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An ecology of relationships: tensions and negotiations in documentary filmmaking practice as research

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ABSTRACT

Documentary studies as textual analysis is often predicated on providing ways of looking at and thinking about documentary practice. Filmmaking as research can be conceptualised as a petri-dish: rich with possibility; it can afford a consideration of documentary practice in a way that intersects with issues around pedagogy, sites for knowledge-making as writing and filmmaking as ways of thinking through theory. However, while filmmaking as research can redefine and reframe practice, it can feel laboured in terms of a constant concern for theoretically positioning the artefact and the making processes. In such instances, this can stymie the unselfconscious nature of making and raise the question of whether the production of a film artefact is at odds with a process-driven methodology.

In exploring this relationship, this article takes the form of a dialogue where we discuss our respective documentary practices as sites for complex tensions and negotiations within an academic context. In particular, we discuss our shift from an independent practice-based paradigm which prioritised the production of an artefact to a practice which is knowledge-based. We discuss a selection of our respective film projects; some of which were made as research and others which were theoretically ‘retro-fitted’ as practice-based research.

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Introduction

The increasing movement of filmmakers into the academy as a way to continue to make work within a supported framework has afforded a level of critical engagement that an independent or industry-based practice does not facilitate. Filmmaking as research can be conceptualised as a petri-dish: rich with possibility. It can afford a consideration of documentary practice in a way that intersects with issues around pedagogy, sites for knowledge-making as writing, and filmmaking as ways of thinking through theory.

However, filmmaking as research is often hampered by tensions between desires and necessities. Trish FitzSimons (2015) gives a comprehensive overview of documentary filmmaking in the academy in terms of current trends in institutional and broadcast funding coupled with decreased opportunities for one-off independent documentary

film projects. FitzSimons claims that funding has shifted towards favouring series, factual content and larger production company projects. More recently, funding has shifted away from interactive online works to other emergent forms such as web series and VR projects (Munro 2017a). FitzSimons cites another tension as the pressure of filmmaker academics to publish written articles at the expense of their creative practice. Rather than reiterate the complications inherent in funding and academic institutions, and where documentary production is positioned as a result, this article presents a conversation around how the intersections of theory and practice materialise through a number of our respective projects.

The practitioner as researcher occupies a position that allows for an interplay between the two forms of knowledge-making, creating a site for generative and unexpected results. According to Ross Gibson, as differentiated from a theorist, the practitioner as researcher is in a unique position in being able to draw out more interesting relationships about how knowledge is created and applied through the process of making. Gibson further suggests that the maker as researcher is able to dwell within an ecology of complex relationships and make these visible; thereby being granted a more expansive perspective:

Most of our inherited disciplines in the humanities, the social sciences and the sciences all espouse the dispassionate assessment of carefully distanced objects. But all around me now I see cultural phenomena and interactive relationships that are not objects, not stable or amenable to modelled analysis, not susceptible to distanced appreciation. Instead I see networked and interactive phenomena that are complex, dynamic, relational, everaltering and emergent. (Gibson 2010, 7-8)

Gibson's observation speaks to a process of making as a way to tease out relationships between the material and the ideas.

Our individual practices also emerge from shared theoretical interests that intersect between participatory, ethnographic and art practices. As Larissa Hjorth and Kristen Sharp have noted, ethnography has become 'a widely deployed approach and conceptual framework in contemporary media cultures' (2014, 128). Key tenets of an ethnographic approach are the 'reflexive negotiation of self, power, labour and participation' (Hjorth and Sharp 2014, 128). Similarly, Grant Kester (2004) uses the term 'dialogical aesthetics' for practices that engage the maker and the participant in a collaborative process built on a relationship of reciprocity. Kester's site for discussion is socially situated art practices and projects. The works and practices favoured by Kester are co-created through the underlying belief that language, meaning and social subjects are co-constructed through dialogue.

In exploring this relationship, this article takes the form of a dialogue where we discuss our respective documentary practices, which bridge some of the areas between participatory, poetic and essayistic, as sites for complex tensions and negotiations within an academic context. In particular, we discuss our shift from an independent practice-based paradigm which prioritised the production of an artefact to a practice which is knowledge-based. We specifically discuss a selection of our respective film projects; some of which were made as research and others, which were theoretically 'retro-fitted' as practice-based research. As practitioner-scholars, we have been drawn to the academy for similar reasons; a desire to develop and critically interrogate our respective filmmaking practices, which have not generally conformed to industrial expectations around content and narrative. Despite this, as academics, we have had quite disparate experiences

of practice-based research and as such this article also demonstrates the many possible nuances of the term and its somewhat contested nature.

