



***DECIPHERING* CULTURE**

ordinary curiosities and subjective narratives

JANE CRISP, KAY FERRES, GILLIAN SWANSON

Deciphering Culture

Representation, subjectivity and sexuality continue to be central issues in the humanities and social sciences. *Deciphering Culture* explores their relationship, focusing on the way representations are used in practices and narratives of self formation. The authors develop the concept of 'curiosity' as a way of deciphering the working of distinct cultural formations, considering questions of knowledge and authority; reading and decipherment; and the ethics of critical and textual inquiry. Each author takes a distinct approach, using examples from the visual arts, literature, popular culture, and cultural history and examining questions of gender and cultural difference. They address a variety of topics including

- the historical formation of subjectivities, identities and differences
- everyday cultures and negotiation
- cultural conduct and habits of the self
- consumption and the body
- memory, history and autobiography

This fascinating book will appeal to students and academics from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds in the social sciences and cultural studies.

Jane Crisp is Adjunct Senior Lecturer in the School of Film, Media and Cultural Studies at Griffith University. **Kay Ferres** is Senior Lecturer in the School of Humanities at Griffith University. **Gillian Swanson** is Senior Lecturer in the School of Cultural Studies at the University of the West of England.

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Deciphering Culture

Ordinary Curiosities and Subjective
Narratives

**Jane Crisp, Kay Ferres
and Gillian Swanson**

First published 2000
by Routledge

Published 2013 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY, 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Typeset in Baskerville by Taylor & Francis Books Ltd

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Crisp, Jane.

Deciphering culture: ordinary curiosities and subjective narratives/

Jane Crisp, Kay Ferres, and Gillian Swanson.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Individuation (Psychology) in literature. 2. Individuation (Psychology)

3. Gender identity in literature. 4. Gender identity. I. Ferres, Kay,

II. Swanson, Gillian. III. Title.

PN56.I57 C75 2000

809'.93353-dc21

00-034473

ISBN 13: 978-0-415-10837-9 (hbk)

ISBN 13: 978-0-415-10838-6 (pbk)

Curiosity (kiüerĭp siti). ME [A.OF. *curioset *, ad. L. *curiositatem*; see CURIOUS and -TY]

1. Carefulness – 1747; scrupulousness, accuracy – 1694; ingenuity – 1772; undue niceness or subtlety – 1766. 2. Desire to know or learn; inquisitiveness ME.; inquisitiveness about trifles or other people’s affairs 1577. 3. Scientific or artistic interest; connoisseurship – 1781. 4. A hobby – 1661. 5. A fancy, a whim – 1718. 6. Careful or elaborate workmanship; nicety of construction – 1807. 7. Curiousness 1597. 8. A curious matter of investigation – 1700. 9. A vanity, refinement – 1705. 10. A curious detail or feature – 1747. 11. Anything curious, rare, or strange 1645.

2. A noble and solid c. of knowing things in their beginnings 1632. Curiositie, which I take to be a desire to know the faults and imperfections in other men HOLLAND. 7. Rotterdam, where the c. of the place detained us three days 1686. 11. Japanese goods, lacker ware and curiosities SEMMES

(*Oxford English Dictionary*)

A man possesses nothing certainly save a brief loan of his own body: and yet the body of man is capable of much curious pleasure.

(James Branch Cabell, *Jurgen*, 1919)

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Preface

How to read this book

The idea for this book began in our teaching collaboration: we taught a course on the representation of gender together – in various combinations – between 1990 and 1998. Our students were drawn from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds – cultural studies, film and media studies, literature, history, visual arts and professional areas such as health and education – and we therefore devised a way of teaching that allowed us to address issues in gender and representation in an interdisciplinary context. We drew from a broad base of different models, presenting differing approaches, outlining their implications, and demonstrating their applications in a range of contexts.

Of course, many gender studies courses name their distinctiveness as ‘inter-disciplinarity’. What was different and challenging in this case was that we were teaching in an institutional context that was also successfully interdisciplinary. We could make no territorial claim on ‘gender’, either: it appeared in many other courses. Our students were not seeking refuge from traditional departments indifferent or hostile to ‘gender’; they were coming to develop an expertise, whether ‘theoretical’ or ‘applied’ in its orientation.

