Resistance, Empowerment, and Social Change: Collaborative Film and Speaking Back in a 21st Century Neo-Colonial World

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the *Boodja*, Country, where we are meeting today, the Whadjak Nyoongar people, their Elders, past, present and future, and also acknowledge that this land was never ceded.

Cultural Warning

This presentation contains images of Aboriginal people who may have passed away.

Context

20 years ago when I landed in Australia from France on a two-year student visa, I knew nothing about Aboriginal peoples and culture. I was what Aunty Jackie McDonald, a Bundjalung Elder, called "a blank slate", willing to listen, without too many preconceived ideas (McDonald, pers comm, 2006). "Listening" became central to my methodology for collaborative filmmaking and research with Indigenous Communities, as this paper will explain. I would like to preface this by saying - I still

know nothing - "marloo nila ngayoo", meaning I know nothing, was the first sentence I learned in the Nyikina language, when I started working in the Kimberley.

As is often the case for academics, the more I know, the more I know I don't know...

My first foray into collaborative filmmaking with an Indigenous community occurred not long after I finished my Masters Degree in Film and Television. I had been working as a freelance filmmaker in Northern New South Wales on a number of regional and state arts and environmental projects, when a call came from the local Mayor. He was asking if I could meet with a group of people who had been fighting the construction of a highway bypass for the past eight years, on cultural and environmental grounds - this was my first introduction to the Tweed Aboriginal community, with whom I worked for the next year and a half on my first documentary, *Bypassed: The Erosion of our Cultural and Environmental Landscapes* (McDuffie, 2006).

This experience enabled me to witness and document the seemingly insurmountable obstacles put in the way of Aboriginal communities who are trying to protect their cultural heritage from invasive development. Negotiations often occur within a conflict-based paradigm, and, more often that not, end up in exacting, drawn-out court processes, which leave Aboriginal people feeling like their culture, scientific and ecological knowledge, life-ways, and traditions, have not been taken into account, or are not as "valid" as the arguments put forward for development (McDuffie, 2016). Native Title processes are equally complex and not well understood by the broader public - whilst Traditional Owners with Native Title

rights can "negotiate" with developers or mining companies, they do not have the right to veto invasive developments on their Country.

When cultural heritage is "intangible" and cannot be seen, it is often considered as non-existent - so how can the camera reveal its significance to the wider world?

More importantly, how can we, as non-Indigenous filmmakers, work effectively with Indigenous communities, or other cultures for that matter, respecting their knowledge and perspectives, translating them into visual representations that do justice to their cultural identity? And should we actually do it?

If early ethnographic documentaries are anything to go by, then the answer would be a resounding no. Buoyed by the power of the lens to tell a story that only they could see, early filmmakers, doubling as explorers, brought to the world images of "The Other" in all its "destitution" and "primitiveness", extolling the virtues of white superiority and civilisation, and making an exotic spectacle of Indigenous peoples' ceremonies and traditions. There are many examples of early films which, as Jay Ruby argues, only served to "uphold the colonial view of the world" (Ruby, 2000). In 1932, when British Pathe came to Australia, they described the "wild blacks of Central Australia, who have never seen a white", "prehistoric beings sprung from a race said to be 500,000 years old" (British Pathé, 1932). 1950s and 60s documentaries such as First Film (L. J. Marshall, 1951), The Hunters (J. Marshall, 1957), or Dead Birds (Gardner, 1963), did very little to give agency to their subjects, drowned out in the omniscient voice-overs of the filmmakers or all-knowing observers, and featuring heavily manipulated footage. In Australia, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Institute,

now AIATSIS, set up a film unit to "salvage and archive" a "dying" culture for scientific research (Bryson, 2002).

