

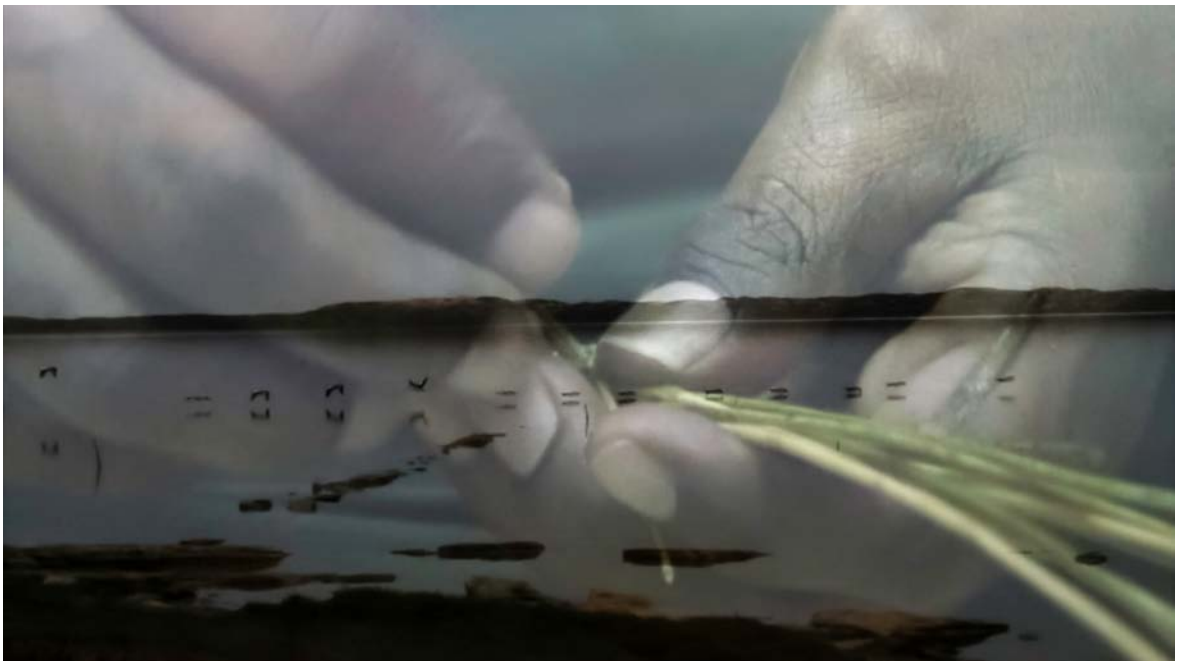
# An Exploration of Collaboration: Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Relationships in Ethnographic Filmmaking

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## ABSTRACT

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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.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This project has spanned a decade in which many changes have occurred. It has been one of the most fruitful periods of my life. My Grandmother, Gwendoline Nunn was an advocate for and intimately connected with Aboriginal people during her lifetime. I consider this project an extension of her commitment and one where I have had the privilege to establish a series of rich and mutually invaluable relationships with a number of Ngarrindjeri men and women.

There are many to acknowledge for their support, knowledge, commitment and partnership in the completion of this project. These are not necessarily in order, but I will say each as they come to mind. I am indebted to Aunty Ellen Trevorrow for her partnership in this project and with whom I have developed a remarkable relationship. Quite simply this project would not have been realised without her generosity and willingness to share herself, her friendship, her time and her knowledge. I am also indebted to the contributions of Debra Rankine, Aunty Noreen Kartinyeri, Aunty Millie Rigney, Aunty Alice Abdulla and Edie Carter. They have been the threads that have brought this project to fruition. I also acknowledge my Ngarrindjeri friends and filmmakers who contributed so much to the making of the first film.

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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

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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

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*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.<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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 weavers<sup>2</sup> 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

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<sup>2</sup> 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.



## CHAPTER ONE:

### The Ethnographic Image and Filmmaking

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*The handle of Félix-Louis Regnault's moving camera turns. With every revolution, Regnault, a scientist, captures the image of a Wolof woman making a clay pot. She has been brought to Paris to be on display at the Paris Exposition Ethnographique de l'Afrique Occidentale in 1895. She, like many other indigenous people on display at the Exposition, has become an exotic curiosity for the people of colonising nations such as France, England, Spain, America and Australia. This perception of indigenous people has justified their removal from their homelands in service of this aspect of the colonialist agenda. It has also justified her being put on display, that somehow her physical presence would satisfy this desire for the exotic. In this environment she, along with those on display with her, become spectacles to be gazed at, talked about and observed.*

The formative type of relationship and ways of representing people of research interest to anthropologists/filmmakers was established with the early use of the still and moving camera. In the account of Regnault's early filmmaking above, the moving camera records the *spectacle* of a Wolof woman on display at a European Exposition for the consumption of a European audience. Her presence at the Paris Exposition coincides with the significant invention of moving film. Regnault has taken the camera that the Lumière brothers introduced to French audiences with the famous footage of a train pulling into Paris Central station and used it to produce what MacDougall (1995: 126) refers to as an 'observational film record' of the Wolof woman's activities. This filmic record extends the spectacle that the Wolof woman has become well beyond her physical presence at the Exposition. It represents a turning point in the relationship between scientists and their indigenous subjects, and establishes the foundation for the relationship between anthropology, the anthropological subject and still and moving image making. This relationship and the way in which it influenced the ways in which indigenous people were recorded and represented in ethnographic filmmaking practice will be explored in detail throughout this chapter.

Regnault's footage is definitely a filmic record. It is also observational in that there is no engagement evident in the footage between the Wolof woman as the subject and Regnault as the filmmaker. It is also ethnographic, in that it fulfils the scientific

agenda of this early form of anthropological inquiry to visually document the customs, physical characteristics and behaviours of indigenous people. Regnault however, is not an anthropologist; he is a scientist as are many other 'early anthropologists'. The discipline of anthropology has not yet been officially recognised, but Regnault's pursuit of knowledge with regards to indigenous people (along with those that preceded him), is distinctly ethnographic. He is collecting information in order to understand the differences his subjects display. He sees this new form of technology as the optimal way to do that. The moving camera can document more information and different sorts of information than the still camera and can exceed the human eye's capacity to record this information. Primarily, it can capture movement, and therefore be a register for every stage of the activities being documented. As he says;

[Film] provides exact and permanent documents to those who study movements ... Acts of locomotion can be translated into geometric graphs in which all is measurable with a precision that observations alone could not achieve. (Regnault, as cited in Tobing-Rony, 1996: 47,59)

Regnault was to use the information recorded from his documentation of the activity of pot making as evidence for the Wolof woman's transitional status in the social evolutionary hierarchy.<sup>3</sup> He proposed that her pot making technique of turning the pot placed her closer to the most advanced techniques of pot making using the pottery wheel. Capturing this activity on moving film meant that he now had a document that could provide evidence for his theory. It was this new medium that gave him that access.

This coming together of three significant elements — Regnault, the Wolof woman and moving film — capture the critical components that establish the relationship between anthropology and moving film. This chapter will explicate the nature of this relationship as a backdrop for the later discussion of my filmmaking process, practice, and collaboration. This fledgling relationship between early anthropology

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<sup>3</sup> Film employed in the manner by Regnault, was used as evidence for the evolutionary status of indigenous people. This was informed by the prevailing theory of this period, *Evolutionism* or *Social Evolutionary Theory* that claimed indigenous people were of a lower evolutionary status than their European counterparts. Their evolutionary status could be determined by their physical characteristics. Early anthropologists, E.B. Tylor and J.G. Frazer were key proponents of this theory (see Kuper, 1983: 2-5, and Edwards, 1992: 5-6 and MacDougall, 1997: 279 for accounts of the relationship between evolutionism and the use of photography in early anthropology).

and moving film established many of the ways in which indigenous subjects were represented on moving film and the approaches and styles filmmakers took for, or against, the scientific use of the moving camera evident in Regnault's footage. I have defined Regnault's approach as scientific as it introduces a particular type of relationship between the anthropologist, the camera operator and the moving camera. This early scientific approach foregrounded and validated a later belief that an accurate, that is, a 'truthful' filmic representation of culture was linked to minimal engagement with the people being filmed on the part of the filmmaker as well as minimal intervention in terms of shot choices (with the wide angle establishing shot being preferred) and post-production editing. This became the hallmark approach referred to here as 'Observational objectivism' (Ravetz 2017) which linked an observational approach with the production of objective scientific representations. This use of film in anthropology was evident in films such as *The Ax Fight* (1975) and a number of other films in the Yanomami Film Corpus including *Arrow Game* (1974) and *Weeding the Garden* (1974). These films represented an extension of Regnault's 'observational film record' (MacDougall, 1995: 126), and a relationship to the camera as a recording device and ancillary tool for gathering evidence to substantiate a scientific agenda.