We didn’t, then, set ourselves or our project up as ‘oppositional’ or ‘subversive’. We each were members of teaching teams in other subject areas: in film studies (Jane), cultural policy studies (Gillian) and Australian studies (Kay). What we sought to achieve was a productive convergence of gender studies with these fields. This pedagogic impulse inevitably influenced our research interests and directions as well.

From this beginning, we took our research and writing – as well as our teaching – in different directions, and we have developed a book that maintains the distinctiveness of our individual involvements and intellectual orientations. Each of our contributions, then, shows a different pathway through the common questions that addressing representation and gender raises.

The order in which each section’s chapters are arranged allows for a progressive build from the more personal and accessible chapters by Jane to the denser explorations of each section’s issues by Kay and Gillian. While Jane is concerned primarily with the textual, and the ways readers negotiate their meanings and use them in their everyday lives, Gillian is concerned with the configuration of know-

ledges and the way these constitute the 'environments' of subjectivity, as institutional definitions are disseminated to become part of popular cultural repertoires. Kay's chapters bridge these concerns – working from the practices of reading and writing, she considers the way representation functions as a practice of memory and history.

The book can therefore be read in two ways at least: 'down', taking each section and examining the different ways each author formulates the question of the relationship of representation and gender; or 'across', by following the thread of a particular author's analysis and argument, and moving through from one section to another to assemble a particular approach and discern its implications and productivity. Each author's contribution to the section is outlined in the section introduction, which identifies our common starting points and the different way we pursue them.

The sections of the book move from the general to the particular. In Chapter 2, we offer three introductory essays on curiosity as a way of thinking about culture, representation and subjectivity. In Part 2, we outline distinct approaches to representation, and in Part 3, we consider how the different frameworks we adopt lead to the analysis of different forms of representation and thereby reconfigure the object of representation. And finally, in Part 4, we each take up a particular case study, focusing on the blurred line between memory and history. Each of these chapters demonstrates the application of the models we describe in Part 2 and takes up one dimension of those forms of representation we identified in Part 3. And they show the implications of these approaches in a sustained way, based in our respective forms of research. In these final chapters, we see subjectivity being mobilised in ways that foreground the instability of the definitions and categories of gender, as representation is seen as a provisional process, open to competing versions and alternative readings.

Acknowledgements

Firstly we must thank those at Routledge who helped to bring this project to fruition: Chris Rojek for his early support; Mari Shullaw for putting her confidence in such a 'quirky book' and for constructive advice as we remodelled it over time; and the unknown readers, whose comments made us consider our 'threaded conversations' more closely, and allowed us to rethink our early conception of its form.

We owe a debt of gratitude to our colleagues within the former School of Humanities, now Faculty of Arts, at Griffith University for the stimulus that working with them provided and for their constructive interest in the various projects out of which our individual chapters have arisen. We are also indebted to the many students from different disciplinary backgrounds who attended our courses and whose enthusiasm and commitment provided the major inspiration for writing the present book.

We would also like to thank various people who gave advice or commented on earlier versions of particular chapters: Rachel Bowlby, the late Christian Metz, Francie Oppel, Helen Crowley. Thanks to Chris Barry for permission to use the images discussed in Chapter Seven. And special thanks to Janice Mitchell for her invaluable help in the conversion and formatting of our individual manuscripts into their final publishable form.

Personal thanks are also due to our families, for their patience and support throughout and especially during the hectic final stages of getting this book ready for publication: to Colin Crisp, to Ken and Allison Ferres, to Gwen and Ron Swanson, and to Colin Mercer, Taara and Joseph.

Part 1

Introduction

Curiosities

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Introduction

A key feature of this book is that it contains three different approaches to ‘deciphering culture’. Although it is a collaborative work, we have chosen to keep our voices distinct rather than melding them together into one collective editorial voice, except in the introductions to each section. The primary function of the first two chapters, therefore, is to provide a sense of the different backgrounds, interests, methodologies and styles that inform our individual contributions to the book.

Chapter 1, ‘Curious Histories’, directly introduces the three writers through autobiographical sketches characterising those intellectual engagements that inform our writing of this book. These histories chart our involvement with particular subject areas – literary studies, film and media studies, gender studies, cultural studies – and with the various evolving and competing methodologies associated with these fields. Because they are individual, they make clear what each of us is drawing on in the chapters that follow; but because they are also representative of the trajectories followed by so many of our contemporaries, they serve to give the reader a sense of the wider domain within which our work and this book are situated.

