

An Exploration of Collaboration: Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Relationships in Ethnographic Filmmaking

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ABSTRACT

This doctoral project explores the collaborative process and relationships formed between anthropologists and/or filmmakers and the Aboriginal people they work with. I use the making of film as the research site to explore the collaborative process and the building of relationships within this process. As anthropologists/filmmakers, the Aboriginal people we now work with, are situated in, and identify themselves within an environment that is a product of more than twenty years of requesting ownership and control of their representations. Aboriginal people are in many cases, highly politicised and direct how they work with anthropologists/filmmakers. This has called for the development of a collaborative practice that honours this altered environment and the way in which Aboriginal people are positioning themselves within it.

Through the exploration of my own collaborative practice and those of other anthropologist/filmmakers, I argue that collaborative engagement with Aboriginal people is strongest when it is long term and grounded in the core tenets of respect, trust and shared ownership. This results in a visual product that stems from a process that incorporates the conflicting and differing perspectives and desires of a group of people, versus fulfilling the singular agenda of the anthropologist/filmmaker. I also argue that a long term collaborative relationship is visually evident in the film through the way the people being filmed represent themselves on screen. In this exegesis, I critically analyse the collaborative relationships I developed in my project and the evidence in the films for the intimacy developed in these relationships.

This project is a body of material that includes a series of photographs, two films and an exegesis. Incorporated into the film *Stitch by Stitch* (2017) and the exegesis are still images taken from the films and B&W photographs taken during my fieldwork. *Stitch by Stitch* (2017) is an ethnographic film that was made with a group of Ngarrindjeri women who live in and around The Coorong and Lower Murray Lakes in South Australia. It focuses on a number of core issues of importance to these women. These are linked throughout the film by the process of weaving from the freshwater rushes that grow in the estuary environment of The

Coorong. These core issues include yarning together, teaching, the degradation of the environment and preparing the next generation as custodians for continuing the cultural and artistic practice of weaving. There is also a second film that is strictly pedagogical and a documentation of the key stages of the weaving process. This film was made at the request of the woman who has been my central collaborator and friend in the project, Aunty Ellen Trevorrow. The making of these films constituted my research site for exploring collaboration between myself as an anthropologist/filmmaker, and my Ngarrindjeri colleagues.

I spent seven years making the films with the Ngarrindjeri women. This was incorporated into a total of eleven years fieldwork and ongoing engagement with Ngarrindjeri men and women. My fieldwork was defined by periods of long and short-term stays, multiple conversations and communication with my Ngarrindjeri colleagues.

Using the making of the film as the research site as a means to explore collaboration, has resulted in identifying collaborative engagement based on respect, trust and shared ownership as a pathway for ethnographic filmmaking practice that honours the contemporary environment in which Aboriginal people are now requesting ownership of their representations and enlisting the skills of anthropologist/filmmakers in furthering their cultural and political goals. This is a pathway that encapsulates the building of trust, respect and intimacy between filmmakers/anthropologists and their Aboriginal colleagues, as well as acknowledging that any collaborative process is marked by conflicts and differing perspectives that potentially allow for multiple outcomes and products. It also argues that deep long term relationships are the foundation for building powerful partnerships between Aboriginal people and anthropologists and/or filmmakers into the future.

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Along with Aunty Ellen, I acknowledge and thank my editors, Philip Elms and Teresa Robinson, whose creative partnership over many years has resulted in three moving and successful films.

DECLARATION

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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Signed:

Naomi Robyn Offler

Date:



'Stitch by stitch, circle by circle
weaving is like the creation of life. All
things are connected.'

Aunty Ellen
Camp Coorong, South Australia

PREFACE

I have my eye to the viewfinder as I observe Aunty Ellen's fingers deftly circling and pulling the single thread of the rush through the loop she has made. As we continue, I find myself becoming entranced with this process. It is methodical and even meditative. The rhythm reminds me of the 'nori' (pelicans) flying down The Coorong. I begin to understand why Aunty Ellen says this is her therapy. She directs me to focus on particular things. I allow my camera to move in closer, sometimes I use the zoom feature for speed, but whatever I do, it is at the direction of Aunty Ellen. She is the teacher here, and I am the student. I have been asked by her to document the stages of the weaving process. I agreed to this, only when it became apparent that this was something of importance to her. I, on the other hand, had previously determined that I was never going to make one of those tedious educational films that document a ritual or practice at every stage. Yet as I allow both myself and my camera to be guided by the rhythm of the weaving process and directed at every stage by Aunty Ellen's expertise, I find myself getting closer and closer, forming an intimate connection with this process, asking questions as any student would and being taken aback by the mastery of the practitioner. What is created is not a didactic, highly structured educational film shot from a distance so as to 'accurately' record the process, rather an intimate observation of an embodied process that has the filmmaker firmly immersed within it.