Kim's experiences as a Masters and then a PhD candidate in practice-based research around expanded documentary forms and practices have led her to reflect on the research film as a genre in process and form. This also concerns the relationships between filmmaker, participant and audience. While research has enabled a more experimental practice, the outputs or artefacts have tended to lack a clear path to finding an audience outside of the academy. And much of this research has ultimately been channelled into written articles.

After completing a practice-based PhD in documentary, which drew on poetry, and cultural studies, and was based on her participatory documentary work in a community development context, Paola gained a full-time academic role teaching writing and research skills and International and Community Development. In this role, she utilised her practice-based research expertise in lateral ways. She continued to accept commissions for short participatory advocacy films from NGOs, which she then 'retrofitted' as practice-based research.

PAOLA: A couple of years ago I attended a documentary club you were involved in organising and you were screening a collection of Agnes Varda's films. The spirit of play inherent in Varda's films, has been a significant influence on my work, and it piqued my interest in yours as it signalled that your practice was likely to be experimental and not confined to conventional narrative paradigms. How did your practice emerge and what drew you to practice-based research?

KIM: My background is in an art practice that was very much centred around individual authorship. I shifted into documentary filmmaking about ten years ago as way to find a practice that was more inclusive of both working with other people as well as feeling like there was more of an audience to engage with. I also admit there was a belief that documentary could 'do' something that an art practice couldn't in terms of social activism and engagement; that it could affect change or at least have impact. I think a lot of people want to make documentary for these 'worthy' reasons and as you pursue a practice, you soon realise it's a lot more complicated, especially when you become aware of the multiple ethical dilemmas every time you turn on the camera. I was drawn to documentary making rather than fiction though I use these terms with the self-awareness that that there is much slippage between the two. As Trinh T minh-ha suggests; 'there is no such thing as *documentary*' (1990, 76). Nomenclature aside, documentary presented a way to work with systems of meaning making, knowledge and relationships. After making a few funded films I became attracted to more experimental and hybrid forms of filmmaking. I discovered that the academy could provide opportunities for interrogating my practice and bringing a more theoretically informed methodology to what I wanted to make.

PAOLA: And would you say that there is a certain luxury in practice-based research in the way that it allows time for exploration of and reflection on the making process? In my experience mistakes and misconceptions can become a valid form of discovery, what Di Tella (2012, 40) has referred to as 'the eloquence of mistakes and failure'. According to Di Tella (2012, 40) 'the failure of a project, or the mistake of an idea crashing against reality, can express the truth of that idea or the reality of that project'.

KIM: Yes, I think filmmaking in this environment can emerge from a sense of enquiry into an idea or situation that is formally more playful and experimental and less tied to narrative arcs and characters. It also allows a longer duration to be with the subject matter and the ideas. Actually, a lot of the work I've made have been experiments and what di Tella calls 'failures'. Yet, from an iterative and reflective process, these false starts and discontinued paths have led somewhere more interesting with a critical interrogation of my practice. Filmmaking as research as allows the construction of a methodology through the act of making, testing, refining and failing. This has resonance with what Jacques Rancière refers to as a 'path' that 'the thinker constructs to know where you are, to figure out the characteristics of the territory you are going through, the places it allows you to go, the way it obliges you to move' (2009, 114).

Paola, you came from a writing and community development background before you embarked on a PhD. How have those practices contributed to your documentary making and practice-based research?