The scientific use of the moving camera was employed by a number of ethnographic filmmakers from the 1950s to the mid 1970s.<sup>4</sup> During this period, this approach was inaccurately linked with the genre of filmmaking practice known as Observational Cinema. The employment of an observational approach was not characterised solely by the distancing nature of the scientific approach and in fact was employed in a completely distinct way in the hands of two UCLA film students, Herb Di Gioia and David Hancock (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009: 55-56). This application of an observational approach can be likened more to the application of an observational sensibility (Ravetz 2017), and defined as Observational Cinema. It drew on numerous influences including Italian Neo—Realism and Richard

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<sup>4</sup> As mentioned later in this chapter, the early proponents of the scientific application of an observational approach or 'Observational objectivism' were ethnographic filmmakers Tim Asch and John Marshall, however, not all their films, even some the early ones, displayed the distancing nature that was frequently attributed by critics of an observational approach. Equally, Henley (in Sikand 2015:44) suggests that ethnographic filmmakers of this era never believed in or aimed for objectivity, that indeed, they were aware enough to recognise that by virtue of their presence, only a subjective representation could be made. I will expand on the perspectives of those who critiqued this limited view of the application of an observational approach later in this chapter.

Leacock's 'Direct Cinema' and was expressed in a more embodied, intimate use of the camera. The complexities surrounding the collapse between the scientific application of an observational approach with Observational Cinema, including a review of the value of an embodied observational approach will be discussed later in this chapter. This discussion will provide the ideal backdrop from which to discuss the dynamics of contemporary ethnographic filmmaking practice through my own practice and my relationships with those represented on film.

The footage shot by Regnault of the Wolof woman cannot be defined as an ethnographic film,<sup>5</sup> however, it can be classified as ethnographic footage. The footage is being taken and viewed in a context that is both given by the populist colonialist fascination for the exotic as well as the prevailing 'scientific' theory, *Evolutionism* (Kuper, 1983: 2-5), concerning the social evolutionary status of human beings. The flickering images of an indigenous woman making a pot became more than ethnographic information, but evidence for classifying her in a position on the evolutionary chain that was lower than her colonisers. Tobing-Rony (1996) labels the representation of indigenous people during this period as *ethnographic spectacles*. Within this category, they are both objects for scientific evidence gathering as well as exotic curiosities. This is a useful category in that it captures very simply, the nature of the relationships the European world established with indigenous people, however, it only defines a specific type of 'one-way' relationship between anthropologist and the people they were documenting.

There is evidence that indicates the relationships early anthropologists developed with their subjects were far more complex than that implicated in Tobing-Rony's (1996) categorisation. Early footage from other sources clearly conveys evidence of much deeper relationships between early anthropologists and the people they were documenting. The footage taken by Walter Baldwin Spencer of the Aranda<sup>6</sup> people during his 1901-1902 expedition through Central Australia clearly displays

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<sup>5</sup> Ethnographic film complies with the structure of a film as opposed to footage that is shot simply to record ethnographic material. An ethnographic film can be a stand-alone text that conveys a visual commentary of culture or be accompanied by a written companion that explicates the visual material.

<sup>6</sup> I will be using 'Aranda' when I refer to the Aranda people in this exegesis. Spencer and Gillen identified them as the Aranda people. The contemporary spelling is Arrernte (Batty 2005: 211).

the connection he had established with them.<sup>7</sup> The fluency in the Aranda language of Frank Gillen, his collaborator, definitely contributed to this connection, however, as the person behind the camera, it was clear Spencer had more than a cursory connection with the people he was filming. The depth of relationship established between Spencer, Gillen and the Aranda people and the visual evidence of this in their images, will be explored in detail in Chapter Three. The discussion in Chapter Three will clearly demonstrate the complexity of these relationships and point to the juxtaposition of a personalised connection with the more detached relationship demanded by a scientific agenda. Both approaches are evident in the images and footage taken by Spencer and Gillen. However, the prevailing scientific agenda remained as the predominant factor in the selection of the images chosen for academic and public display. This overrode the personalised connection between Spencer, Gillen and the Aranda people. The detached approach of Regnault contributed to the establishment of a methodology for the documentation of indigenous people. Thomas Huxley's anthropometric guidelines for the accurate recording of the physiology of indigenous people was an extension of this and canonised Regnault's early experiments using film. Evidence of human emotion and connection between the anthropologist and their subject was eradicated in any image slated for academic or public display. This process of selection for the elements of indigenous existence that would provide salient scientific records was linked to the prevailing belief by early anthropologists such as Spencer and Gillen that the Aranda people like other indigenous groups at this time, were on the brink of extinction. Later given the title, 'Salvage Anthropology', Poole (2005: 164) suggests that nineteenth century anthropologists (like many of their twentieth-century descendants) were '...convinced of both the inevitability and desirability of evolutionary progress...that the primitives they studied were on the verge of

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<sup>7</sup> Walter Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen were among the first researchers to extensively document Aboriginal people in Australia using visual, audio and written mediums. They conducted this research over eight years, which included their 1901-1902 expedition from Oodnadatta, South Australia to the Gulf of Carpentaria. Their collaboration with the Aranda people formed a large component of 'Native Tribes of Central Australia' (Baldwin Spencer & Gillen: 1899) and Gillen's photographic folio extended well beyond the 250 half-plate glass negatives, 36 quarter plate negatives and album of prints he sold to the South Australian Museum in 1910 (Jones 2011:13). Baldwin Spencer was Professor of Biology at the University of Melbourne and Gillen was the Telegraph Stationmaster at Alice Springs Telegraph station and had established relationships with the Aranda people with whom he and Spencer were to conduct most of their research. Spencer and Gillen were also among the first 'early' anthropologists to use the moving camera to create visual recordings of the customs, ritual and daily activities of Aboriginal people. Others included Alfred C. Haddon who spent the year of 1898 documenting the Torres Strait Islanders (Edwards 1992), Emil Torday and M.W. Simpson who documented extensively in the Congo in 1907 (Vasina 1992) and E.H.Man in the Andaman Islands in the late 1800s (Edwards 1992).

disappearing.’ This reinforced both the primary scientific purpose for the camera and the use of an observational methodology — to capture whatever remained of this culture for posterity and create an ‘accurate’ scientific record of the customs and activities of indigenous people.

## **Moving film in anthropology and the representation of the anthropological subject**

This next section will provide a historical overview of the use of moving film by anthropologists and filmmakers to represent the people of research interest to them. It will also deal with the relationship they had to the camera, film as a medium, and to the product that resulted from this. I will outline the key shifts in approach taken by anthropologists/filmmakers in representing their research subjects. The section will demonstrate the growing commitment of anthropologists/filmmakers to capture on film the relationships and connection between them and their subjects and how the methodological approach altered to align with this. This establishes the foundation for the discussion of collaboration and my own practice in Chapters Four and Five.

Film was a medium that had immense potential for anthropology in that it could capture the unpredictable, uncertain and multi-layered world of being in the field and *experiencing culture*. Yet, like photography, it posed far greater threat to the totalising nature of empiricist agendas that sought to explain, interpret and contain culture within paradigms of thought that enabled comprehension of human cultural expression. While such approaches brought order and understanding to culture and were invaluable to the anthropological project, film, like photography, displayed visual excesses (such as the expression of emotion on a person’s face or gestures that indicate connection between themselves and the anthropologist/filmmaker) that could not be contained within these paradigms of thought. The shift in anthropology in the 1920s to the interpretation of culture through conceptually based paradigms such as social structure and organisation, saw the disappearance of photography as a complementary medium to the written word. Film also took a secondary role as a visual adjunct to the written word and as a source of evidence for the agenda of the anthropologist.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the scientific approach employed by Regnault in the use of film established the foundation for how film could be used to complement a scientifically focused anthropological agenda, resulting in an approach to ethnographic filmmaking defined earlier as ‘Observational objectivism’ (Ravetz 2017). Heider (1976) constructed a set of rigid criteria for the definition of ethnographic film that gave this approach a specific methodology. While many of the filmmakers at this time did not embrace the same level of detachment employed by Regnault, their films were still made and interpreted from within this paradigm. The early films of John Marshall and Tim Asch reflected this methodological approach. They were frequently no longer than 15 – 20 minutes as a means for a ritual to be recorded in a single take. Marshall and Asch devised what they referred to as ‘event filming’ and ‘sequence filming’ to maintain the temporal integrity of the event or sequences of action/behaviour being filmed (Asch 1996). This they argued, produced a record of human social behaviour that had the greatest level of accuracy with the least intervention from the filmmaker. Performative events like rituals, and large scale celebrations like festivals and simple human interactions were the primary subject matter of these films.<sup>8</sup>

Observational Cinema, rightly or wrongly was linked to the scientific paradigm and the positivistic aims of the discipline at this time.<sup>9</sup> The prevailing idea of the existence of a single ethnographic reality, one that could be captured in a written account and substantiated through a filmic document, was extremely influential regarding the interpretation of the use of film in anthropology during this time. The filmic merits of an observational approach as that derived directly from Observational Cinema and promoted by a small group of ethnographic filmmakers, were largely overshadowed by the focus on ‘Observational objectivism’. The result was that ‘Observational objectivism’ became inaccurately linked with Observational Cinema. Subsequently, those such as MacDougall (1998) who had made this link, reviewed their original position. MacDougall (1998: 137)

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<sup>8</sup> Simple human interactions were captured in the films of John Marshall and Tim Asch. These include, *The Meat Fight* (1973) and *An Argument about a Marriage* (1969) by John Marshall, and *The Ax Fight* (1975) and *Weeding the Garden* (1974) by Tim Asch.