Internationally, Jean Rouch was the first filmmaker to buck this trend in the 1950s, advocating for an "anthropologie partagée" (shared anthropology), a "two-way dialogue" between the filmmaker and his or her collaborators - not subjects (Eaton, 1979). Rouch, himself an anthropologist, realised that feedback was an all-essential component of the filmmaking process, fostering mutual understanding, and bringing with it a vital intersubjectivity which transcended barriers of race, culture, and classes (Rouch, in Diop, 2007). His collaborators would work with him on storylines, music choices, and record their own voice overs. The innovations Rouch brought to ethnographic films, his "camera-pencil", his "in the moment" style of filmmaking, later inspired the French New Wave and Cinéma Vérité (Henley, 2010). In Australia, it was not until the late 1970s, with David and Judith MacDougall, that documentaries with and for Indigenous people, not about, would start demonstrating closer collaborative relationships with their subjects, with observational films such as Takeover (MacDougall & MacDougall, 1979), or Collum Calling Canberra (MacDougall & MacDougall, 1981), both depicting the control and power play of far-away government organisations over remote Aboriginal communities.

It is heartening to see that we have come a long way in terms of representation, and in this, self-representation is key. From the 1970s onwards, Aboriginal communities insisted on having content produced by them locally, for local broadcast, reflecting

the contemporary Aboriginal experience rather than damaging stereotypes (MacDougall, in Ginsburg, 1995). Warlpiri people's innovation and collaborative work with Eric Michaels (Michaels, 1994), and their seminal experiments with local television (Biddle & Stefanoff, 2015), gave rise to all the Aboriginal-owned Media associations we know today: CAAMA, PAW Media, PAKAM, which I had the pleasure to work with for two years, PY Media, NG Media, Imparja, Goolarri TV, ICTV, and of course NITV. In narrative film, celebrated Aboriginal directors such as Ivan Sen, Warwick Thornton, Rachel Perkins, Tracey Moffat, Catriona McKenzie, and Wayne Blair, to name only a few, have made a profound mark on Australian cinema, with a lot of emerging new talent coming through.

In view of all this, is there a need today for trans-cultural collaborations? I would argue that there is, provided the need comes from communities themselves, and that the works are truly collaborative and community-driven. In this, the filmmaker must always put themselves second to the aspirations of the people they are working with.

Collaborative Filmmaking

Let's go back to my first documentary, *Bypassed*. In the heat of the fight against both the Queensland and New South Wales governments, and in my desire to see wrongs righted, I neglected to identify the most important aspect of our collaboration, which I was made aware of long after the film was completed. The

community lost their fight - the bypass was built, with the inevitable catastrophic consequences they foresaw. The only one allowance made to the community - one single archaeological test pit in one area only of the bypass, yielded more than 122,000 artefacts - giving an idea of the magnitude of the cultural loss experienced by the community (McDuffie, 2016). I was crushed - I had believed, until the end, and in my youthful idealistic enthusiasm, in the power of film to create change and to inform. Upon seeing my disappointment, Aunty Jackie McDonald, the Bundjalung Elder leading the campaign, said to me - "you know, they may have won, but the film will be here forever. It will show our kids, our grandkids, what we did to protect this place. In years to come, it will still be telling them the stories of this place, long after we are gone. It made our voices heard - and the most important thing was that someone actually listened to us". The film has actually been used recently in Native Title processes.

This highlighted the significance of film as a process, not just as an outcome or product. As filmmakers, we are taught that the measure of our success is where the film is screened, how many awards it gets, or how many festivals it is selected for or wins. The accolades come from our colleagues in the industry, our accomplishments often defined by how much funding we can secure for our next project. I would argue that if we are working in a transcultural context, there is also a need to deconstruct our practices and to examine our processes and motivations - and that our most important feedback comes from our collaborators themselves.