PAOLA: I think community development work primes you to see 'failure' in a different light – as working with groups of people is so unpredictable, it's unwise to have one approach or a rigid plan. Things have to be allowed to unfurl quite organically, because ultimately it's the community who will be living with the outcome of a project. Documentary practice is very similar in terms of possible real life impacts for participants. It's also entirely relational – the end result is really the product of the relationship between the practitioner and participant, a relationship this is often liminal and ethically complex (c.f. Billbrough 2015). I see my practice research as a hybrid beast, an improvised mix of a number of art forms and disciplines which offers imaginative and intellectual richness. In my twenties I focused on poetry as an art-form, but it felt like a marginal, solitary pursuit and I began working in the community sector out of a desire to contribute to social change. I found creative media projects including writing and film to be an effective way to engage the communities I was working with and a way for people to represent the stories that are not often told via conventional media outlets. I'm preoccupied with the tensions inherent in auto/biographical work – my poetry is mined from aspects of my life and I've continued this in my documentary work which combines testimony with non-literal visual imagery and uses a participatory methodology (Nichols 2010). In my practice-research I'm constantly exploring possible 'solutions' for what life-writing scholar, Paul John Eakin observes; 'because our own lives never stand free of the lives of others, we are faced with a responsibility to those others whenever we write about ourselves (Eakin 1999, 159). Notions of responsibility gain *extra* currency in regards to documentary, because it is a narrative and visual medium and a participatory art form.

KIM: In other conversations you've mentioned an anxiety about the potential of losing sight of your own voice in the films you were making for community, so what has emerged for you through a practice as research approach to filming in the academy that has expanded your practice?

PAOLA: In a community development context my role as a filmmaker sometimes felt like a balancing act between the aims of the organisation/funding body with the

rights/aims of participants (who may have a story or perspective that differs from what the organisation believes should be advocated for), and my own artistic vision. I was drawn to PhD study as I wanted to explore this dichotomy further – how one might tell other people’s stories ethically without one’s own voice being lost. I completed a documentary in 2010, *No One Eats Alone* (NOEA) (Bilbrough 2010), with and about twelve Sudanese-Australian women. This was conceptualised as an alternative narrative to the reductive mainstream media representations of young Sudanese-Australian men as gang-members, evidenced in a body of research (see Windle 2008; Gatt 2011; Nolan et al. 2011; Nunn 2010; Ndhlovu 2013; Bilbrough 2014). Echoing Jean Rouch’s practice of ‘audiovisual reciprocity’ (1973, 11), NOEA participants viewed and discussed interview footage and reflected on the potential impact of the way they had been represented on film. As a result, many participants retold a particular story. There was also an issue of women censoring one another out of a well-founded anxiety about inadvertently perpetuating negative perceptions of Sudanese-Australians (see Bilbrough 2013a). The complexity of making this film galvanised me into doing a PhD and I use it in my exegesis as a case-study.

I was keenly aware of documenting the intimate life stories of the NOEA participants and the fundamental inequity and power imbalance of participants not knowing much about my life. Feminist sociologist Anne Oakley (1981, 49) put forward a notion of ‘no intimacy without reciprocity’ in conducting interviews, and this is something I am really aligned with in terms of the documentary relationship. My PhD took this reciprocity one step further. It was a reflexive exploration of my own subjectivity and positionality that combined poetry with ‘domestic ethnography’ (Renov 2004; Lebow 2008); I made three short ‘documentary-poems’ about my parent’s marriage and their experience of juggling parenthood with their respective artistic ambitions in 1970s New Zealand. The fourth film is about my attempts to foster-parent a teenager who was experiencing chronic homelessness (see Bilbrough 2014).

KIM: So the core of your research has really been a preoccupation with relationships, specifically that between the participant and the practitioner. You’re also concerned with the complexities of cross-cultural contexts. I’m interested in the title of your PhD ‘Givers, Takers, Framers: the Ethics of Auto/biographical Documentary’ Can you explain that a bit further?

PAOLA: It riffs on Trinh T Minh Ha’s observation about the potential for documentary practitioners to be complacent about the unequal power balance inherent in representing others:

In affirming righteously that one opens a space for those who do not have a voice, one often forgets that the gaining of a voice happens within a framed context, and one tends to turn a blind eye to one’s privileged position as a ‘giver’ and a ‘framer’ (Trinh, quoted in Hohenberger 2007, 115).

A logical extension of Trinh’s point is to suggest that intrinsic to ‘giving’ is an equal element of taking. So my thesis (through both the films and the writing) explored the continuum of give and take and shifting power dynamics between participants and myself. Trinh’s work is something I constantly refer to in working through practice-based research

issues. It's particularly pertinent to supposed 'advocacy' work across cultures, when one is coming from the privileged position of being white and middle-class and working with people who are not from the dominant cultural group. But it's also pertinent to making films about one's own family.