<sup>9</sup> In a review of his original position regarding the use of an observational approach in ethnographic filmmaking (MacDougall 1975), MacDougall (1998: 137) acknowledges in retrospect that the work of filmmakers employing an observational approach were actually highly personal and reflective of their choices and that perhaps Observational Cinema was dealt an unfair blow. It is also important to note that MacDougall himself was never engaged in the ‘observational objectivism’ given by a scientifically driven approach to ethnographic filmmaking practice.

commented that 'Observational Cinema is [in fact] contingent and provisional in its findings'. Additionally, there was a notable integrity in the intention of those who promoted Observational Cinema which was forged against the overt construction of other approaches. For example, Young (in Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009:8), criticised *The Nuer* (1971) for the fragmentary and filmmaker driven interpretation evident in the construction of this film. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Observational Cinema had its ideological and methodological roots in post World War Two Italian Neo-Realism where filmmakers actively forged a new realism against the romanticisation evident in films prior to World War Two. The genre of *documentaire romance* pioneered by Georges Melies illustrated this highly constructed genre where storylines based on actual events were fictionalised to create drama and heighten audience engagement. Neo-Realists on the other hand, made films based on actual events, shot outdoors and often in the absence of scripted roles. This historical backdrop paints a dynamic picture of the visual, methodological and anthropological theories and approaches that influenced the application of film to anthropology during this formative period of ethnographic filmmaking practice. They also provide a foundation for understanding the development of other approaches in ethnographic filmmaking that were created in conjunction with and also in opposition to the perceived limitations of 'Observational objectivism'.

Against this backdrop, the relationship between film and anthropology has been an uneasy one (MacDougall 1998: 64). In using film as scientific evidence and as a means to provide a visual record of the external features of peoples' physiology and social life, the people featured in these films were made secondary. This was also apparent in the still photographs of this time. Levels of closeness and connection between early anthropologists and their subjects were not evident in the images that were made available for public display through public or academic lectures.<sup>10</sup> Any unnecessary signs of connection or unintended displays of

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<sup>10</sup> This reiterates the point I made above about the depth of the relationships established between early anthropologists and their subjects. The personal insights of Walter Baldwin Spencer noted in his diaries and letters to Frank Gillen indicated a much closer connection with the Aranda people than evident in his written research, but to some degree also in his visual imagery (Cantrill and Cantrill 1982). Gillen's photographs seemed to display more of this personal connection (Jones 2011). Even in these early stages of the discipline, it was clear that the anthropological project was underpinned as much by the establishment of connections and understanding of the people brought about by long term fieldwork, as it was about a scientific intention to document and classify every aspect of their physical and ritual lives.



intimacy were edited out. Equally, the focus of 'Observational objectivism' on minimising engagement with the people being filmed and preferencing wide shots and minimal editing, did have the effect in some films of distancing the people being filmed.<sup>11</sup> This lack of attention to the human element so essential to viewer identification and interpretation of the people on screen, was something that was addressed in other approaches, principally Participatory Cinema and David and Judith MacDougall's dialogic approach. These will be discussed later in this chapter in addition to an end of chapter summary that brings together the salient points of each approach and the relevance of these to future based approaches for ethnographic filmmaking practice.

The institutionalisation of anthropology as a formal discipline in the 1920s marked a significant turning point in how film and photography were perceived in relation to the anthropological project. As mentioned, anthropologists became more interested in ideas about culture that could not be recorded on film, such as social structure and the symbolic life of their subjects. The role of the camera as a recording device diminished and the written word gained primacy in the anthropological project.<sup>12</sup> The anthropological endeavour became about discovering deeper layers of cultural meaning. Poole (2005: 164) also attributes the abandonment of the camera in the anthropological project to the failure of photography (and film) to visually comply with the criteria of a totalising anthropological agenda. The human factor was peripheral and any display of humanity on the part of the subjects was considered excessive and extraneous and therefore irrelevant.

Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson reintroduced the camera to the anthropological project through their extensive fieldwork in Bali in the 1930s. This saw a return to the use of the camera as an ethnographic recording and evidence gathering device. Volumes of still photographs and reams of footage represented Mead and Bateson's attentive eye to the movements and gestures of various Balinese rituals and dances. Mead was content to maintain using the camera as

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<sup>11</sup> This was very distinct from the intimacy evoked by the use of the observational camera in Observational Cinema and evident in Leacock's *Primary* (1960) and MacDougall's *To Live with Herds* (1974).

<sup>12</sup> For further information, Pinney (1992) provides an excellent account of the 'parallel' histories of anthropology and photography

an instrument for examining her theories concerning social behaviour. Bateson however, was far more interested in using it as a way to capture the broader social context in which the Balinese lived (Bateson and Mead 1977). Bateson's attitude demonstrated his interest in the human factor and therefore using the camera as a way to communicate sociality, personhood and lived experience. Mead's methods demonstrated her stronger commitment to the scientific analysis of social behaviour which reinforced and saw a continuation of the method employed by Regnault.

The major limitation of the distancing nature of the scientific application of an observational approach was the objectification of the people in the films made using this approach. While it was the source of an extensive range of detailed material on human social behaviour and therefore fulfilled the needs of a discipline committed to documenting and classifying the ritual and physical features of social life, it left those viewing the films distanced from the subjects and therefore more likely to construct and sustain negative stereotypes (Offler 1999). This became problematic when these films began to be used as teaching aids and were classified as 'ethnographic films'. Had they been considered to be ethnographic footage, the need for careful contextualisation would have become immediately apparent. These films represented students' first encounter with people that the anthropologist had a long-term relationship with. Without the benefit of this extended relationship or the connection provided by the subject(s) speaking to the audience, ethnographic subjects continued to be spectacles open to stereotyping according to pre-existing notions of the 'other'. The absence of the connection between the anthropologists and/or filmmaker and the subjects of the film in the scientific application of an observational approach, only reinforced notions of 'otherness'.

The publication of Susan Sontag's 'On Photography' (1977) marked the turning point for visual imagery and visual theory being re-evaluated from a postmodernist perspective. Sontag broke the myth concerning the objectivity of visual imagery. She argued that visual images were the product of subjective processes, that is, the photographer's point of view was fundamentally subjective as was that of the audience viewing the image. Any claims to the veracity of the visual image by those espousing it as an accurate record of data, were strongly thrown into

question. In this climate of questioning and disputing the objectivity of the visual image, MacDougall wrote his seminal article 'Beyond Observational Cinema' (1975). This article provoked a significant shift ethnographic filmmaking practice. MacDougall's (1975: 129) primary emphasis in outlining the limitations of an observational approach which I have previously defined as 'Observational objectivism', was the invisibility and omnipresence of the filmmaker and how this impacted the relationship with their subject(s). He suggested that '...the same methodological asceticism that causes filmmakers to exclude themselves from the world of their subjects also excludes the subjects from the world of the film' (1975: 133). The assumed link between this lack of interaction and objectivity, was antithetical to the process of filmmaking and the inclusion of the subjects in this process. While there was validity in MacDougall's assertion that the distancing approach excluded the subjects from the world of the film, the equation of this with Observational Cinema as a whole meant that the valuable features of the embodied application of an observational approach such as the capturing of the 'as lived' experience of peoples' lives, was excluded. The post-1975 swing to a participatory approach saw Observational Cinema side-lined and identified solely with this limited view. As discussed previously, MacDougall reviewed his original critique of the Observational style and acknowledged many of it's benefits. A complete re-evaluation of Observational Cinema will be raised later in this chapter as part of a broader discussion concerning contemporary approaches in ethnographic filmmaking practices.

