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Spatializing Storytelling: Contemporary Post-Binary Geographies of News Discourse

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THE INVITATION TO CONTRIBUTE to the inaugural issue of *Aether* delighted me because I believe the dawning of this journal marks an exciting moment in geography—a moment burgeoning with possibilities for an emerging geography of media. As a multidisciplinary scholar with a joint position at University of Toronto in geography and journalism (the first joint position of this kind to the best of my knowledge), I am passionate about exploring the process of storytelling, paying particular attention to stories we tell about place. Although I am happily ensconced in my academic home now, teaching journalism students how to cover stories differently—stories that do not replicate racist and sexist assumptions—I must admit I still feel most comfortable in an edit suite, barricaded in by walls of video cassette tape boxes like bricks, peering intently at the monitor, explaining to the editor which shot needs to be dissolved next. Before I became a full-time academic, I was a national television producer at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, where I was out daily covering news stories with a reporter and camera and sound team. I would be assigned a story early in the morning and expected to return that day with a two and a half minute news item. I covered stories ranging from deadly subway crashes to the rise and rise (then) of Alanis Morissette, to the demise of an environmental minister to a yodelling contest. I interviewed politicians, pundits and was on the cusp of the reality show craze in the late 1990s, helping to produce a show entitled “Seventy-Two Hours to Remake Canada” where twenty four Canadians met to rewrite the Canadian Constitution over a weekend. During this time of my life, I rarely slept. I worked on a steady diet of adrenaline and coffee. I loved the job and at the same time found it exasperating because while it gave me the freedom to tell stories that would reach millions of people, I also felt boxed in because I had only a few minutes to tell a story which was always necessarily more complex than what was told.

Working in television profoundly shaped my path in geography. I was granted a leave of absence from my job at the CBC to complete my Ph.D. and I took a year and a half off from my job to write up my research at University College London. There is no doubt that being a producer influenced my approach to my study on women of “mixed race” in Toronto. As I engaged in a snowball sampling approach to find participants, I discovered that the majority of the women I interviewed were journalists. This complicated my research findings because some of the women were only too eager to provide me with interview material journalists could only dream about, coining pithy phrases like “Women of “mixed race” occupy a third space—isn’t that the perfect clip for you?” accompanied by a cheeky grin. This obviously complicated my data collection and needed to be addressed in my analysis (see Mahtani in progress). There is also something about being “mixed race” that allows for the opportunity to see issues from both sides – an approach which has come in handy for me as a journalist. Many of the women I interviewed likened themselves to “flies on the wall” or “ambassadors” (Mahtani 2002) and while this does not mean we are objective, for no journalist is truly impartial, this positioning did allow me to consider different perspectives in storytelling. It has also changed my interviewing skills. As a journalist, I was trained to ask particularly potent questions, including my all-time favourite, “What do you mean by that?” My dual identity shifted from one where I was Indian-Iranian to that of the journalist-academic. I felt comfortable adopting this new identity and it provided me with a chance to map out new ways to understand the senses of belonging for women of “mixed race” in my study.

My new research explores a critical geography of journalism. Geography offers me a particularly fruitful lens through which to consider the worlds of both newsmedia production and consumption. Not surprisingly, my research has been influenced by my own experience in a newsroom. As a woman of “mixed race” I was seen as a member of a minority group, and often asked to cover stories related to “race” and religion. What does it mean to be essentialized like this in a newsroom? What kinds of silencing occur in newsrooms for people who are labelled as members of a minority group? People of color make up less than five percent of employees in most newsrooms, and yet there is a renewed interest in covering marginalized groups in a fair and accurate way, especially after 9-11 (Allan 2002). Inspired by my own experience, I interviewed women journalists of color in a variety of international sites, ranging from Mumbai, Sydney, and Toronto, asking them about their experiences of sexism and racism (Mahtani 2005, Mahtani 2001). The stories I heard (from very articulate and eloquent journalists no less) were remarkably similar from place to place. I heard that women were expected to act in ways that reinforce ideologies of femininity and at the same time perform a masculine identity in order to get the “hard news” story. This paradoxical space (Rose 1993) and how it was negotiated for many of these women was of great interest to me, because the experience of newsgathering is indeed gendered. Even the language of news

is loaded—one gets a news “hit”, you acquire a “spear” for your story, there is the old adage, “if it bleeds, it leads”, etc and as geographers the onus is upon us to explore how various forms of masculinity are enacted, negotiated and challenged in various international newsrooms, asking about the impact of this dynamic on international newsmedia production.

While fascinated with the sites of international newsmedia production, I have become interested in the other side of this equation: the experience of news consumption, especially among members of the so-called “ethnic audience.” Even in cultural studies, our research on marginalized audiences remains limited. I am curious to discover how our memories of particular places are influenced by media representations. Can memory be contaminated by media portrayals? I have been conducting focus groups with members of the Iranian diaspora and asking them how they remember their “home” based on media representations in Canadian news reports. I argue that yearning for the homeland is altered, shaped and sculpted through particularly pervasive patterns of racist programming in Canadian newsmedia. In particular, I suggest that the imagined space of the homeland is continually being reconstructed in juxtaposition against the dominant culture’s mis-representation of the Other. It’s my hope that this kind of audience analysis will open up a new space for work in the sub-discipline of geography of media—a geography that is politically inspired, critical in perspective, and takes into account the racialized and colonial subject position of the diasporic media consumer.

The birth of *Aether* offers us an opportunity to develop a novel approach to analyzing the relationship between geography and media, where we move beyond our reliance on discourse analysis as a methodological tool towards a critical, progressive geography that may lead to different kinds of storytelling about place and identity—storytelling that challenges the heteronormative and ethnocentric assumptions so often rampant in conventional newsmedia. I look forward to reading these new stories in future issues of *Aether*.

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