KIM: Yes, through my process of filmmaking and research, Trinh's critique of the documentary maker as the 'almighty voice-giver' (1993, 96) has been really impactful in how I think about engaging with participants; balancing that socially-oriented imperative which initially drew me to documentary with thinking critically about power-relations and my own role as author. I've also found Trinh's ideas that documentary theory should sit alongside documentary film rather than explicate it really helpful in thinking through the relationship between theory and practice as well as the interplay between the components:

I theorize with my films, not about them. The relationship between the verbal, the musical, and the visual, just like the relationship between theory and practice, is not one of illustration, description, or explication. It can be one of inquiry, displacement, and expansive enrichment. (Trinh, quoted in Hohenberger 2007, 107)

Filmmaking as research also allows a writing practice to sit alongside the practical filmmaking – not as a way to explicate what is being made, but rather as an autonomous element.

So Paola, recalling Gibson's claim about the insights gained by the practitioner through the research process, how did theory and practice materialise as shifts in your approach to making documentary?

PAOLA: What I found and relished in was that research initially opened my practice up. I saw it as an invitation to play. In starting a PhD in documentary practice, I returned to writing poems and used them as condensed documentary scripts. I come from a family of artists and I wanted to explore how I could represent highly contested family history and two people (my parents who separated when I was five) who are storytellers in their own right, and who were not necessarily generous about each other. Ultimately, this meant that I re-shot interviews with my mother seven times for *Willing Exile* (2013b), which is about my parents' marriage, as she was very wary about how I might represent her. Hanif Kureishi, who has got into a fair bit of trouble for his framing of particular events and intimate others in his auto/biographical work, has commented: 'People can be transformed into tragic, comic or inconsequential figures. They are at the centre of their own lives, but you can make them extras. Art can be revenge as well as reparation' (Kureishi 2011, 291). My practice research navigates this territory and asks how might a complex, highly sensitive personal or cultural issue be communicated in a compelling way that doesn't negatively impact on the people involved in the film or their intimate others.

Poetry provided a possible solution to this. In thinking through an idea for a film, I will have an image connected to a narrative idea or issue, and perhaps a few lines will arrive in my consciousness as I'm working. Practice-research enabled me to scribble and dream and shoot footage that uses images to convey ideas in a non-literal way. I'm now re-working *Willing Exile* post PhD.

Practice-research offers what you've so evocatively described as a petri-dish, Kim. Tell me more about your use of that metaphor in relation to your work.

KIM: What I mean by that is that the documentary practice creates a site for enacting theoretical approaches in a way that textual analysis of films does not allow. Making documentary as a way of testing out a methodology is a way to apply the filmmaking as research in an iterative dialogue between the theory and the practice, as you've just described with your use of poetry. In January 2017, I spent a month in the north of Iceland at an artist residency. This project I made during this time, *Why do the ducks not fly south?* (Munro 2017c) was made for the Skammdegi Mid-Winter Art Festival in Ólafsfjörður. I approached this project to test out a methodology of a listening practice around environmental and human concerns. This project was a twenty-five minute site-specific audio essay walk and a series of video works. The audio is composed of interviews, poetry, songs and sounds all recorded in the town over the month. The process was relational and the combination of site specificity, methodology and environmental contingencies. Here, I think about Nicholas Bourriaud's term, 'relational aesthetics' (2002) in how the project emerged through the relationships formed in the place from the materials and people that presented themselves.

My methodology of listening was inspired by Gemma Fiumara's proposition that listening is a state of 'requesting the unknown to talk to us' and that, 'The act of listening to the unknown marks the act of living and exchange' (1995, 122). This idea of 'living' is reiterated by Fiumara as a position of dwelling within a space or experience (1995, 172). With this philosophical premise, I attuned my practice of listening towards three stages of production; approaching the documentary interview, the embedded recording of soundscapes, and the translation of the material into an embodied listening experience for the audience.