It was in MacDougall's 'Beyond Observational Cinema' however, that he made the statement that represents one of the major areas of exploration in this exegesis and project more broadly, that is, the clear recognition that the film is a product of the dynamic space that is the relationship between the filmmaker and the people being filmed. He states (1975: 134),

No ethnographic film is merely a record of another society; it is always a record of the meeting between a filmmaker and that society.

While MacDougall never extended this to examine the construction and building of these relationships within a 'process' that happened over time, his pointing to the critical relationship between the filmmaker and the people being filmed, threw light on a vital component of ethnographic filmmaking. Consequently, MacDougall

(1975) proposed a more subjective and interactive approach to ethnographic filmmaking. This ushered in an era where approaches that actively engaged the people being filmed on screen or in the filmmaking process itself, became formalised under the banner of Participatory Cinema. Interestingly MacDougall's own style was never overtly participatory. Throughout all of MacDougall's films, there is a strong focus on dialogue, that is capturing what people say, however his approach is closer to what Grimshaw and Ravetz (2009) would define as an embodied observational approach (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009). This suited MacDougall's commitment to record life as lived and expressed by the people he was filming. He was not interested in including his overt presence in his films, rather creating a level of intimacy yet privacy that allowed his subjects to 'speak'. He in fact suggested a possible future for ethnographic film as one of collaboration and joint authorship between filmmakers and their subjects (MacDougall 1998).<sup>13</sup> This statement foregrounded the pathway taken by ethnographic filmmakers in their practice after 1975. It also pre-empted a shift in environment regarding those being filmed. The people who had been the 'subjects' of the films made by anthropologists/filmmakers were increasingly demanding ownership of and control over their representations. They were also coming to the initial discussions about a potential film with their own agenda and a commitment to have it fulfilled. As a result, there was an unmistakable move towards increasing levels of subject participation, authorship and ownership in ethnographic filmmaking practice and product from 1975 onwards.

### **Participatory Cinema: a preliminary exploration into collaboration**

Participatory Cinema became the signature style for subject inclusion and therefore has been the style most connected with definitions and expressions of collaboration and collaborative practice. Articles regarding collaboration and ethnographic filmmaking practice emerged after the shift to greater levels of

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<sup>13</sup> MacDougall (1998) later rescinded this, suggesting that joint authorship would lead to a confusion of perspectives. Instead he proposed a possible future of multiple authorship leading to a form of intertextual cinema. He suggested that this would enable ethnographic film to '...address conflicting views of reality, in a world in which...reciprocal observation and exchange increasingly matter.' (1998:138) It is the latter perspective that I use as one of the bases of my discussion about my own approach and potential future(s) for ethnographic film.

subject participation in ethnographic film.<sup>14</sup> The participatory style encapsulated a range of levels of subject participation, authorship and ownership in specific films. As such, the identification of these with 'collaboration' meant that collaboration could not be linked to a definitive methodology, rather to the broad cinematic style of participatory cinema. This has made it difficult to both define collaboration and articulate a framework for the expression of collaboration in ethnographic filmmaking practice. I will provide an analysis and discussion of collaboration to situate my own practice of ethnographic filmmaking in Chapter Two.

Participatory Cinema was marked by a commitment to the people being filmed *participating* in the filmmaking process. This called for the overt presence of their participation, either on film or in the editing process. As mentioned, collaboration during this period of participatory cinema was broadly linked to a variety of levels of subject inclusion and not to a definitive approach. It rarely reflected equality when it came to authorship and ownership. For example, *collaboration* for many anthropologists in relation to ethnographic film was represented by the *collaborative* relationship between anthropologist and filmmaker, rather than the relationship between the people being filmed and the anthropologist. This form of collaboration found expression in a number of crucial partnerships between anthropologists and ethnographic filmmakers.<sup>15</sup> One of the most successful collaborative partnerships was between ethnographic filmmaker, Timothy Asch and anthropologist, Linda Connor. Asch and Connor went on to produce a series of films based on Connor's fieldwork in Bali. In *Jero on Jero* (1981), Connor engages in a question and answer sequence with her central informant Jero Tapakan while both of them view footage of Asch and Connor's first film, *A Balinese Trance Séance* (1979). The footage in *Jero on Jero* (1981) powerfully captures the intimacy and shared knowledge of an anthropologist and their informant in a way that has yet to be surpassed. Equally, the presence of Connor

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<sup>14</sup> I mention in my discussion of Participatory Cinema articles written by Sarah Elder (1995) and Linda Connor (1988), both of which discuss notions of collaboration in the filmmaking process. These were significant in that they formally named relationships established between anthropologist and/or filmmaker and the people being filmed as an expression of 'collaboration', and linked this with ethnographic filmmaking practice. These expressions of collaboration will contribute to my articulation of a framework for collaboration in ethnographic filmmaking in Chapter Two.

<sup>15</sup> In addition to the collaborative partnership between Tim Asch and anthropologist, Linda Connor, Asch also established collaborative relationships with a number of other anthropologists including Chagnon, James Fox, and Douglas Lewis. Australian filmmaker Ian Dunlop worked with Howard Morphy and Robert Tonkinson, and Kim McKenzie with Les Hiatt in *Waiting for Harry* (1980).

as anthropologist on film also dispelled any notion of the anthropologist as omnipresent. Interestingly, while Connor (1988) initially wrote at length about her collaboration with Tim and Patsy Asch, she did not include Jero in the group that she classified as collaborators.<sup>16</sup> This represented the defining criteria of collaboration in ethnographic filmmaking practice at the time. As with Spencer and Gillen, the definition did not reflect the actual nature of the relationships being developed between the anthropologists, filmmakers and people being filmed. Jero unquestionably had levels of ownership in the filmmaking process and product, including the right to veto any footage. She did this with a small section of footage in *Jero on Jero* (1981). She played a powerful role in shaping the nature and content of the films. Her level of ownership and authorship was implicit and unstated rather than explicitly linked with the production of anthropological knowledge. Hence, collaboration in Connor's sense appears to be located in the anthropologist/filmmaker relationship, rather than the subject/anthropologist relationship.

This was the common perception of *collaboration* held by many anthropologists and filmmakers. It was at its most prominent in the Granada produced *Disappearing World Series*, where anthropologists acted as consultants for the production of 50 minute television documentaries on cultures around the world. The overarching commentary of the anthropologist gave both the subjects and the audience very little space to speak or interpret themselves. These documentaries are what Eco (1979) would refer to as closed texts where the audience is directed to 'read' what they are seeing in a particular way. This application of collaboration shaped and in some cases, still shapes how collaboration is defined and expressed in regards to ethnographic filmmaking.

The move to increasing levels of subject participation in Participatory Cinema as mentioned, had a variety of expressions in the hands of different filmmakers and therefore definitions of collaboration shifted accordingly with these different expressions. The subject centred approach of David and Judith MacDougall clearly ushered in a style of ethnographic filmmaking that acknowledged and made important the role and contribution of the anthropological 'subject'. Within this

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<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that Connor (2008) then wrote about her long-term relationship with Jero Tapakan and the nature of relationships built over time during and beyond ethnographic fieldwork.

style, the subject became the primary source of cultural knowledge and the communication of cultural information. The method employed by the MacDougall's was what David MacDougall referred to as *dialogic* (MacDougall 1995), that is, the testimony of the subject(s) is used as a vehicle for the audience to gain access to their perspective and worldview. This approach went beyond involving the subjects of the film in selecting and reviewing the content of the film as had been the case with Jero Tapakan. It asked the subject(s) to be engaged in every step of the filmmaking process. Thus, Tomas Woody Minipini not only assisted in the editing of *Goodbye, Old Man* (1977), but was a central 'character' in the film and provided the narration. This was also the case with Geraldine Kawangka in *The House Opening* (1980). Throughout the film, her commentary guides the audience through the various stages of the ritual opening of her house after the death of her husband. In a similar fashion, other ethnographic filmmakers, particularly in Australia, began to make the subject(s) of the film central to it. As mentioned previously, *Waiting for Harry* (1980) drew on both testimony from Frank Gurmanmana and the anthropologist, Les Hiatt. In a relationship not dissimilar to the one between Linda Connor and Jero Tapakan, Hiatt and Gurmanmana co-create for the audience the complex stages of an Aboriginal mortuary ceremony.<sup>17</sup> Loizos (1993) refers to this stage in ethnographic filmmaking as being defined by subjective voices, where '...sometimes at the explicit request of local groups, there was the drama of particular struggles, issues, claims, and rituals, but filmed in a way which more directly served the interests of the subjects themselves as well as the interests of a community of liberal scholars and cultural caretakers' (1993: 171). If there was a distinctive trend to identify with regards to ideas and definitions of collaboration, it was one where the people being filmed were becoming both active and visible participants in the filmmaking process.

