Culture was Detroit…

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Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists

DAVID L R HOUSTON, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

This column is going to close the year with a slightly different, even unorthodox perspective on books. Not a book review per se, it considers a specific title.

The book I want to talk about is My Husband Betty: Love, Sex and Life with a Crossdresser, by Helen Boyd. I met Helen Boyd by pure chance last year. She had copies of her book, which appears to date to the early 1900s, notes that this Culture was “Super Quality,” but readers might be more surprised to see that in this case the origin of the book is more difficult issues common to many others. Being a crossdresser is not about covert trips to TJ Maxx, or about invented reasons to add a copy of Cosmopolitan to a full shopping cart. It is about a journey into self, a trip that pushes boundaries in ways that can sometimes be unbearably painful, as Boyd demonstrates with the sad account of a good friend who clung to her marriage until it was painfully clear that it could no longer be. Being a crossdresser is a lot about love and self-respect.

Students soaked the book up like sponges. They reported their readings in an online blog and shared their respect and amazement at the stories and challenges faced by Helen, her husband Betty and the entire cast of the book. They were at first puzzled at how this practice can be, how grown men can want to do this and still be grown, and very often married, men. As the book deepened, as the critical analysis of her self, her life, her husband and the national support groups expanded, I could watch the students grow—it was almost palpable. They felt what the book’s characters felt. They did more than sympathize—they really understood.

Helen and Betty visited class as we finished the last chapter. I sensed a brief moment of surprise when they entered. Faced with the certain knowledge that, despite their deep reading, they were now going to have to talk—out loud—to these two people that had become like friends, some were a bit taken aback. Most had never actually had experience of the restaurants elsewhere. Early menus and advertisements thus did not bother to translate the menu into Arabic—they simply transliterated the English names into Arabic phonemic equivalents. No one not already familiar with McDonald’s food could possibly get a clue as to what an item was made of from decoding the Arabic.

A tension developed within the company between those who wanted to expand into the supposedly rising middle class, and those who believed that in a country with a $4000 GDP per capita and a 14 percent unemployment rate, the middle classes would never be a significant part of their market. As the former gained influence, translations of “happy meal,” “double apple pie” and “value meal” appeared. It was never clear whether these efforts made any difference to sales.

If choosing transliteration over translation can be a rational marketing choice, it’s not always successful. In bringing Pokémon to major European and North American markets, Nintendo carefully translated many of the Japanese names into foreign language equivalents. For example, the fire-breathing lizard Hitokage became Chambray, a contraction of “salamander” and the verb “char.” In French, the same monster is Salameche; in German, Glumanda. The objective is to reduce what Malinowski called “the coefficient of weirdness” and increase the “coefficient of intelligibility”—without destroying the magic that appeals to young players.

When the Pokémon franchise came to Cairo, its owners simply transliterated the English
were selling in the contemporary US. He mentions Chirac as a possible signified because the message is in French. Bihn has his own theory of meaning; he suggests that the joke was meant to refer to him, as president of the company.

None of these stories is as simple and direct as the Nova anecdote. Unlike the Nova story, though, they are true. Perhaps the moral for advertisers is a truism of anthropological linguistics: that meaning usually lies not in words but in the contexts in which they are uttered.

Please send your comments, contributions, news and announcements to SLA contributing editors Jim Stanlaw at stanlaw@ilstu.edu or Mark Peterson at peterms2@muohio.edu.

Society for Medical Anthropology

NANCY VUCKOVIC and JANELLE S TAYLOR, CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Helman Receives SMA Career Achievement Award

An MD, Helman has worked to create and promote the subfield of clinically-applied medical anthropology through his teaching, his applied work and his numerous publications. Please see the “Rites of Passage” section of the April issue of AN [p 35], for the full description of Helman’s remarkable accomplishments.

Informed Consent in Oral History and Ethnography

By Mark Padilla and Amy Fairchild (Columbia U)

An October 1993 memorandum from the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP) in the Department for Health and Human Services (HHS) has been treated by many as having resolved a longstanding controversy over whether those conducting oral history studies must subject their work to institutional review board (IRB) review: “Oral history interviewing activities, in general, are not designed to contribute to generalizable knowledge and, therefore, do not involve research as defined by HHS regulations and do not need to be reviewed by an institution review board.”

Depending on the subject matter, oral history may represent very little risk of personal injury, embarrassment, or humiliation; it may, however, present tremendous risk. When the risks are great, explicit informed consent procedures are appropriate. But when the risks are negligible or realistically non-existent, elaborate procedures that emphasize contractual protections against litigation that motivate IRBs—also does not consider the continuous and dynamic nature of the relationship between “researcher” and “subject” in the context of extended ethnographic fieldwork. Ironically, then, it is not in the spirit of informed consent as a dynamic and continuous process and may actually undermine the ongoing flow of information about the ethics of research that is particularly important in ethnographic studies.

That we treat oral history and ethnography so differently underscores the extent to which the question of whether they constitute research or not misses the point entirely: we need to ask what type of ethical guidance and oversight is most appropriate for different types of investigations involving different levels of risk, and this needs to be achieved on a case-by-case basis rather than making blanket declarations that problematize particular research methodologies and exempt others out-of-hand. As in the 1970s, when epidemiologists argued that the rules of clinical research would render records-based research virtually impossible, we have again reached a juncture where we must face the limits of the principles and regulations designed for clinical and biomedical research as they are applied to the social sciences. The true question before us is how to weigh the harms to the research enterprise as a whole against those that might fall on individuals. To address this question appropriately may require reevaluation of the ethics that should govern different types of investigations and the place and nature of informed consent within those undertakings.

[For references and more information on this topic, see www.aaanet.org/press/an/index.htm.]

Please send column contributions to the SMA Contributing Editors Nancy Vuckovic at nancy.vuckovic@kpchr.org or Janelle Taylor at jstaylor@uwashington.edu.

Shifters for sale: the success of this label in raising sales apparently depends on its ambiguity about just which president it refers to. Image courtesy Tom Bihn Co

names. The problem is that such names could mean anything. Rumors began to abound that the names were blasphemous. According to one flyer, what Charmander “really” means is “No God in the world.” Rumors like this fed into a moral panic that arose over Pokémon in some parts of the Middle East at the turn of the century.

Yet if semantic ambiguity can open the door to criticism, it can also sell products. Witness the case of the Tom Bihn company, based in Port Angeles, WA, which designs, manufactures and sells laptop bags, messenger bags, backpacks and briefcases. Inside some of the bags, the care label is printed in both English and French. The French version, though, contains something missing from the English version—the phrase “Nous sommes desole que notre president soit un idiot. Nous n’avons pas vote pour lui.” (“We’re sorry our president is an idiot. We didn’t vote for him.”)

According to the company, once someone noticed and posted the information to a blog, sales picked up. “It is a mystery, but since we launched the bags with the label sewn, sales have doubled,” company president Tom Bihn told Agence France-Presse last spring.

“Everyone seems to have a president that they think is an idiot. Take your pick: Jacques Chirac, Bill Clinton, George Bush.” In other words, the message has selling power because it is a shifter, a deictic element whose meaning shifts according to context.

Yet the label is clearly indexical in the more traditional sense as well. Bihn mentions Bush and Clinton as potential signifieds because the bags