IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion) - Sexing The Academy: Or, The Seductive Art of The Misleading Monograph Title

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Sexing The Academy: Or, The Seductive Art of The Misleading Monograph Title

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Look, here’s the thing: nobody really has any illusions about scholarly monographs being fun to read, right? I mean, I know there are some things you just don’t say in a polite group of librarians, but surely we can all agree that the vast majority of university press and scholarly trade publications — whatever their significance to the marketplace of ideas and however valuable their contribution to the nation’s academic health — are not books with which a normal person would look forward to curling up by the fire on a rainy afternoon. Not everything good and valuable has to be fun, after all.

So let’s just take the essentially boring nature of scholarly monographs as a given, and let’s put that assumption to work as a partial explanation for a strange and wonderful marketing practice that dominated the academic marketplace throughout the 1990s: the strategy of taking impenetrable theoretical treatises and gussying them up with sexually suggestive titles. I’m not talking about books that genuinely deal with sex and sexuality, but do so in a dry and academic way — I’m talking about books that were given steamy titles despite the fact that they had little or nothing to do with sex.

I believe this practice emerged from the confluence of two simultaneous trends: the rise of postmodernism and Cultural Studies (whose exponents have a well-established love of sexually provocative language and an even more well-established aversion to rhetorical clarity) and the decline of the scholarly book market. Sales were starting to head down in the 1990s, while the number of academics writing obliquely about the performativity of gender and hegemonic hermeneutics was still as high as ever. The need to sell just as many arid scholarly monographs in an increasingly selective marketplace resulted naturally in a flood of deliciously absurd book titles, the likes of which we’re not likely to see again for some time. All were apparently formulated with the bored academic in mind: someone so desperate for a book written on an intrinsically interesting subject that he (or she) would take any glance at the title and immediately snatch it up without bothering to dig deeper — or even, in many cases, read the subtitle.

One of the more elegant examples of this practice comes courtesy of Todd C. Parker’s Sexing the Text. Now, you need to understand that in Cultural Studies parlance, the verb “to sex” has nothing to do with sex as in “I wanna sex you up.” “Sex” is a transitive verb, but its object is always an abstraction. When cultural theorists use the verb “to sex,” they generally mean “to endow with gender-specific significance.” Parker’s book is a case in point, as you can see by looking at its subtitle: Sexing the Text. The Rhetoric of Sexual Difference in British Literature, 1700-1750. That date range is the real clincher. Right up until that point, it almost sounds as if the book might offer a hint of prurient interest, but that 1700-1750 (not only historically remote but also narrow) is enough to discourage the most desperate literary thrill-seeker.

This rhythm of anticipation and disappointment is typical. Consider Ursula A. Kelly’s Schooling Desire (What’s this? A little boarding-school fantasy scenario? Cultural Politics and Pedagogy (Oh. Nope.), or Peggy Phelan’s Mourning Sex (What? Morning sex?): Performing Public Memories (Feh. Skunked again.). In the latter, the author “mediates on the trauma of loss, erotically and performatively” and “advances performance theory in dialogue with psychoanalysis, queer theory and cultural studies.” This is not a promising blurb, though I suppose a mental image of the author meditating on an erotic and performative manner could hold a certain perverse attraction. Then there’s Sexing the Savage: Popular Music and Gender, in which various cultural critics take turns avoiding any real discussion of sex in pop music. Instead, they unbend themselves of essays with titles like “Feeling and Fun: Romance, Dating and the Performing Male Body in the Take That Videos” and “Seduced by the Sign: An Analysis of the Textual Links between Sound and Image in Pop Music Videos.” Less artful than Sexing the Text but more impressive in terms of sheer brazeness is a book from 1997 by Melanie Weber. Its main title is Erotic Men and Undating Women, and its subtitle is very long. The editors probably hoped you’d decide to buy it before getting to the end. It goes like this (big breath): The Visual Imagery of Gender, Race and Progress in (guesses, anyone?) Reconstructive Illustrations of Human Evolution.

Yes, this is a book that explores the subtle “paleoanthropological conventions” that are socially constructed by means of those pictures that depict man’s evolution from a knuckle-walking ape to an erectly walking human. (Get it? Erectly?) I’m not sure how feminine undulation figures in this thesis, because I haven’t read the book. And I don’t think I’m going to.

Here’s another fun example, this one courtesy of author Henry Kries and Cornell University Arts and Science. Title: Fetish: An Erotics of (for wait for it. . .) Culture. The word “culture” in a book title is not generally the harbinger of a scintillating read, but still, this one has possibilities. Maybe it’s about pornography, you think to yourself, or about why Kevin Kline kept snuffing Jamie Lee Curtis’ shoes in A Fish Called Wanda. Inquiring academics really might like to know these things! Then you check out the table of contents and come face to face with chapter titles like “Interpassivity and the Knowing Wink: Mystery Science Theater 3000” and “The Ambassador’s Body: Unscreening the Gaze.” Oh, well.