### **After Participatory Cinema: self-reflexivity and other approaches**

In expanding the participatory approach and inviting the participation of their subjects in the filmmaking process, the work of David and Judith MacDougall, Gary Kildea, Kim MacKenzie and other ethnographic filmmakers, introduced a new era in ethnographic filmmaking practice. The films that came from this period had

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<sup>17</sup> See further discussion in Chapter Three of these films and the specific relationships that contributed to their form and structure.

subtle but powerful displays of the relationships between filmmaker and/or anthropologist and people being filmed. They also dispelled the myth of the omnipresent and invisible filmmaker/anthropologist. The passing image of Patsy Asch holding the boom and microphone over Jero Tapakan and Linda Connor while both are discussing the footage from *A Balinese Trance Séance* (1979) creates a sense of immediacy and intimacy and invites the audience to be active participants in the film and their relationship. Kim MacKenzie hand holding the camera as he follows anthropologist, Les Hiatt and Les' brother and central informant, Frank Gurrmanamana into the scrub, creates a sense of being there and again, an invitation to connect with those on screen. Such 'uncut' displays of the presence of the filmmaker, the anthropologist and/or other members of the filmmaking team saw the inclusion of potent self-reflexive moments become a common feature of ethnographic films from this point onwards.

The advent of postmodernism in anthropology in the 1980s saw a strong movement towards self-reflexive practices as a way of minimising the overarching presence of the single authorial voice. For ethnographic filmmakers, the increasing inclusion of the people about which they were making the film, had already reduced the omnipotence of their role in the filmmaking process. The inclusion of self-reflexive practices, such as making their presence on screen visible, were part of an already established approach associated with Participatory Cinema. A strong proponent of the participatory approach in ethnographic filmmaking practice, Jean Rouch, included himself in the frame in many of his films, notably *Chronique d'un été* (1960). Self-reflexivity allowed for the subtle announcement of the filmmaker/anthropologist as integral to the environment in which the film is being made. The display of the filmmaker/anthropologist on screen generally correlated with higher levels of participation from those being filmed, however, this did not necessarily equate with the people being filmed having equal ownership and rights in the filmmaking process and product. Levels of ownership and rights, as I will discuss later, are critical markers in articulating a framework for the analysis of collaboration in ethnographic filmmaking practice.

It is also important to qualify in any discussion of self-reflexivity in ethnographic filmmaking practice that displays of self-reflexivity in ethnographic films, were in most instances, not self-indulgent. Illustrations of extreme self-reflexivity rendered



the filmmaker/anthropologist the primary subject, and the people being filmed as incidental. This extreme demonstration of self-reflexive practice was the target of significant criticism in the era beyond post-modernism and much of the reason, I would suggest, of the swing back to embrace practices that focus on the people being filmed and their lives. As such, ethnographic filmmaking practice beyond Participatory Cinema and Postmodernism, incorporated a melody of self-reflexivity, subject centred approaches and the embodied observational camera that allowed for the full elicitation of what was happening in front of the camera. David MacDougall chose to make the final film in his *Doon School Project* series a biography of a boy, Abhishek, who becomes, as he says, ‘...a little like my shadow...’ (Vaughan 2005: 463). *The Age of Reason* (2004) is a very personalised film and frequently shows glimpses of MacDougall as he interacts with his friend off camera.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, a number of the ethnographic films coming from postgraduate programs in recent years presence the filmmaker in frame in conjunction with a high level of engagement with the people being filmed.<sup>19</sup>

The incorporation of self-reflexive approaches in ethnographic filmmaking practice has made visible the relationships between filmmaker and/or anthropologist and the people on screen. Such practices unquestionably reveal the collaborative nature of these relationships, however, can only reveal collaboration as displayed in that moment. In relation to some films, these visible snippets represent the extent of the collaboration between the various people associated with the film. What is not evident in these snippets is the complexity of collaborative practice that I will be discussing in relation to my own practice and a number of other anthropologists/filmmakers.

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<sup>18</sup> MacDougall and Arnav Koshy have recently directed and produced *Arnav at Six* (2014). This was a collaborative project between MacDougall and Koshy and an extension of the biographical approach in MacDougall’s personal portrait of Abhishek in *The Age of Reason* (2004).

<sup>19</sup> In the 2014 Australian and New Zealand Anthropology Conference, all of the films shown included the filmmaker in frame.

## **Contemporary approaches, methods and theories - from capturing to eliciting culture**

The discussion above outlines subjective filmmaking practice and collaborative approaches as they have developed to this point. The observational approach has been both re-evaluated and extended by a number of contemporary anthropologists. In a comprehensive re-evaluation of Observational Cinema, Grimshaw and Ravetz (2009) draw on the early work of filmmakers Herb Di Gioia, David Hancock and David MacDougall. Grimshaw and Ravetz (2009) in their rethinking of Observational Cinema, link the observational use of the camera with the filmmaker by suggesting that it is in fact more of an embodied approach than previously thought. They ‘...argue that the traditional interpretative frameworks drawn from science and semiotics have obscured the genre’s identity as a sensuous, interpretive, and phenomenologically inflected mode of inquiry’ (2009: ix). What their reinterpretation of Observational Cinema enables, is a reevaluation of the qualities of this approach when viewed without the negative associations with scientific detachment. As outlined earlier, MacDougall (1998) also re-evaluated his original position regarding Observational Cinema. He noted that none of the filmmakers who employed an observational approach believed they were producing ‘...complete, unmediated documents, nor did many of them ever hold that Observational Cinema could be ideologically transparent...’. Additionally, Henley’s later assertion (in Sikand 2015), that the hallmark of Observational Cinema was a means to have the filmmaker’s attention on the activity (i.e. lived experience) of people rather than the internalisation of this experience through a series of self-reflexive filters is also a worthy point. It is indicative of the need to return to a less filmmaker centred approach, the source of which lies in the opposition to the indulgence of the self-reflexive approach evident in both texts and films produced in response to the ‘crisis of representation’.

This reveals a fresh view of Observational Cinema that identifies it as Grimshaw and Ravetz (2009: xiv) suggest, ‘...a mode of inquiry that sticks close to lived experience and that seeks to render the finely grained texture of lived experience.’ Along similar lines, MacDougall (1997: 289) argues that the visual offers ‘...pathways to the other senses and to social experience...’ Equally, Pink (2013)

has extended the observational approach in her use of video/digital recording as an ethnographic method and suggests that visual ethnography can be defined as the video recording of the stream of activity of people in their everyday life. This is in order to experience, interpret, and capture notions of place, culture and home. Film used in the manner Pink (2013) describes could be defined as 'ethnographic footage' where film is used to capture activity (as Regnault equally used film for), but with the spirit of participation and collaboration between the anthropologist/filmmaker and the people being filmed. She suggests that the 'trace' of the ethnographer is present when they are following a participant through a particular space. Thus, whether film has been used to capture ethnographic footage or to make a complete film, both provide the viewer with access to actually experiencing peoples' lives as lived. This perspective allows film to be embraced for what it can provide as a distinct medium.<sup>20</sup>

What is of critical interest however, is possible new approaches that lie beyond what has been developed so far. This particular doctoral project was designed with the explicit purpose of examining the space in which the filmmaking process takes place and using that to explore the ebb and flow of communication, relationship, power and ownership between the filmmaker/anthropologist and members of the community being featured in the film. Using the filmmaking process as the research site therefore provided a direct access into exploring the development of collaborative partnerships between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal filmmakers/anthropologists in this contemporary environment. It was intended that the design of the project would provide a structure in which qualities of both ethnographic filmmaking practice and engagement with Aboriginal would become apparent and new expressions of collaborative engagement would be revealed.