The Project

This project began as an inquiry into the relationship between the anthropologist/filmmaker and the people being represented on film, including the way they presented themselves on screen. It resulted in an in-depth exploration of the nature of these relationships, specifically the nature of collaboration. I was particularly interested as a non-Aboriginal Australian anthropologist/filmmaker in developing a collaborative relationship with a group of Aboriginal people with whom I could make a film.

This broad research agenda was based on many years of my own research on ethnographic film, which ranged from observing student responses to cultural differences in ethnographic film, examining ideas concerning collaboration and the connection to the film as product, and exploring the methodological approaches of ethnographic filmmakers. It was also based in my own visual practice as a photographer. I understood from this practice that any real insight into the dynamics between the people being represented in the film and my own engagement with them, hinged on *me* making a film. Being engaged in the practice of making a film would result in me *being there* in any moment as a filmmaker, anthropologist or participant in the group.¹ It would be a site where the dynamics of these relationships could be examined. I saw this as an access to an 'as lived' experience of collaborative relationships inside the structure of making a film. This was a means to unravel the nature of collaboration through the unfolding of the collaborative process. It was clear to me that this process extended beyond many of the bounded notions of collaboration that had been popularised in discussions and writings about collaboration in ethnographic filmmaking practice. These included the postmodern inspired inclusion of the anthropologist on screen in a move to embrace reflexivity, to idealised notions of autonomy popularized in Terry Turner's (1990) accounts of the Kayapo using the camera. While these approaches were not detrimental, and in fact expanded indigenous expressions of ownership, they idealised collaboration as a type of antidote against the dominant position taken by the anthropologist/filmmaker in previous approaches. Despite

¹ I discuss the impact these different roles have on the relationships with people in the project in the following chapters.

these advancements, the agenda, content and ownership of the film remained in the hands of the filmmaker/anthropologist.

My intention was to discover for myself the vicissitudes of establishing, developing and sustaining relationships with a specific group of Aboriginal people. Given that Aboriginal people have been the focus of extensive visual and written documentation—often at the expense of their autonomy, control and ownership of their representations—the opportunity to work with this group was even more critical. Against this backdrop, I set about establishing a relationship with a politically active group of Ngarrindjeri people based in and around The Coorong in the south east of South Australia. The Ngarrindjeri people were not unfamiliar with media or politics, having been the subject of a controversial and damaging series of legal cases regarding the building of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge. I found myself engaged in a set of relationships that had multiple layers. As a result, I confronted a series of barriers and impediments that saw the production of footage for three very different films, not one as I originally intended.

I was initially invited to photograph the first reburial of the repatriated remains of Ngarrindjeri people whose skeletons had been stolen for scientific purposes and housed in both national and international museums. This presented me with my first opportunity to establish the ground for making my own film. Concurrent with my documentation of the event in photographs, two Ngarrindjeri filmmakers were documenting the event on film. It was through meeting them at the reburial that I approached them about making a film about the making of their documentary about the reburial. I considered this would give me an opportunity to 'observe' the unfolding of social relations within this environment of Aboriginal self-representation and advocacy. This also included factoring in my own role as an anthropologist/filmmaker documenting them and how I would be positioned in these relationships as they unfolded. The funding for the project was limited and didn't cover post-production costs. This restricted the capacity of the filmmakers to complete the film and after three years of work, the project came to a halt. While time as well as financial constraints played a major role in the project not being completed, I also encountered a number of impediments in maintaining my relationships with the filmmakers. These impediments pointed to the continued presence of inequalities and conflict with non-Aboriginal organisations that created

tension and disruption in my relationships with the filmmakers. I spend time discussing this in depth in Chapter Four.

When it became evident that the filmmakers would not complete their documentary, I had to reconsider the original approach I had taken in my project. I looked at the opportunity of making an ethnographic film within the community rather than being one step removed as I had been in making my film about the making of the Ngarrindjeri filmmaker's documentary. During the development of my relationships with the filmmakers, I also befriended a number of Ngarrindjeri women involved in the reburial, specifically Aunty Ellen Trevorrow who was a senior elder. She and a number of other women were proficient basket weavers, a weaving practice they had been reconnected with as a means to establish links with their *old people* who were expert weavers² and to maintain cultural continuity. An important reason for maintaining weaving as a practice was sustaining Ngarrindjeri heritage by passing on the technique to future generations. As a result of a conversation with Aunty Ellen, it was decided that I would make a film with them about their weaving and its significance to them as a source of continuity between past and future.

