Section in 1998. The time lapse between the awareness of the need for something new and an institutional response to this through the

establishment of a new electoral section indicates that a good deal of dialogue, negotiation and diplomacy was necessary over the intervening period to overcome scepticism within the Academy that cultural and communication studies merited its recognition. This was also, it's fair to say, matched by a scepticism within some sections of cultural and communication studies that such recognition should be sought or, indeed, accepted.

Clearly, these reservations on both sides were overcome, the section was established, and, over the twenty years that have passed since, it has played an active role in the Academy's work, contributing, alongside the other sections, to the continuing need to adjust its activities to take account of the changing intellectual and political imperatives that have continued unabated over the intervening period. It was therefore decided that—as still the only entirely new electoral section to be established since the Academy's foundation—its twentieth anniversary was a moment worth marking. We were therefore mandated to convene a colloquium that would take critical stock of the contributions the Cultural and Communications Studies Section has made to the work of the Academy and to the wider cultural and communications studies community by placing these in the context of the what have proved to be a remarkably intellectually transformative twenty years.² Now little more than a dim and distant memory, the 'theory wars' that provided the spur for the *Beyond Disciplines* symposium have since been displaced by a whole series of new 'wars' and intellectual 'turns'—the history wars, the material turn, the digital turn, post-human studies, the environmental humanities—that have significantly impacted on the intellectual agendas of cultural and communication studies. As a means of engaging with these changing intellectual and political preoccupations, we invited presentations from some of the founding members of the section as well as from its more recent recruits. But we also wanted to go outside the Academy to get a sense of the new urgencies that mattered most to the rising generation of early career researchers.

The papers that are collected together in this themed section of *Cultural Studies Review* are revised versions of those presentations, arranged in the order of their presentation. The first panel of the day brought together two of the founding figures in Australian cultural studies, Meaghan Morris and Graeme Turner, with a younger researcher, Brett Neilson. Locating itself in relation to a now lengthy history of neoliberal 'reforms' in the University sector, Morris's paper remembers some of the struggles involved in bringing cultural studies into the Academy, and pays tribute to some of the sympathetic elders (Ian Donaldson, Graeme Clarke, Anthony Low and Ken Ruthven, among others) who helped open its gates to us. Turner's paper takes up the story at a later date, with the consolidation of cultural studies and its contribution to policy debates and advocacy: as Vice-President and then President of the Academy Turner was a key player in the Academy's project of talking to a government that was, and is, frequently resistant to understanding the value of research in the humanities. Neilson's paper, finally, reflects on his own research on logistics as a way of understanding academic research in terms of the material effects of the 'tyranny of supply' and of classificatory codes: material effects that may facilitate research or distort it, but in either case derive from a logic of organisation that has little to do with our own perceptions of the aims and the value of our projects.

The second panel of the day brought together three vibrant female scholars at different stages of their career to talk openly about the joys and difficulties of doing inter- and trans-disciplinary cultural studies in different geographical and institutional locations. While many might say but cultural studies *is* interdisciplinary, this session underlined that we need to reach further in our interdisciplinary collaboration.

It is clear that generation and location are crucial to young cultural studies scholars—where cultural studies is practiced influences greatly the forms it takes, and well as its politics. This was evident in Shawna Tang’s paper, where she detailed her long trajectory moving between Singapore and Australia, and across a number of post-doctoral fellowships and now as a Level B lecturer in Gender & Cultural Studies, at the University of Sydney, where she is working on the viability of a minor in Diversity Studies, which will hopefully cement a longer-term position. Shawna presented on the real difficulties of doing research on sexual minorities, especially on the domestic lives of lesbians, in the context of Singapore where such work is rarely funded. Crystal Abidin shared her auto-ethnographic stories to recount how she navigated interdisciplinarity as a precarious early career researcher. She too led a peripatetic existence as an ECR going through several fellowships in a number of countries before she segued finally into a continuing position, and subsequent to the symposium was awarded a DECRA in her own area of Internet cultural studies. Jill Bennett is at the peak of her career with an ARC Laureate and recently promoted to a Scientia Professorship at UNSW. Bennett spoke of her ground-breaking research that attends to the practical tasks of stigma reduction and empathy cultivation. For her, this is a pressing social challenge for cultural studies as an engaged, adaptive, post-disciplinary space. Bennett detailed projects funded through her Laureate focus on bringing community engagement into conversation with new theoretical frames that bring psychology and neuroscience into conversation with cultural studies.

The afternoon sessions of the Colloquium consisted of two somewhat disparate panels. In the first, Julian Thomas considered some of the policy implications that attend contemporary forms of media and communications, while Fran Martin spoke about what ‘Asia-related cultural studies work’ might look like in the present. Fittingly for an anniversary event, Thomas and Martin both framed their remarks as historically inflected. While Thomas helpfully introduced some key questions in relation to existing platforms, he also underlined the continuing significance of public cultural institutions as sites where responses to more-than-human challenges need to be worked through. Martin made a concise and compelling case against the dominant modes in which ‘engagement with Asia’ has been undertaken, particularly in the tertiary education sector. The alternatives that Martin sketched were committed to cultural studies methods and collaboration and solidarity with intellectuals in our region. The final session of the day featured Matt Poll talking about the shifting role of Indigenous people in museums and Tim Rowse considering some recent dynamics in how non-Indigenous Australians engage with indigeneity. Given the uneven and sometimes fraught relationships between cultural studies and Indigenous scholarship, it’s unfortunate that Matt Poll was unable to provide us with a written version of his thoughtful and nuanced account. However, Tim Rowse’s exploration of a ‘reconciliation orthodoxy’ and how that might both constrain and enable forms of recognition in the complex domain of settler-indigenous recognition provides much to consider.

Endnotes

1. From the back cover of the subsequent publication of the Symposium proceedings. Ken Ruthven (ed) *Beyond the Disciplines: The New Humanities*, Occasional Paper No. 13, Australian Academy of the Humanities, Canberra, 1992.
2. The Colloquium was held at the University of Sydney where it was hosted by Gerard Goggins on behalf of the Department of Media and Communications. The Colloquium was also supported by the administrative staff of the Academy which also provided bursaries to support the participation of early career researchers. Additional financial support was provided by the University of Melbourne’s School of Culture and Communications and the Institute for Culture and Society at the Western Sydney University.