These three journeys are all, in a sense, ‘through the looking glass’. Mirrors reflect what is behind the looker, as we reflect here on the routes we have taken. However, like Alice’s journey through the looking glass, ours too have led to different ways of seeing and understanding the world we inhabit. The moment of passing through or beyond the looking glass is one in which alternatives are simultaneously in play; it is also an emblem of the ‘between-ness’ that is a key element of all our subsequent chapters. Between-ness is a condition of curiosity as it moves from arousal to satisfaction and back again.

In Chapter 2, each of us takes up this central motif of curiosity. Jane Crisp discusses curiosity in Rudyard Kipling’s ‘The Elephant’s Child’; Kay Ferres, in the stories of Eve and Pandora; Gillian Swanson, in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Our treatment of the notion of curiosity and of our chosen texts makes fully visible the differences in approach already glimpsed in our curious histories. Jane Crisp concentrates on a playful analysis of her text, drawing on structuralist and psychoanalytic ideas in the process. Kay Ferres deciphers

4 Part 1: Introduction

evidence of the workings of curiosity in both the production of representations and critical rereadings of them. Gillian Swanson shows how new spaces of consumption in the nineteenth-century city allowed new ways of exercising curiosity, bringing about an encounter with difference that '[unhinged] cultural certainty' and destabilised sexual categories.

Taken together, the two chapters in this section introduce the range of themes foregrounded in the title, *Deciphering Culture: Ordinary Curiosities and Subjective Narratives*. Curiosity, which is the linking motif of our individual contributions to Chapter 2, becomes visible as a motivating force not only in the activities and pleasures of daily life but also in academic investigations. It underpins the study of culture: subjected to a curious and inquiring gaze, the ordinary and everyday becomes curious, a subject for interrogation – to be read for clues that might help decipher the inner workings of distinct cultural formations. The inclusion of our curious histories in Chapter 1 introduces our interest in subjective narratives, providing an instance of the fact that the act of narration, whether of national or personal or fictional histories, is also inevitably an act of construction of the narrating subject, which draws on patterns already laid down within that subject's formation. The act of reading is also one of construction and negotiation, as evidenced by the different ways in which familiar texts and stories are read and used in Chapter 2. As we show in that chapter, these processes inevitably involve questions of gender. And finally, the treatment of subjective narratives in this section foreshadows our later engagements with questions of memory, narrative and the subjective in writing the past in the book's final section.

1 Curious histories

Jane Crisp, Kay Ferres and Gillian Swanson

Jane Crisp

My journeys to this point, both physical and intellectual, are fairly typical for someone of my background. Like the majority of Australians, I was born elsewhere – in my case, in England. My parents and I settled in New Zealand after the war. After completing a BA and a Master's degree, I married and spent some years in France while my husband was doing his doctorate. Many of our friends and contemporaries were doing much the same thing, studying overseas at British, European and American universities for higher degrees that would eventually earn us university jobs 'back home'. In 1965 my husband joined the French department of an Australian university; we had a child and I completed a doctorate. Since then we have been back to Europe regularly on the sabbatical leaves to which our employment as university teachers has entitled us, and are likely to continue to do so after retirement, since our son has reversed the trajectory of his mother and grandparents and is now living in England. This pattern of migrations and journeyings to and fro across the world for purposes of work, study and tourism reflects the mobility of his and our generations within postwar Western capitalist society.

Looking back on the parallel intellectual journey, as writing this section obliges me to do, I note that it, too, is one that many of my contemporaries have followed. My undergraduate studies were conventional enough – majors in English and in Latin language before the spread of literary theory – literary history and close reading of selected 'great authors' were the order of the day, and no one mentioned the New Critics or F.R. Leavis, despite their influence on the orientation of our studies. So naive was I that, later, when I was first tutoring in Australia and a colleague was pointed out to me as being 'a Leavisite', I assumed that he must practise some strange religion. However, this naive assumption was perhaps not so far from the mark after all, given the fervour with which the various competing approaches to literary and other studies have been espoused by their practitioners over the last few decades.

My doctoral thesis, which I worked on during the 1960s, involved a study of the relationship between the novels that Jane Austen read and those that she wrote. Although I didn't realise it at the time, this work tied in with several

contemporary developments within the study of English. On the one hand, it related to a growing interest in popular genres and in writing by women that addressed female readers, which was leading to a broadening of the university curriculum to include women's or gender studies. On the other, it reflected a shift away from an emphasis on the unique work of art that embodied the vision of its author, towards questions of intertextuality – a text's place within a web of other texts on which depended its material, strategies and meanings. I had not heard of structuralism yet, but when I did I had no trouble recognising the implications of what I had been doing in my doctorate.