My project was also designed in the knowledge that there had been ideas, projects and approaches in ethnographic visual practice that had already transcended the

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<sup>20</sup> Many ethnographic filmmakers have extended the unique qualities of film to capture culture and interpret it using filmic elements to create experientially and conceptually engaging works, such as *Tempus de Baristas* (1993) by David MacDougall, *Celso and Cora* (1982) by Gary Kildea and *Photo Wallahs* (1991) by David and Judith MacDougall. This moves film beyond the recording of ethnographic footage to become a medium of interpretation in its own right. MacDougall (1998: 76) defines this type of ethnographic film as *anthropological film* as distinct from *film about anthropology* where the focus is on recording ethnographic footage to substantiate an anthropological agenda. Anthropological film as an approach will be expanded on later in this exegesis.

approaches discussed above. I also knew that my own approach would be shaped by the collaborative process and requests of those I was working with. I drew on David MacDougall's theories concerning how film can be used to best elicit 'culture' which linked strongly with capturing the non-verbal realm of human cultural expression including gesture, facial expression and body language. I considered there could be a possible connection between the level of familiarity and intimacy brought about by long-term collaborative relationships and the expression of the non-verbal cultural realm in ethnographic film. This potential connection also constituted part of my analysis of the collaborative process in the using the making of an ethnographic film as the research site.

MacDougall's ideas opened up the space for the expansion of the use of film and its distinct characteristics in ethnographic filmmaking. MacDougall (1998) has argued that film lends itself to a different yet complementary portrayal of culture from that created by the written word. He says that if ethnographic film presents us with an apparently less culturally specific view of humanity than ethnographic writing, it also gives us access to a different distribution of specific human characteristics. He identifies those that show up in film as *appearing, making and doing* rather than *naming, conceptualizing and believing* that are more commonplace in the written word. MacDougall (2006) extended this identification of film as a medium that captures *doing* to focus on what he called the *visual aesthetic* in ethnographic filmmaking. This revealed another dimension to ethnographic filmmaking practice, one that elicited rather than explicated culture. Film and still images are therefore mediums through which culture can be elicited. MacDougall (2006) argues that visual ethnography, that is, ethnographic research conducted using the camera as the central medium of inquiry, elicits different layers and elements of culture than the written word. He states;

Visual knowledge (as well as other forms of sensory knowledge) provides one of our primary means of comprehending the experience of other people. (2006: 5)

It is precisely the power of the visual image to convey experiential information to the viewer, as Poole (2005) says, a document of encounter that makes it an invaluable complement to the written word. Visual images record the more sensory aspects of human expression such as gesture, body language, movement

and facial expression. These provide access to a distinct level of connection and arguably, a complementary level of connection to that of the written word, that is, to the lived experience of the subject. As MacDougall (1997: 287) suggests, 'Visual anthropology may offer different ways of understanding, but also different things to understand.'

Poole's (2005: 166) identification of photographs as 'documents of encounter', demonstrates that images capture the *encounter* between photographer and subject through the visible display of communication and exchange which indicate the presence of this encounter. However, with film, this *encounter* is played out in front of the viewer in movement, gesture and sound. Rather than leaving the viewer with a sense of intimacy as with a still photograph, the *spectre of intimacy* (Poole 2005) is obvious and vivid in film. Film allows for a more holistic encounter with people and the ongoing opportunity of *encountering* them throughout the duration of the film. The dynamics of social relations and the ebb and flow of communication are therefore best accessed through film. Film is a document of *encountering* and through it we encounter those critical relationships that reveal the dynamics underpinning the contemporary connections between anthropologists/filmmakers and Aboriginal people.

MacDougall's commitment to distinguish and make visible the distinctive features of film in the representation of culture and the distinctive features of human sociality it best expresses, has identified ethnographic filmmaking as an equal contributor to the understanding and experience of another's culture. This makes film a very potent medium when conveying the dynamics of social relations in the contemporary relationships between anthropologists/filmmakers and Aboriginal people. The emphasis of film on capturing what people *do* and their visual features, creates an environment in which the visceral elements of human interaction, both on and off screen become visibly evident. It encourages an environment in which collaborative engagement between the anthropologist/filmmaker and Aboriginal people in this contemporary setting can be intricately explored.

This also points to the potential for a new space in ethnographic filmmaking practice to emerge, one that combines MacDougall's focus on the visual aesthetic

with the level of collaborative engagement now apparent in relationships between anthropologist/filmmakers and Aboriginal people. The structure and approach of the project enables this new space to emerge. Incorporating both the exploration of social relations underpinning the production of the film and utilizing the distinctive characteristics of film as a *visual* product, these relationships, their evolution, and the dynamics of ownership and power, are made visible through the focus on testimonials, gesture, movement and sound. This is a unique space that provides access into the world of relationships that constitute contemporary ethnographic filmmaking. The potential here is the blending of two critical approaches in ethnographic filmmaking practice to produce a product that best expresses the contemporary environment and contemporary relationships between anthropologists/filmmakers and Aboriginal people. The following chapters will discuss what evolved through the making of the film as the research site and the implications of this for ethnographic filmmaking practice and collaboration with Aboriginal people into the future, while the next chapter in particular, will interrogate definitions and approaches to collaboration specifically in anthropology and film.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### Collaboration articulated: establishing a framework for the analysis of collaborative practice in ethnographic filmmaking

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#### Introduction

This chapter begins by establishing the foundation for articulating a framework for the discussion and analysis of collaboration in ethnographic filmmaking practice. I establish this foundation by critically discussing approaches to collaboration in ethnographic filmmaking practice. This begins with a brief overview of the diverse range of approaches and relationships established by ethnographic filmmakers that they have defined as collaborative. I then draw on a number of key ideas regarding collaboration articulated by a group of social scientists interested in the contemporary expression of collaboration in social science practice. I start my analysis of collaboration by looking at the approaches and relationships established by ethnographic filmmakers, Jean Rouch and David and Judith MacDougall who placed a high emphasis on the quality of the relationships they formed with the people with whom they made films and worked. I use the production of the visual installation, one hour documentary and three hour video from the *Christmas Birrimbirr Project*<sup>21</sup> (2011) by anthropologist, Jennifer Deger, her Yolgnu<sup>22</sup> colleagues, Paul Gurrumuruwuy and Fiona Yangathu (dec.)<sup>23</sup>, and video artist, David MacKenzie, as the foundation for articulating the tenets of the collaborative process as expressed in ethnographic filmmaking/visual anthropological practice. As mentioned previously, collaboration has been associated with a range of relationships and expressions in ethnographic filmmaking practice. Given this, there has not been a definitive method that has been linked with collaboration. As such, articulating a framework for the analysis of

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<sup>21</sup> Deger (2013a:358) defines the project as drawn from her collaborative partnership with Paul Gurrumuruwuy and consisting of "...the multi-media exhibition *Christmas Birrimbirr*, a companion one hour-documentary about it, *Manapanmirr, in Christmas Spirit*, and a three-hour video especially compiled for, and circulated by, Gurrumuruwuy and his family to other family members."

<sup>22</sup> The Yolgnu are a group of Aboriginal people located in Gapuwiyak in Northern Australia. Deger has worked with the Yolgnu people for over twenty years (Deger 2013:357).

<sup>23</sup> Fiona Yangathu passed away early in 2011 before the opening of *Christmas Birrimbirr* (2011) in December, 2011.

collaboration has been challenging.

### **An overview of the definitions attributed to collaboration by ethnographic filmmakers**

Ethnographic filmmakers and/or Visual Anthropologists have talked about collaboration, either formally or informally in their films and visual products. They frequently link the relationships they form with the people they are filming and the impact these relationships have on the visual product. Sarah Elder (1995) devotes an entire article to the collaborative nature of her and Leonard Kammerling's relationship with the Yu'pik eskimos, with whom they worked to produce a collection of eight films over a period of sixteen years<sup>24</sup>. She says,

All documentary exists as a record of the relationship between the filmmaker and subject. (Elder 1995: 94)

In reflecting on the making and screening of the Balinese films made in collaboration with Tim and Pasty Asch and Jero Tapakan, Linda Connor suggests that Jero's presence on screen draws the viewer to her and that she left an indelible memory with students and academics alike who have viewed the films in which she features. As she says,

I feel it's that inter-personal connection that people make with people in the film, that audiences make with people in the film, or students make that is really quite significant in their communicative quality. (Linda Connor pers. comm. 1998 in Offler 1999: 93)

Finally, David MacDougall (1975: 120), stated in his seminal article, 'Beyond Observational Cinema',

...the filmmaker must devise ways of bringing the viewer into the social experience of his subjects.

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<sup>24</sup> These films extensively documented the issues confronting the Yu'pik eskimos, their activities, personal commentary and rituals. Elder and Kammerling employed a dialogic approach not dissimilar to that of the MacDougalls, that allowed the audience access into the concerns and experiences of the people on screen. They formed a close collaborative relationship with a number of key people in the community over a period of sixteen years to develop the films in accordance with their ideas and preferences regarding how they wanted to be represented.