There are so many more. Anne Fausto-Sterling’s Sexing the Body hints strongly at a certain amount of, um, practical applicability, but then you hit the subtitle: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality. And let’s not even talk about Elspeth Probyn’s equally misleading Sexing the Self, which carries the deflating subtitle Gendered Positions in Cultural Studies. Robert Young’s 1994 monograph is intriguingly titled Colonial Desire (Mmm, new details on Jefferson and Hemings? Maybe something about the kinky secrets of those black-clad Puritans?) only to disappoint with the subtitle Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race. Another fine example is Persuasive Desire and the Ambiguous Icon by Allen S. Weiss, which offers no subtitle and therefore waits to disappoint the reader until the table of contents, which includes chapter titles like “Inmate Totems: continued on page 85

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IT’S ONLY A MATTER OF TIME UNTIL THE HOMELESS DISCOVER THE POWER OF ONLINE BEGGING

When Karyn Bosnak moved from the Midwest to New York, she soon found out that this city is a shopping mall, just like home, only bigger and better. It took her just a few months to run her credit card up to $20,000, an amount she had no hope of ever paying off. But Karyn is nothing if not resourceful, so she set up a Website, www.SaveKaryn.com, and posted a message explaining her plight: “I need $20,000 to pay off my credit card…I’m really nice and asking for your help...if you have an extra buck or two, please send it my way.” Karyn not only got twenty thousand of those extra bucks, but she was also sent many gifts, such as Yankee tickets (she auctioned them on eBay), garden vegetables from Ohio (she froze them) and coupons for dates with a guy named Dave (poor Dave). Now HarperCollins has rewarded her ingenuity with a book deal, including an advance of about $20,000. Karyn describes her forthcoming tome as “a madcap memoir of living in Manhattan, running up crazy debt, and ending up in the poorhouse. Like Bridget Jones meets Confessions of a Shopaholic.” She will include valuable advice, such as keeping a credit card for emergencies only, and “a pair of boots on sale is not an emergency.” I have some advice for a certain acquisitions editor at HarperCollins: Lay off those Grey Goose martinis when an agent is pitching a book over lunch.

BUT AT LEAST SHE ZIPPED UP THE FLY

Former Paramount Studios honcho Robert Evans’ memoir, The Kid Stays in the Picture, recounts an embarrassing moment for him and his wife, Ali McGraw. The fashionista Halston designed a spectacular dress for their audience with the Queen, but when Ali put it on just before the event, Evans complained that it was too much too revealing. Horribly, Ali changed into a demure pantsuit, resulting in loud outcries from the British tabloids criticizing Ali’s bad taste and lack of respect for Her Majesty. The next morning Halston called Evans, asking him why his wife had not worn the dress he’d designed for this occasion. Evans explained “the plunging neckline completely showed my wife’s breasts.” Halston was understandably miffed because Ali had put the dress on backward.

COMB-OVER IS IN, AND SO ARE BODY-PIERCING AND BOTOX

It’s a word used five times in five different places over five years, the editors of The Shorter Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary will consider it for inclusion. The newest edition, just published, includes 3500 new words that made the cut. Joining the Tabibis are Prozac and Viagra. Chat rooms, snail mail and sticker shock combine with spandex, leotards, bonging young woman with an older but wealthy guy. The Shorter is an historical dictionary, intent on recording every word in common usage since 1700. Priced at $150, it seems to me a priceless record of how our language evolves and prospers. In a New York Times piece on the new edition, the co-editor Angus Stevenson was asked for his personal favorite new word. “Gio commando,” said Mr. Stevenson, which means to go out on a date wearing no underwear.

THE NIGHTMARE AT HOGWARTS SCHOOL: HARRY POTTER EXPELLED?

When JK Rowling told the press that she is taking a little more time to complete the next Harry Potter blockbuster, shares of Bloomsbury Press PLC declined 26% from its 52 week high. This happened despite the $40 million cash reserve that Harry has produced for Bloomsbury. Suddenly the market recognized that Bloomsbury without Potter was a fine literary press, profitable and respected, but a bit wonky. And according to the Wall Street Journal, Bloomsbury’s CEO Nigel Newton, agreed. He began using the Potter cash pot to buy some British reference publishers like Who’s Who. He launched a children’s book line in America where, unfortunately, he sold the Potter rights to Scholastic before anyone knew how big the series would become. Bloomsbury is also changing its publishing philosophy, moving away from the literary to the more popular, such as last year’s successful Kitchen Confidential. Coming soon, an illustrated book entitied All My Life for Sale, wherein the author describes how he sold everything he owns over the Internet, including his sideburns packed in a plastic bag. Soon to be a major motion picture?

BIN LADEN’S MYSTERIOUS GIRLFRIEND CONDEMNS RELIGION AND HARVARD

Who is Kola Boof, and why is she posing topless on the cover of her book, Long Train to the Redeeming Sin? Don’t try to find out by calling her publisher, North African Book Exchange in Fullerton, CA. No one answers the phone there. You might want to ask famed New York University law professor, Derrick Bell, who read Long Train, admired it and began an email conversation with Ms. Boof. Bell defends her against critics who think her life story just doesn’t add up. Ms. Boof, from southern Sudan, was raised in the Muslim faith and witnessed the murder of her parents by Sudanese rebels when she was 8, or 10, or 12, depending on which version of her life you hear. She somehow fled to America and was adopted by an African-American family where she didn’t want to go. For a time in the 1990s she says she was Osama bin Laden’s mistress. She eventually left Islam behind her, condemning it’s treatment of women. When she attacked all organized religion, saying “For just as Harvard University is an institution created by men, so is every religion” a fatwa was issued against her by Sudanese clerics. However, the government of Sudan knows of no fatwa against her. She claims she was shot at in Oakland, California and shot back and, as a result is under FBI protection. But the FBI knows of no protection they are giving her. “That’s their way of protecting me,” she says.

Her book was selling very slowly over an Internet site called AAIBCom, a bookselling site specializing in African-American titles. But Ms. Boof joined with some political activists who are working against slavery in Sudan, and launched an intense Internet campaign to promote herself and her book. She appeared on radio talk shows, and her book, languishing near number 190,000 on Amazon’s bestseller list, jumped to number 951. “I can’t deny I’m a conniving person,” Ms. Boof admitted.