During the 1970s and 1980s, I extended my doctoral work to include a number of once popular, but since neglected, nineteenth-century women writers, among them Rosa Nouchette Carey; her critical reception provides one of the case studies for Chapter 6. During this period, however, my teaching and research interests were being influenced not only by the rise of gender studies but also by that of film and media studies, both of which developments typically occurred first within departments of English. I found myself spending progressively less time teaching in courses on 'seventeenth-century poetry' or 'the twentieth-century novel' and more and more time in newer subjects on the curriculum, such as 'language and communication' and 'rhetoric of the mass media'. The similar shift occurring within my research is evidenced by the titles of some articles and book chapters produced by me during this period: "Descriptive Syntagma" and "Descriptive Pauses" – A Problem in Film Analysis' (Crisp 1986), "No Message, No Sex, Just Good Fun": Dealing with Gender Representation in the Popular Cinema' (Crisp 1987), 'Past History, Present Concerns: The Bicentenary of the French Revolution' (Crisp 1992). Underpinning two of these items is an interest in theoretical questions around how the standard repertoire of narrative film practice engages the viewer; these questions provide another case study for Chapter 6.

Even more significant, though, was the growing influence of a range of theoretical frameworks which were radically altering the questions that informed much of our work. As a means of simplifying what was then a complex and fiercely contested terrain, and still is within many universities, one can divide up the competing frameworks and their followers into three broad groups. First, the traditionalists continued to regard the appreciation of individual texts and their authors as the central and most worthy object of study, and stoutly rejected as irrelevant the wider social, political and theoretical issues raised by members of the other two groups. Second, there were those who were drawing on various Marxist and sociological frameworks to introduce questions about the particular interests and values that were being served by the way English studies were currently constituted. Such questions made visible the implicit biases of culture, class and gender within the official curriculum and helped to promote the inclusion of such previously marginalised and devalued areas as Third World and colonial writing, gender studies, and the study of popular media. Third, there were those who were influenced by the ideas of structuralism and semiotics and focused not so much on individual texts as on the broader systems of language or

narrative on which the production and making sense of texts depends. Orwell had asserted that 'good prose is like a window pane' (1970: 30) – a transparent medium through which an undistorted vision of the world could be conveyed; this view was challenged by an alternative view of language, not as a medium that we use but as the very means through which our world and our places within it are constructed. Just how contested this terrain was may be gauged by the struggles that I and some of my colleagues had during 1985 to persuade a 'Department of English' to accept the introduction of a first-year survey course of these contemporary theoretical issues. The course was finally accepted, but under the anodyne title of 'Approaches to Literature', in deference to more traditional colleagues' fears about the possible effects of the dreaded word 'theory'!

Despite the ongoing divisions and debates between these three broad approaches, in practice many academics draw on aspects of all of them. I am no exception. In the pleasure that I enjoyed while doing my close reading of 'The Elephant's Child' in Chapter 2, I recognise my earliest training in the more orthodox skills of close reading, even though these have now been augmented by insights from the theoretical frameworks that I have worked with since then. My most recent research draws on highly theoretical structuralist and semiotic ideas about how language systems work, yet uses these for the practical project of helping members of one of the most devalued groups within our society – people who have Alzheimer's disease. The questions that inform this research are typical of those posed by the more politically and sociologically oriented scholars: Who speaks for whom? What are the practical consequences of representing someone as lacking the capacity to reason or to speak intelligibly? Whose interests and values are served in the way we define and treat people with Alzheimer's (certainly not those of people with the condition)? Yet the strategies that I have been developing to help carers to listen to and make sense of someone with dementia arise directly out of structuralist and semiotic theories of language as a sense-making system. Meaning and sense are products of that system, not a result of matching words and things. People with Alzheimer's speak differently from 'normal' people; they lose the ability to distinguish between fact and fantasy and to give people and things the right name. However, because their language use still follows identifiable rules, from a semiotic perspective it is still meaningful – provided we know what those rules are. This project, which brings together all my previous interests, is touched on again in Chapter 3, when I consider the role of other people in the fashioning of our identities, and is covered in more detail in the final section as an example of how the ideas I discuss elsewhere in this book have been taken up in my own research.