Similarly, ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch demonstrated with his use of the hand held camera, that being amongst the people being filmed creates a direct connection with their world. Stoller (1992: 216) refers to this approach as Rouch's *camera being* and his access to describing '...sensually the world of the Songhay'.

The anthropologists/filmmakers mentioned above rarely make comment about any kind of dissension or contestation in their relationships with those they were filming. This can be attributed to comparative lack of attention anthropologists/filmmakers have paid to the nature of their relationships with the people they are filming and more significantly, the prevalence of either the filmmaker or the anthropologist's directorial control in the final product.

### **Articulating a framework for collaboration in ethnographic filmmaking practice**

Against this backdrop of ambiguity and generalist notions of collaboration, the framework I will articulate is one that draws on a number of contemporary sources regarding collaboration and more broadly, the relationships anthropologists currently develop with the people they are working with in a much changed environment regards the autonomy, ownership and voice of the people who have been the 'traditional subjects' of anthropological inquiry. I have chosen a framework based on social science rather than any other discipline given my central point of examination are the relationships developed between anthropologist/filmmakers and the people being filmed. This is the basis for articulating and giving definition to key relationships, both current and historical, formed between anthropologist/filmmakers and the people with whom they work, and how the nature of these relationships in regards to their formation, development and expression have a critical impact on how the visual product is shaped and communicates. While this analysis allows for the myriad of expressions of collaboration in anthropological and ethnographic filmmaking practice to be given definition, it most importantly distinguishes relationships that embody the tenets of respect, trust and ownership in contemporary communities as representative of an ethically driven and socially focused approach that impacts how the people on screen are received. The exploration of this through my own process of establishing and developing relationships with a group of politically

active and socially conscious Aboriginal women in later chapters allows for the full articulation of collaboration as defined in this framework. This necessarily includes identifying the pitfalls I experienced and using this as a basis for critiquing this framework.

Lassiter (2008: vii) suggests as I have pointed to above, that collaboration has many different forms and articulations in anthropology and equally, "...has always been a vital, albeit often implicit, facet of what we do as anthropologists." As with ethnographic filmmaking practice, collaboration in anthropology has been wide ranging and not linked with one specific methodology. It has however, always been there in some form, mostly underlying and unexamined. The journal *Collaborative Anthropologies* was set up in 2008 to 'thicken' discussions of collaboration so that a more complex understanding of the collaborative process could be articulated. Prior to this, discussions about collaboration had reduced it to 'one-dimensional exercises in obtaining agreement'. As Lassiter (2008: ix) states,

Indeed, although "collaboration" has become an oft-heard motto in our field, the deeper complexities of collaborative anthropologies remain elusive. The nuances of collaboration, for instance, are at times glossed over in overly simplistic or celebratory accounts of what otherwise may be extremely complex partnerships.

Lassiter's critique of how collaboration has been used in previous analyses points to the necessity of creating a framework that allows for the full articulation of the complexity of these relationships, the impact these relationships have on the production of knowledge, how the people represent and express themselves in the products that derive from this collaboration, and how these products are received. It also allows for the theorising of collaboration to be appropriately located in a contemporary context where anthropology's traditional 'subjects' are now demanding full partnership in the production of this knowledge. With respect to ethnographic filmmaking, this refers to the people who have customarily had little to no say in how they are represented, now requesting full rights to and ownership of both the representational process and product.

Collaborative ethnography has been defined as;

...an approach to ethnography that deliberately and explicitly emphasizes

collaboration at every point in the ethnographic process, without veiling it—from project conceptualization, to fieldwork, and, especially, through the writing process. Collaborative ethnography invites commentary from our consultants and seeks to make that commentary overtly part of the ethnographic text as it develops. In turn, this negotiation is reintegrated back into the fieldwork process itself. (Lassiter in Rappaport 2008: 1)

Lassiter's definition illustrates some key points concerning collaboration that provide the foundation for the framework I am articulating. Lassiter identifies collaboration as an approach; one that incorporates and invites the participation and contribution of the people with whom the anthropologist is working at every stage of the project. He also identifies the collaborative approach as a negotiated process, one where the commentary from the participants consistently informs the project and feeds back into the fieldwork process. Lassiter's articulation of collaboration is dynamic, integrative and inclusive, and clearly defines it within the research process. He also implicitly points to the nature of the relationship between the anthropologist and the people with whom the anthropologist is working as one which is based on a commitment to nurture connection and respect as well as build trust. There is also the implication of ownership, however, the level of ownership held by the participants is not explicitly stated.

Lassiter's definition of the collaborative process is clearly thorough, however, his focus is distinct from mine. Lassiter focuses on collaboration as a process and identifies the major points of engagement and exchange in this process. My focus, on the other hand, is on the nature of the relationships between the anthropologist/filmmaker and the people with whom they are working, what it is that defines these relationships and the products of this encounter.

The following articulates the core categories of respect, trust and ownership as the foundation for an exploration of these relationships. My choice to focus on the core tenets of relationships and the products of encounter rather than process as the key for collaboration in ethnographic filmmaking practice is linked with my commitment to establish that the nature of these relationships impacts the production of knowledge and consequently, shapes the visual product. This is aligned with analysts such as Fleuhr-Lobban (2008) and Rappaport (2008) who argue that the multiple, polyphonic perspectives that occur in collaborative relationships result in better theory and the co-production of knowledge.

The idea that 'better theory' and new knowledge stem from collaborative relationships between anthropologist/filmmaker and the people being filmed, is not new. Jørgensen (2007) illustrates this in her discussion of the long term relationships that ethnographic filmmaker, Jean Rouch had with his four principle collaborators. Rouch conceptualised his ethnographic filmmaking practice as the source of a *shared anthropology*. This ushered in the idea and methodology of filmmaking as a shared dialogue between the anthropologist/filmmaker and the people being filmed. Ethnographic filmmaking as a genre constituted by dialogic exchange was further reinforced in the approach of David MacDougall. As mentioned, this shared space in the filmmaking domain is not new. What is of interest however, is that the relationships established between Rouch, Damourè, Tallou, Moussa and Lam, and those formed between David MacDougall and the many people he has collaborated with in the making of his films, were necessarily grounded in levels of trust, respect and ownership. This resulted in representations that are intimate and personable, and which therefore impact the viewer's response. The link between long term relationships formed with anthropologists/filmmakers and the people they work with, and the way they present themselves on screen and are represented, will be consolidated through an in depth discussion of the collaborative relationships of Rouch and MacDougall in the following sections.

### **Shared Anthropology – the collaborations of Jean Rouch**

The work of Jean Rouch and the relationships he formed with numerous people in Niger, Africa is a critical nexus point in the discussion of collaboration in ethnographic filmmaking practice as articulated through the tenets of respect, trust and ownership. Rouch built relationships with four key people<sup>25</sup> in his filmmaking in Niger from the 1950s through to his death in 2004. These relationships traversed his entire career as an ethnographic filmmaker and underpinned the making of the majority of his films, so much so that that government of Niger invited him to celebrate his first retrospective in Niger: *Jean Rouch, Seventy*

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<sup>25</sup> These four were Rouch's principal collaborators and were instrumental in shaping many of Rouch's films. Rouch however, collaborated with many others and his films are a product of the ideas of these people (see Stoller 1992: 171-172 for a list of these people and their influence on Rouch's films).

*Years/Seventy Films* (Stoller 1992: xiii). Jørgensen (2007: 71) suggests that the relationships Rouch developed with his principal collaborators, Damouré, Moussa, Tallou and Lam, led to the production of new types of knowledge that resulted from what Rouch (in Stoller 1992: 170-173 and Jørgensen 2007: 63-64) referred to as a 'shared anthropology'. Jørgensen (2007) says their shared anthropology stands out as perhaps the most comprehensively dialogic informant-anthropologist relationship in the history of anthropology.