After *Bypassed* I was invited to go and work with more Aboriginal communities around Australia, and was eventually contacted by Dr Anne Poelina in 2007 to go up to the Kimberley for two weeks to work on a short documentary project. This was the start of a collaboration which has continued to this day. Initially, our films were aimed at showcasing the various positive initiatives of Nyikina people for sustainable development in their local communities: language and training programs (Magali McDuffie et al., 2010), the creation of the Majala Wilderness Centre (Poelina et al., 2008), plans for the Nyikina Cultural Centre (Poelina et al., 2007), book publications (McDuffie & Poelina, 2010; Poelina et al., 2009), cultural tourism (Poelina, Camilleri, & McDuffie, 2009), and educational films (Michael Wiljaniny, Poelina, A., Perdrisat, I., (Producers), & McDuffie, M. (Director), 2016a; Michael Wiljaniny, Poelina, A., Perdrisat, I., (Producers), & McDuffie, M (Director), 2016b).

With the onset of the global financial crisis in 2007-2008, the pressure to develop the Kimberley and access its rich mineral resources, gathered a renewed intensity. In the context of relentless development pressures on their Country, the voices of the women I was working with took on some urgency (McDuffie, 2019). From 2010 onwards, the women's cultural actions (Poelina, 2009) took on a very political dimension when they started opposing a coal mine on the Fitzroy River, and got involved in the James Price Point Campaign. I documented the protracted campaigns against these major developments in a feature-length NITV documentary, *Three Sisters, Women of High Degree* (Poelina, Marshall, et al., 2015), a short YouTube documentary, *Walmadany Corroboree* (Poelina et al., 2011), used in the campaign, and many other short stories such as a film submission to the EPA,

Duchess IS Paradise (Poelina et al., 2014), Places You Love (Places You Love Alliance et al., 2014), for the Places We Love Alliance and the Sydney World Parks Congress, a short information documentary, What is Fracking, for ICTV (Poelina et al., 2018), Our Shared and Common Future, for the Climate Change Conference in Paris (Poelina et al., 2015), and Mardoowarra's Right to Life (Mardoowarra River et al., 2017), for the UN Indigenous Rapporteur Visit in Western Australia. At the same time, I had started my PhD research, looking at Nyikina women's agency, their inter-generational journey of cultural actions, economic and self-determination initiatives, through film (McDuffie, 2019).

Over the many years of working together, we developed a process which I translated into a Community Engagement Framework, and called "Kalara" - to make seen, to reveal (McDuffie, 2019). Using Indigenist, Participatory and Emancipatory Action Research approaches, the central premise of this framework is Country. Working in place, on Country, means that as a filmmaker I have to learn to see again, and to listen deeply - what Myriam Ungumerr-Baumann calls Dadirri (2017), but which we call "Ngikalikarra" in Nyikina - "you've got to listen"! As an Aboriginal Elder once said to me in Cairns "we all have two ears and one mouth for a reason: we have to listen twice as much as we speak!". Listening is central to my methodology for collaborative filmmaking - ideas get developed through conversation and dialogue, nothing is planned (script or treatment), other than being there with my camera, listening - the story reveals itself through the people I am guided to, and the places I am taken to. My collaborators are my producers, they always retain cultural and

moral rights over their stories - meaning that they also have the ultimate power to veto the film if need be (McDuffie, 2019).

Our collaborative filmmaking practice is located in a relational space. We are constructing and deconstructing history and the reality around us together, not apart, highlighting a shared human identity (Boudreault-Fournier, 2010, p. 174; McDuffie, 2019). The first conversation originates in booroo, the local space, initiating the film idea, and a process of continuous consultation and feedback. This presupposes a relationship of trust between the participants, who follow their liyan, and the filmmaker, who, through listening, will become integrated in the action (Eaton, 1979). This is what Terence Turner describes as a "convergence of goals" (Turner, 1991), a process which Haraway calls "alignment" (Haraway, 2016, p. 41): the filmmaker, after a long time spent with community, practicing deep learning-to-see and deep listening-to, becomes an active participant in his or her collaborators' lives (Turner, 1991, pp. 71-72). Thus, the filmmaker, now turned actionist (Poelina & Hagan, 2012) and researcher, gets involved in the struggles of the people he or she is working with, to produce tangible outcomes for their communities (Fals-Borda, 1997, pp. 109–110). Research further enhances the film project, yielding historical and archival materials which trigger memories and intergenerational conversations: these empower the participants to re-claim past dominant discourses by producing their own counter-discourse for the future. Throughout this process, and over time, actors meet other actors, conversations connect with other conversations, forming alliances and wider networks, and enabling the film participants to relate to other

like-minded voices in a global context. If they wish, these voices can become part of the local conversation, in *booroo*, and the cycle begins again (Magali McDuffie, 2019).