I would never have guessed when I embarked on my intellectual journey that it would end with my working on and for people with Alzheimer's, nor that the baggage that I have acquired along the way would eventually prove of such practical help in this work. Yet my basic trajectory, from a Department of English to a School of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, and from work within English literature to a project that brings theory to bear on a lived contemporary issue, is one that many of my colleagues have followed.

Kay Ferres

When Jane proposed that we use biography as a means of discriminating our different voices and positions in the chapters that make up this book, this presented itself to me as a problem of writing: how to inscribe the personal, what were the uses of the autobiographical voice, how to evade the 'confessional' genre. This, of course, is a question that many scholars working in cultural studies and gender studies have addressed in their work: I think immediately of Valerie Walkerdine, Annette Kuhn, Nancy Miller and Jane Tompkins. When Jane Crisp and I have taught together, the shadow of Jane Tompkins is never far away. Gillian Swanson introduced me to the writing of Valerie Walkerdine when we arrived together at Griffith in 1988, and I remember her account of Carolyn Steedman's mother's longing for the New Look coat. But, temperamentally, disclosure is not something I am drawn to. And so I want to begin with a reference to Rachel Brownstein's essay, 'Interrupted Reading: Personal Criticism in the Present Time' (Brownstein 1996).

Preparing an introduction to a new edition of her book, *Becoming a Heroine*, Brownstein includes an anecdote. It describes an incident in the subway when a stranger interrupts her reading, and her annoyance at this unwelcome intrusion. She offers it as a 'story about the enormous gulf between compulsive readers like me and practical, militant nonreaders' like the strange young man in the subway and her mother (Brownstein 1996: 30).

In spite of her intention, 'the anecdote stubbornly refused to make that point', and was excised from her text. Her editor fretted that the story was about other kinds of difference that Brownstein didn't recognise and deconstruct – race, generational difference, sexual difference. 'Readers' and 'non-readers' – these categories perhaps recall a kind of class difference, focused on the high culture–popular culture distinction, which cultural studies has critiqued and dismantled. In 1932, Queenie Leavis (wife of the influential literary critic F.R. Leavis) published a book about taste and class, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, which marked out the differences between elite and mass culture in Britain. Brownstein draws a similar line in 1996 but the groups that fall out on either side of it do not correspond neatly to class, race or ethnic categories. Indeed, writing and reading were practices critical to the emergence of minority cultural politics in the late twentieth century.

The difference in my story might be named as 'cultural' rather than 'class'. In common with many Australian women, I am a reader with tastes formed by exposure to 'classic texts', newspapers and to public radio, the only form of mass culture whose networks extended to remote and rural areas until the 1970s. ABC radio and ABC-sponsored concerts broadcast an 'Englishness' among a diversifying Australian population in the 1950s and 1960s, when I grew up. The advent of television and popular music, on the other hand, brought a dangerous proximity with 'Americanness'. The difficulty of isolating elements of an Australian cultural identity against these dominant cultures has been critical in recent debates about the formation of intellectual identities in Australia. Those identi-

ties are shaped by that contact with the great 'elsewhere'; they are not formed in isolation from it.

Masculine intellectual formation has been much written about in biographical and autobiographical writing in Australia. For the generation who grew up under the regimes of the 'White Australia' immigration policy of the 1950s, it typically involves Irish Catholic schooling and, in early adulthood, expatriation. A postwar generation began to look to North America, rather than Great Britain, for this experience of 'elsewhere'. My impression of women's accounts is rather different. Institutions don't figure to the same extent: women were not eligible for the Rhodes scholarships that provided a colonial passage for many of the men who became prominent in public life. The transition from Australian country towns to the metropolitan centres of culture for women is often a story centred on romance; but it is a story that is difficult to tell in terms of starting points and destinations that are not 'personal'. Jill Ker Conway (1990) and Meaghan Morris (1998) have tried to tell it. Conway's is a narrative about leaving things behind; Morris, on the other hand, is a returner. I have never left, in any sense that could position me credibly as 'outside' my own culture.

I pondered the distance from my own and Meaghan Morris's Australian childhoods to the working-class rooms of Carolyn Steedman's and Annette Kuhn's family stories; the intellectual trajectories that take Morris to Paris and the US; and the glamour of expatriation compared to my own fixity. Would it ever make sense to ask of an Oxford or Cambridge intellectual (or one from Harvard or New York), 'Why have you never left?' I am a tourist in other cultures, especially intellectual cultures. I am a reader.