Rather than being one step removed from the community as I had been with the filmmakers, I became embedded in the social relationships that constituted the group and was readily invited in. As a result of being placed in a more 'one on one' relationship between filmmaker/anthropologist and the people being represented, my approach became far more self-reflexive as I began to observe my role in their film and their role in mine. It compelled me to examine the nature of collaboration as it was played out in this social setting.

It was as a result of this second stage of the project that I began to explore collaboration at a deeper level. Collaboration had become a popular feature of ethnographic filmmaking practice and stemmed from MacDougall's (1975) seminal article 'Beyond Observational Cinema' which called for a more participatory approach to the filmmaker and/or anthropologist's engagement with the subjects of their film. This extended into an increasing focus on the subject's voice being

² The Ngarrindjeri refer to those who have passed on as their *old people*.

prominent in the film inside the post modernist deconstruction of the filmmaker's position of power. The extreme end of this argument was the absence of the author/filmmaker and the rise of self-representation projects as the most ethical way of approaching the representation of ethnographic subjects. 'Collaboration' and a collaborative approach found a middle ground between these. However, instead of being fully interrogated as an approach, it became a somewhat taken for granted construct, and for some, an ideal as to how relationships between filmmaker/anthropologist and ethnographic subjects should be. It has rarely been examined as a concept and practice that gives definition to a dynamic, fluid and evolving set of relationships and negotiation between filmmaker/anthropologist and the people they are filming. This lack of critical exploration as to the actual nature of collaboration, has left a gap in not just the literature about ethnographic filmmaking practice, but also in the exploration of the fluid and dynamic relationships that exist between filmmaker/anthropologist and the group(s) with whom they collaborate. With respect to my project, the relationships between myself as a filmmaker/anthropologist and my Ngarrindjeri colleagues in an environment of increasing recognition of Aboriginal owned and produced media, posed an valuable opportunity to examine collaborative practice.

In summary, this project examines a number of key areas that are of importance to ethnographic filmmaking practice and the relationships between the anthropologist/filmmakers and the people with whom they work. This exegesis is laid out in five chapters. The first examines the ethnographic image and the historical construction and use of the image by anthropologists and filmmakers. In the second I have explored previous examples and definitions of collaboration in order to set out a framework for the articulation of collaboration in ethnographic filmmaking practice which is developed and applied in the chapters following this. In order to achieve this, Chapter Three lays out a review of a number of key examples of ethnographic photography and filmmaking of Aboriginal people in Australia, including Spencer and Gillen's work, films produced during the 1970s and 80s under the funding program set up by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS) and the video training programs for Aboriginal people set up by Eric Michaels in Yuendumu in the mid 1980s. In Chapter Four I use the grounding of this framework for collaboration and history of filmmaking relationships in

Australia in order to critically document and assess my own relationships with the Ngarrindjeri, against the backdrop of their historical and political positioning. Finally in Chapter Five, I critically examine the collaborative process in the making of the two films that constitute the visual component of this project where I reflect on both the successes and failures of my own process against the outcomes I intended.

This exegesis thus critically reviews Australian ethnographic filmmaking process and develops a framework for the collaborative process in order to achieve a number of things. First, to examine the collaborative process through the development of my own relationships with my Ngarrindjeri colleagues and those established by other anthropologists/filmmakers, as means to identify the core criteria of collaborative practice that best reflects the changing environment of autonomy and power in which Aboriginal people now situate themselves. Secondly, to examine how collaborative relationships impact the way the people being filmed present themselves on screen and therefore influence the construction, content and shape of ethnographic film. Amidst the flux and disruption that has characterised this project, what has eventuated for me is a personally, visually and intellectually rewarding long-term engagement with both film and a dedicated and committed group of Ngarrindjeri people. Through my own experience I am able to argue that collaborative relationships within ethnographic filmmaking practice marked by respect, trust and shared ownership, result in relationships that honour the positioning of Aboriginal people in Australia as active agents in the production of their identity and culture. It also results in a visual product or body of materials that reflects and incorporates the multiplicity of ideas, knowledge and often conflicting perspectives and agendas of a group of people working closely together for a desired end. Finally, it suggests that there is a potential link between close collaborative relationships and the way in which people with whom anthropologists/filmmakers work, present themselves on screen.