This filmic process enables us to create a broader network of connections, to implement new projects within new partnerships. Our films are shown at conferences and festivals nationally and internationally, triggering more dialogue, creating many connections in France, my country of origin, and other places, "growing" the rhizome described by Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004), bringing new people to Booroo. They will themselves learn to see another reality, and listen to Indigenous voices, which uncover exciting possibilities for alternative, sustainable development solutions, countering the oppression of the capitalist market economy (McDuffie, 2019) and fostering unity in diversity for a better world for all: 'together, shoulder to shoulder' (Poelina et al., 2011). In 2007, I started to listen to the voices of three women who were calling for the protection of their river country, the Martuwarra (Fitzroy River). Today, I work with the Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council, which is made up of six nations along the river, as one voice, calling for the protection of one of the last wild rivers of Australia, with allies and supporters in many universities, environmental organisations, and philanthropic associations nationally and internationally, and film has been a huge part of building this network.

I have continued to apply this Community Engagement Framework with the many other communities I have worked with since, here in Noongar Country, for instance, collaborating on short films about suicide prevention (Eades, McDuffie & Hayes,

2018), and sexual abuse (Hayes, 2019), and in Adnyamanthanha Country, in South Australia, where we made a feature-length documentary on the fight of local Aboriginal communities against a federal nuclear waste dump on their Country (Hammond, McDuffie & Hayes, 2018).

Are our films popular? Probably not. Some of our ways of working can be immensely frustrating - particularly the lack of planning, the constant urgency, and letting the story emerge through listening. It requires an amount of patience, flexibility and adaptability which I never suspected I had. But the camera as a witness, and trigger, is I feel a vital aspect of the work we do as filmmakers. Our films are a moment in time, elevating marginalised voices who would otherwise perhaps not be heard.

Current Work

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Agricultural Protection Board, in Western Australia, employed Aboriginal men in the Kimberley region to spray pesticides in an attempt to eradicate non-native weeds wreaking havoc on the sheep and cattle industries. These men were told that the substances they were using were safe, they wore no protection equipment, and many jumped at the opportunity to work with their friends, in the bush - as many said, they were young, and it was fun! The pesticides turned out to be Agent Orange (a mixture of 24-D & 245-T), and many of these young men became very ill and died, very young. Senior Nyikina Elder Lucy Marshall, lost her son, aged 33, and her grandson, aged 29, from the intergenerational effects of

the poison. She campaigned her whole life for the recognition of the suffering of the families affected by this tragedy, for an apology, by the Western Australian Government, for their responsibility in the matter, and despite multiple reports and government enquiries, nothing eventuated, even though governments knew as early as the mid-1970s that these pesticides were extremely dangerous. A year ago, we were funded to travel through the Kimberley region, interviewing survivors and family descendants of those who had died, so they could tell their stories. Each interview was released as an individual episode on YouTube, with 43 interviews in total (McMahon, Hayes & McDuffie, 2018). These interviews re-ignited discussions in Parliament, and a possible class action is on the cards for potential compensation. I am currently editing the full documentary. The process of listening to people's stories, in itself, was again perhaps more important: after all his years of suffering, and riddled with cancer, one man, who requested to be interviewed despite having only been given a few weeks to live, stated "at least my family will know my story, forever". Perhaps our measure of success could also be based on the positive changes the film process in itself can make to individuals' lives, including our own, and the human connections it fosters.

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