I wasn't 'schooled', though I went to school. But I learned to read, indiscriminately. My mother used to buy books from Americans who appeared on the doorstep selling Bible stories. These blue-bound volumes were divided between biblical narratives (in the back half of the book) and morality tales of contemporary family life; tales which, in the great elsewhere of the televisual world in the 1950s, were becoming the staples of this domestic medium. The clean-cut purveyors of this morality would appear on our back porch and my mother would emerge from the adjacent kitchen or laundry to pay them off. As far as I know, no other member of my family ever read these books – not my sisters who taught Sunday school, or my older brother. Collectively, we came together around contemporary music (the radiogram and the piano and the saxophone), the cinema and backyard cricket.

And we were all encouraged to be performers.

A memory: at 7, being Alice in the school concert in a blue dress; reappearing in the same dress as a doll in a toy shop in the Christmas play, bending stiffly as a boy (whose name I've forgotten) wound me up with a cardboard key.

A photograph: at 9 or 10, at another school; smaller even than the last and in North Queensland, in a settlement that is probably most accurately described as a hamlet. It boasted a beach, a cinema, a garage, a butcher's shop and a general store. There was a hairdresser who ran a business from under her house and a music teacher from Poland. In the photograph, my hair has been cropped to a

helmet and I am in the midst of a group of kids who look thinner, less substantial. One is an Aboriginal girl, Jeannie, who always seemed to be slipping away. Here she is all angles, almost crouching. I recall how I always felt afraid for her because the teacher upbraided her mercilessly.

And on Sundays, when my father had a day off work, we would drive to the nearby town to Mrs Schelling's shop where, each time, I would choose a new book: *What Katy Did* or *Little Women*. My older sister, who lived in the city and was an amateur actress, would send books as birthday gifts: *Pollyanna*, which I went to see at the open-air picture theatre, where bougainvillea curled around the gap in the roof between the canvas seats and the screen, and where the salt breeze and the sound of the waves penetrated. Hayley Mills' Englishness overwhelmed any sense of Pollyanna's Americanness: a curious contamination of the 'Americanisation' of Australian culture in the 1960s.

At home my father read into the night, sitting at the dining table under the light. In the humidity of summer the light would attract clouds of small black beetles, which crawled over the pages and through his hair. He placed bowls of water on the table for them to fall into. When television finally glimmered into life, we often watched in a shop window, those same beetles falling from fluorescent tubes on to the pavement.

I read my way into a liminal existence between Anglo and American culture. When I went to university, I read literature (the canon) and psychology. Film studies were new and glamorous; Germaine Greer, Kate Millett and Mary Ellman shocking in their exposure of the academy's exclusion of women. Many of the scholars in the Australian university system came from the United Kingdom or North America; and many Australian writers, painters and performers became permanent expatriates. Although expatriates are often regarded in Australia as having left their culture behind, or even to have repudiated it (as, indeed, some have), it seems to me that they have contributed a doubled vision that is the other side of the 'cultural cringe'. 'Australia' is located against an international horizon. It is a threshold, rather than a liminal or marginal space. My contributions to this book reflect this way of being in the world. I do not know my 'place' except through its relation to these other alluring places. My beginnings in literary studies have not been left behind as I have made moves into cultural history and applied ethics. The 'itinerary' that connects my chapters with one another is an interest in the way people occupy the space 'in between' identities and cultures. In the chapters that follow I have read texts and practices together and against each other, deciphering the textual exchanges that are implicated in the transformation and reconfiguration of identities.

My own recent research has been concerned with an expatriate Australian writer, Rosa Praed, an exponent of the 'sensation novel' who published over a long and unevenly successful career spanning the 1870s to the 1930s. Her subject was often Australia and colonial race relations, but she also wrote about marriage reform and, from the 1890s, took up with what Rita Felski has called 'the popular sublime' – theosophy and psychic research. I've several times gone to Europe and the US to trace her engagements with political and literary

cultures. I've followed the walk along the Thames that she describes in a book written with the Irish politician Justin McCarthy and the fellow Australian expatriate artist, Mortimer Menpes. I've visited the various places in Cornwall where she and her companion Nancy Harward found lodgings during the Second World War, when their usual French destinations were impossible to get to.

I have read my way into a familiarity with those places that shocked me when I actually saw them. I do not belong there, yet those landscapes and urban vistas are sedimented with meaning for me through the memory of countless readings and writings. My contributions to this book are about memory, history and belonging, about the transmission of culture through practices of reading and writing.