The interviewing process drew on Venturini's discussion of the 'cartography of consequences'; an approach based on an idea of Latour's that the social researcher should just observe. This is a process, which seeks to not impose any preconceived methods, theory, constraints or structure. This led to an open approach to the interview, which allowed for the emergence of relational responses rather than those directed by me. The recording of the ambient sounds of this place in the fjord was a further extension of Fiumara's idea of listening to the unknown (1995), or as Don Ihde suggests; 'listening makes the invisible present' (2007, 51). This emerged from the hours I spent each day walking through the spaces with a microphone; listening and recording. Sarah Pink suggests that 'ethnographic soundscape representations might thus be designed to offer listeners a route through which to hear as others might' (2009, 143). As Pink notes, there should be a way for the audience then to be aware of how they perceive and make sense of these sounds as an embodied listener (2009, 143). The audio piece was framed by my own instructions to the audience and aimed at connecting their embodied experience moving through the space and listening to the ambient sounds with the pre-recorded interviews and soundscapes. The accompanying short films were poetic pieces that reflected my response to the lack of sun over the month-long period. Alongside the making, I kept a daily record of creative and theoretical writing, observations, photos, video and audio recordings.

This project was an example of both a methodological testing and the production of an artefact. However, we have both spoken of feeling somewhat trapped at times in the petri-dish; the continual testing of ideas and the iterative process has meant that I sometimes experience difficulties in finishing projects. The emphasis is on the experimentation and production of knowledge not the artefact. How do you deal with this tension in your work?

PAOLA: I'm more inclined to finish films and then come back to them and re-edit. So, I have a number of versions that demonstrate different elements of research. What has been more challenging for me is the exegetical element – analysing and explicating my work in writing. I gravitate towards sociological and feminist analysis of other screen texts and tend to evade written analysis of my own creative work. A conundrum for me when I began a PhD was how I could bring the researcher and the maker aspects of myself together. The researcher aspect felt closely related to the internal critic that pulls apart and scoffs at creative ideas and which can stop you from continuing with a project altogether for fear that it is not worthwhile or significant enough. When I got over this fear, I took a degree of artistic pleasure in producing journal articles. Within the so-called-confines of academic writing, I have developed first person narratives that aim to be scholarly but also lyrical and evocative. I've found this experience useful in terms of pedagogical outcomes, particularly in teaching writing and research. Mature age PhD students can experience a type of intellectual culture shock in returning to academic study and feel self-conscious about expressing themselves in an acceptable academic way. Some would prefer to just use their candidature time to expand their practice. The research writing can feel onerous and be left to the eleventh hour. In my last role I supervised a couple of creative practice-research doctoral students and facilitated a practice-research writing group. Over time, I sold the scholarly writing to my students, not only as an integral part of a dialogue presented by their thesis but as an artefact in, and of itself and a significant mode of expression and development of a voice.

KIM: This attention to writing clearly draws on your interdisciplinary background cuts through a variety of fields of practice and education. Have you found ways to use documentary making as research in your work beyond the scope of your own practice?

PAOLA: Collaborative/participatory documentary is an interdisciplinary medium; different permutations of practice and theory can be found in documentary filmmaking, anthropology, fine-arts, development studies and education. This means I've been able to use my practitioner knowledge around relational ethics laterally. I redesigned and taught a post-graduate subject in International and Community Development, which was about examining why we intervene in other people's lives globally and locally and how to ensure this is relevant and ethical rather than a type of colonisation. The emphasis in this subject, as with collaborative filmmaking was on process, participation and relationships. Students of Community Development need to be constantly aware of their positionality and intersecting inequities experienced by the people they work with and this has been integral to my documentary practice-research. Since completing my PhD, I've only taught one practical filmmaking subject, which was at undergraduate level. I was a tutor and so had no input into subject design. This was a good wake-up call. I discovered that I have little

interest in teaching filmmaking, which includes no analysis of social and cultural context and the role of films as ideological texts.

But actually, these concerns can and should be explored in teaching documentary. I know you have been introducing ways to think through questions of power and privilege to your students. I'm interested to know more about this and how you have drawn on your practice-based research.

KIM: Michael Renov writes in teaching theory to documentary practice students, 'New horizons open up for them as they think through their own stories, relationships, and agendas for change' (2011, 26). Insights gleaned in teaching the combination of theory and practice through a reflective model can help illuminate aspects such as the students' own relationship to authorship, ethics, knowledge, power and truth. So through documentary making, they learn about other instrumental systems.

Structuring a subject so the students shift through making highly authored works to the more collaborative or participatory can make visible ways in which documentary frames the world – not in an absolute or totalising way, but always subjective and contingent. It can also challenge ideas about indexicality's relationship with the 'real'. The word documentary is so loaded and potentially reductive. I can appreciate Jill Godmilow's banishment of the word 'documentary' in her classes in favour of 'films of edification' to highlight their intentional function of education (1997, 81). I have been interrogating what the students think they know to be true. It's a soft form of politics.

PAOLA: I think these terms we use so loosely can also be problematic as there are so many preconceived notions about what a documentary is and should look like that are really limiting in the potential for play and experimentation. How do you foreground the relationship between form and content when teaching documentary?

KIM: I also introduce non-linear approaches that have included interactive software, episodic and segmented films, and projects that utilise the crowd sourcing of material. This is also to get the students thinking about how different approaches to presenting the work they make can conceptualise representation. This is always interesting to teach as the ideology of these platforms and approaches to the artefact is often quite different to the experience in viewing it, which might not be a satisfying experience. But when the ideology is explicitly taught with ideas of voice and representation in documentary, the purpose can be better articulated. This expands their concept of documentary film through a practice-based approach. A few students chose non-traditional linear forms to represent their filmed subjects in ways that reflected the subject matter that they were dealing with. While this pedagogical application of documentary filmmaking as research can yield many insights about the function of documentary and broader implications of representation, relationships, power and truth, there are still some mitigating factors implicit in what the students might bring to the experience. These include preconceived ideas about what documentary is, as well as the desire to make an artefact for their show-reel or film festival. While these are not necessarily mutually exclusive, they have to be considered in understanding students' desires from the educational experience. So, I also wonder if thinking about the benefits I just spoke about above are a little self-

circulating and insular. I mean, I might think it's great for students to learn all these skills and ways of engaging with knowledge, people and themselves. However, sometimes the research/practice may not lead to making work that can find an audience as well as having to meet other requirements.

Paola, you have managed to balance a full-time academic role outside of screen studies with quite a number of commissioned film projects for community organisations and local government. How has this contributed to your practice-based research?

PAOLA: Admittedly, much of the film work I've done since my PhD has been retrofitted as practice-based research. Although the academy initially gave me the space to explore my own voice via PhD study, ironically as an Early Career Researcher, I have felt that it has been a struggle to be able to continue doing this as the majority of my work has been in an academic support role where the research focus is supposed to be on teaching and learning. Rather than follow this research dictate, I have retraced my steps to the community sector; the commissions from community organisations have enabled me to remain engaged in filmmaking and I have only accepted commissions that were somewhat compatible with my research preoccupations, which are aligned to arts-practice but are also sociological and ethnographic.

KIM: You speak about 'retrofitting' with a touch of regretful humour and as an academic survival strategy, but actually from what I understand your work has really benefited from this approach in some instances.

PAOLA: Retrofitting does initially sound a little negative; as if one is doing perfunctory quick fix 'research' after the fact of making. Actually, retrofitting provides the opportunity to reconceptualise projects that may have been dissatisfactory in some way. It gets back to the notion of practice-based research enabling one to play with form, something which provides a great deal of creative satisfaction and new insights. Retrofitting has enabled multiple iterations of my creative artefacts with accompanying exegetical work. The methodological approach can be understood as a zig-zagging back and forth between the creative and theoretical where one informs the other. I made four short commissioned films in 2015, and one in particular *This is Me: Agot Dell* has provided rich ground for retrofitting the artefact as research and then re-working it as a result of the retro-fit. *This is Me* focuses on a young woman's experience of arriving in Melbourne at the age of sixteen and feeling as though she was constantly reduced to her Sudanese/Kenyan background. Working collaboratively with Agot Dell on this film enabled me to keep exploring ideas of voice and framing and the use of non-literal poetic imagery as a way of opening gates and windows for the audience to 'go vagabond' (Varda interviewed in von Boehm 2009) with meaning (see also Bilbrough 2013a, 2017a). The title of the film was dictated by the funding body and Neither Agot nor I were happy with it. David MacDougall (1998, 38) has observed that representation is itself a 'presumptuous act', and that 'By freezing life, every film to some degree offends against the complexity of people and the destiny that awaits them'. We felt that the title 'This is Me' was presumptuous in this way as it suggests that a four-minute film can capture a person's identity, rather than an aspect of their perspective. Additionally, the music that had been selected at the last