Gillian Swanson

How do I begin to trace an intellectual narrative that would make sense of my contributions to this book? I find the harnessing of the autobiographical mode to this task an awkward one, eliciting a different kind of thinking. I love those forms of autobiography which mess with its difference from academic writing, and have a powerful interest in the unstable boundaries between the actual and fictional – in the subjective narrative of figures like T.E. Lawrence, for example. And I have myself wandered between those genres. But, in my own writing, these days I like to keep them separate. Disclosure, for me, belongs in other compartments of my life, and exists in the more intimate exchanges of talk, and other forms of personal correspondence. There is a distinctive pleasure in the restraint, in the impersonality, of academic writing.

So it is with some trepidation that I attempt to retell the story of the way my intellectual interests develop, in a way that fits with my writing of these chapters. I can tell about my 'beginnings': nearing the end of my degree in French and English Literature in the mid-1970s. In those days, I meandered carelessly between the stark and defiant precision of modernist writing and the voluptuous and engulfing narrative of classic and popular novels; it didn't strike me as even worthy of comment that each of them excited me in quite different ways. To restate Kay's phrase, but with a different meaning, I too was a reader: my route into critical analysis was one dominated by this pattern of reading rather than by the established principles of academic inquiry. Yet this was a period in which differences in textual construction *were* critical, as textual innovation and transgression became the hallmark of intellectual inquiry and cultural work, and structural theory looked for its ultimate object. A serious concern with the engagement of the reader, with the way a text 'constructed' and 'signified' its reader, would only later lead – ironically perhaps, given the early dismissal of 'real' readers – to considering the extratextual formation of readers, or the way different modes of address were formed within literary genres or popular novels, different media forms, or a postcolonial frame. I would have to wait to discover these questions and their connection to cultural difference.

In a chance encounter within the newly developing field of film studies

during a course on French critical theory, I found modes of analysis that allowed for the exchange between popular, classical and modernist forms. When I started teaching film, I explored with students the differences in pleasure that moving beyond conventional textual repertoires could bring, and the other kinds of meaning that new forms allowed. After we watched the films of Hitchcock and Douglas Sirk, traced the development of Clint Eastwood's star persona, or identified the conventions of *films noirs* for their syllabus, they stayed behind to help me with my own research on the way 'independent cinema' asked spectators to challenge their own viewing formations and recast the way classifications of taste intersected with social class and difference. So they became experts on films of the British avant-garde – based on the exploration of colour, movement and light, the film frame, and the passage of film through the projector – and independent film, which worked with narrativity, adopting Brechtian conventions or following the writings of Gertrude Stein.

This was, perhaps, an awkward way of negotiating the 'divide' in my own interests, adopting Bourdieu's schema of the relation of education, cultural capital and distinction 'against the grain'. I tortuously attempted to show that cultural subjects were able to negotiate differences between the popular and classical and the avant-garde, that taste communities were not so cut and dried as Bourdieu's hierarchical grids indicated. This seems less awkward now, when empirical or historical work has shown us something of the patterns of 'ordinary readers' less governed by literary canons and institutional protectionism: book clubs, libraries and letters tell us of more experimental readers than of those whose writing established regimes of literary value.

Here I pause. It's difficult to convey the ordinariness of this work: a series of incremental musings, learning to worry away at an idea, rather than a string of epiphanies. But also it is a difficult move to bring this narrative back to my work for this book. My route has been a more circuitous one than I could chart through a theoretical shift from texts and readers to cultural history; one that has to find its explanation in less deliberate moves.

My early family life was one of stories and talk, and it was there, as much as in fiction, that I discovered other lives. The attachments which overlay my intellectual interests were borne from the calm talk of women knitting in front of a quiet television, telling stories of the living of lives, of conversations held elsewhere, exchanging letters from people I knew well but never met.

My mother's stories of life in the war were a particular delight: ironing next to the French windows until the last minute before the doodlebugs went silent, then tearing down the garden and jumping headfirst through the door of the shelter on to the bed before they dropped; her mother packing up with her children and travelling up and down between London and Wales, my mother hating the schools where only she didn't speak the language (each one she started at just beginning to 'do Australia in geography'); going back into the London house after a near hit and finding in front of the piano her brother's birthday goldfish dead among the shattered shards of their glass bowl. My father told of his German grandparents, bricks thrown through their shop window before the First