moment was a formulaic, overly emotional piano track, which effectively 'told' the viewer what to think; potentially equating Agot's post-refugee experience with melancholy and isolation. Publishing *This is Me* (Bilbrough 2015) in *Screenworks*, required me to reflect on these types of tensions, many of which were echoed in the journal's peer reviews. This process gave me the energy to re-edit the film and give it the title Agot and I had originally intended: *They Always Asked About Africa* (Bilbrough 2017b). Subsequently, the film has been selected for film festivals in Melbourne and Paris. This is an example of successfully retrofitting an artefact as practice-based research and the retrospective research nourishing the development of something new. In this case, not touching the original artefact for over a year allowed necessary breathing space.

With commissioned projects, there is always an outcome that will be produced. Practice-based research diverges somewhat from this. I'm thinking of some of your more recent projects, that have been more exploratory and experimental where an outcome may be different to what was conceptualised and where participation may not actually produce an artefact. What kinds of ethical problems might practice as research introduce in the documentary process?

KIM: One of the problems in considering documentary making as a process and a practice for which to engage theoretically with the practice of making and thinking through ideas is that of the ethical obligation towards the documentary participants. There is often an unspoken contract between the filmed subject and the maker based on participation that an artefact will be made and that there will be some outcome to validate and recognise their time involved rather than just being fodder for written academic papers and conferences. In the making documentary as research, there is another layer of ethics around the kind of information given to they participant, how the material will be used, what kind of right of withdrawal will they have. But as to what project will be made, it's trickier as this may not actually be necessary for the research being done. This is exacerbated when making documentary work that involves people and social issues.

One of the projects I'm working on now, *The Park* (2017-), centres around the closure of a caravan park in the suburbs of Melbourne and the eviction of the 180 residents. When I started filming, the imminent closure had only been announced four months earlier and I got involved at a time when it seemed like there was the possibility that my filming could have some kind of impact. While this was not necessarily discussed explicitly, there was a sense of activism inherent in the process of filming and of bearing witness to the event. Getting involved in people's lives and recording them, the filmmaker has an ethical obligation in how they approach the material and how it is shaped. And while I might be interested in presenting the multiple voices and perspectives around this eviction, or taking a materialist point of view in filming long takes of the weeds overgrowing in the gardens after the residents have left, or the the tattered Australian flags, this might be in contrast to the kind of story the residents want told. However, the approaches and strategies of filmmaking that can be gained through theoretical knowledge and research can buttress the desires of the participants' in being seen and heard (Munro 2017b).

Conclusion

This article has presented a number of considerations around filmmaking as research that have arisen in our practices over the past few years. One of the key concerns is how we reconcile ourselves as filmmakers making film as research when we are engaged in social causes whose stories need to be heard. However, these stories also need to be clear and often a more didactic approach is what is required. This is a process of constant navigation, experimentation and error; not dissimilar to documentary work outside the academy. However, within a scholarly paradigm, it is this process which is constantly spot-lit rather than the artefact itself. While this allows us to work more fluidly and test out ideas in ways that are rarely possible within commercial filmmaking settings, it also presents a range of challenges such as the demands of embedding theoretical research within a film versus making an aesthetically satisfying product with a particular audience in mind. However, this presents an either-or paradigm and the affordances gained through disrupting dominant ways of making and viewing documentary should not be underestimated. The traditional focus on the artefact as validation of a process can underpin neo-liberal tendencies towards the production of consumable artefacts. Perhaps a more productive method of engaging with filmmaking as research, is how these insights can be disseminated further afield than the academic institution, and in ways that are visible and that matter.

Despite the obstacles, the practitioner as researcher has a certain privilege that stems from being able to offer insights from within the practice, and knowledge that can only be gained through the messy process of testing and failing. It is also through this process and critically interrogating what we do when making documentary, that we can find spaces and gaps and new ways of looking and listening that can infiltrate assumed ways of thinking about filmmaking. We believe that using methods that draw on research also allow for other approaches to be applied to the filmmaking process that can shift the work away from traditional activist films into potentially more engaging responses to social issues.

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