It is unquestionable that Rouch in his approach, writing and filmmaking practice grounded his work with his collaborators in respect, trust and ownership. This is evident through the responses to Rouch from Damouré, Moussa, and Tallou — three of the four of Rouch's collaborators surviving Rouch's own death in 2004. Jørgensen (2007: 69) notes the overwhelming experience of love and respect granted Rouch by these men. Indeed, their willingness to cooperate with her regarding her exploration of Rouch, his filmmaking and collaborative relationships, was solely from honour for Rouch. Their relationship with Rouch spanned fifty years and Rouch himself attributes the making of his films to an ongoing *ethno-dialogue* between himself and these men, one which he considered a mutual process of creating knowledge through the modification of existing knowledge held individually by the filmmaker and collaborators. There is clear evidence in these relationships of the trust that comes from long term engagement and of respect, in the form of embracing another's view and knowledge of the world and the willingness to create new knowledge based on this. There is also evidence of ownership given the level of participation each of the collaborators had in the making and shaping of the films and the extension of this participation to represent themselves and the government of Niger at screenings of the films in various European locations. Despite this, only three of the corpus of sixty films made by Rouch and his collaborators are held in Niger (in the Institut de la Recherche en Sciences Humaines [IRSH]). This has meant that Damoure, Tallou and Moussa and the ethnic groups represented in the films are unable to access the vital cultural information recorded in these films. In fact, the latter part of Jørgensen's article (2007: 69) is dedicated to calling for concrete assistance in getting copies of the films to Niger and a request that anthropologists reflect on the way they disseminate their anthropological knowledge. It is at this point that Jørgensen's ideal of equality regarding the relationship between Rouch and his collaborators

disbands, and she raises questions concerning the rights and ownership of 'shared' knowledge between an anthropologist/filmmaker and the people with whom they work, are raised. As Jørgensen (2007: 70) says,

I had thus been thoroughly mistaken in my ethnocentric idealization of equality and in my reasoning that existing power relations are suspended in cases of dialogic cooperation. What I failed to recognise was that one cannot build up new relationships without taking existing differences into account.

Damouré also comments on the nature of the relationship between Rouch and his collaborators. Notably, Damouré's relationship with Rouch was Rouch's longest collaboration. His perspective highlights the nature of the inequality as one that is as Jørgensen (2007) says, not wrong, rather is a unique expression of a relationship between a European and African man during this period. Jørgensen came to see that '...No matter how thought-provoking this may seem to someone from the West, it has the obvious advantage that differences in status are neither taboo nor a hindrance to social life and cooperation.' (2007: 70). Despite this, the inequality is also reflective of this period and bears the marks of the extensive impact European colonialism had on African cultures, including the absence of rights to own and control the distribution of material of cultural significance. Damouré states;

No, it's not equality. We cannot be equal. Rouch is considered a father, a benefactor. It's rare to see a European come to this country - - and take care of a young man who has nothing. Who tries to help him find a profession. The Europeans stay in hotels, they stroll, they take photos... Rouch didn't do that. He took care of a poor fellow - - and made every effort to ensure that this young man succeeded in life. You see. He's different...He used all his resources to help me succeed. He didn't give money away just like that. To simply give money is a favor to no one. Rouch never did that. Instead he gave me the possibilities so I could manage in life. That really interests me about Jean Rouch.  
(*Friends, Fools, Family: Rouch's Collaborators in Niger* (2007), dir. Jørgensen and Madsen)

Jørgensen says that Rouch supported his colleagues as any father would. This father/son relationship mirrors the nature of ownership expressed in the relationships. It is one that is reflective of the existing power relations in these relationships and as mentioned, the historical context in which they were formed. It

is at this juncture when examining the tenet of ownership in Rouch's collaborative practice, that there is a split. While knowledge is clearly shared, that the films are not a 'shared product' points to the reinforcement of these existing power relations.

### **Dialogue and collaboration: the relationships behind the films of David MacDougall**

David MacDougall (1975) famously called for an ethnographic filmmaking practice more centred on the 'subjects' of the film and their voices, as opposed to what he then perceived as the distancing nature of the observational camera in the hands of the filmmaker.<sup>26</sup> Within the broad participatory approach, MacDougall and his wife and fellow filmmaker, Judith, chose to focus their films on what people were saying. The emphasis was placed on the dialogue happening between people in the film and sometimes between the filmmaker and those people. MacDougall referred this the *dialogic* approach. This approach is characterised as being 'intimate, direct, and exploratory' (Loizos, 1993: 93). This makes it both conversational and lyrical and is based on MacDougall's (1995) personal testimonial strategy that lies somewhere between the interview and storytelling. MacDougall comments that '...this is a conversation with the filmmaker, freed from the formality of the question-and-answer format. It can produce a different kind of volunteered information' (MacDougall 1995: 246).

The increase in the visibility of the people in the MacDougalls' films correlated with their active contribution to the content of the films they were involved in. This was particularly evident in the late 1970s/early 1980s in Australia where filmmakers including David and Judith MacDougall were commissioned by Aboriginal communities under the auspice of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies<sup>27</sup> to

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<sup>26</sup> I have discussed MacDougall's revision of his earlier stance against the observational approach in Chapter One. At this time, his call for a more participatory style of ethnographic filmmaking practice that demanded an increased presence and contribution from the 'subjects' of the film, signified a marked shift in the visibility of the people being filmed and their relationships with the anthropologists/filmmakers they were working with in the films being made of them.

<sup>27</sup> The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (later AIATSIS – the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) began in 1961 with an interim council and was established as a statutory authority in 1964. The Institute established a film unit in 1961 to act as an archive of filmed material and also to record material of ethnographic and historic significance. The Unit was disbanded in 1991. AIATSIS now houses over 5,000 video titles and 6.5 million feet of film. The increased levels of autonomy and participation experienced by Aboriginal people with regards to their capacity to control their visual representations were consolidated during this era and had a significant impact on the

make films about issues of importance to them. This period gave MacDougall the opportunity to incorporate these increasing levels of participation he had identified as critical. Both he and Judith realised this through employing key people from the communities in which they are filming to collaborate with editing and structuring the film. Thomas Woody Minipini features as the primary narrator in *Goodbye, Old Man* (1977) and works in partnership with MacDougall on the editing of the film. Geraldine Kawangka provides the voice-over narration for *The House Opening* (1980) where she guides the viewers through the re-opening of her marital house after her husband's death. In both these films, there is an overt display of the collaborative partnership established between these key people and the MacDougalls.



David MacDougall and Thomas Woody Minipini editing *Goodbye, Old Man* (1977) in Loizos (1993: 178).

In other films made by the MacDougalls, the evidence of their relationships with the people with whom they are working is less obvious. Regardless, there is always the salient experience of intimacy — the intimacy that comes from

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environment in which they identified and expressed themselves. This will be discussed in depth in Chapter Three.



filmmakers who develop the relationships with the people they are working with from the foundation of ensuring their voice predominantly directs and shapes the film. This shows up the acknowledgement by Chrissy Naponan in *Familiar Places* (1980) that David needs to be protected from the spirits. She reaches up and splashes his face with water while he is filming. The close proximity of his camera to her face as well as the smile on her face as she applies the water creates the palpable presence of their connection. Similarly, in a number of scenes from *Doon School Chronicles* (2000), we hear MacDougall's voice asking the boys questions to which they respond with the eagerness that comes with familiarity.

MacDougall sanctioned the value of establishing long term relationships with the people he was filming. He and Judith's early films in East Africa resulted from long term stays with the Jie of Uganda, the Boran and the Turkana of Kenya where they mastered the basics of the language and engaged the people in their films in what they defined as an 'informant-led' method of editing (Loizos 1993: 93). They considered the people they were filming the 'primary producers' of the film, people on whom they recognised their dependency in the making of their films (Loizos 1993: 92). The level of connection in this relationship extended to the point where the people being filmed became unconcerned with the camera on MacDougall's shoulder. This commitment on the part of MacDougall to the quality of his relationships with the people with whom he was working clearly resulted in the development of respect and trust. This was strengthened as he and Judith introduced measures to formalise the input and participation of the people they were working with such as those evident in *Goodbye, Old Man* (1977) and *The House Opening* (1980). This also resulted in increasing levels of ownership on the part of those people. Yet, as with Rouch, the relationships the MacDougalls formed, specifically during this period, were a product of this period, both in the positive sense with the increasing levels of Aboriginal autonomy and control over their representations, and in the negative sense with the continued absence of Aboriginal rights to ownership of these representations and capacity to direct the distribution of the films they were in.<sup>28</sup> These films are publically available for

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<sup>28</sup> I am specifically referring to the corpus of films made by David and Judith MacDougall under the AIAS scheme. Recent work of David MacDougall reflects his movement towards producing visual work that is grounded in an embodied observational approach that emphasizes aesthetics and an intimate access to peoples' lives as lived and experienced. This is evident in *Schoolscapes* (2007). His recent portrayal of Arnav Koshy in *Arnav at Six* (2014) has been considered auto-biographical.

purchase through the AIATSIS website and Ronin Films who are the distributors of the films made by the MacDougalls. The exception to this restriction on Aboriginal rights and ownership was the media they were beginning to make of and about themselves. What was distinct about this period in terms of Aboriginal ownership was that despite the increase in Aboriginal autonomy, this was generally minimal and left only a handful of Aboriginal people with the means to contribute to their self-determination through access to education, training and media equipment. As a result, only a small percentage of Aboriginal people identified themselves as possessing the capacity and power to influence the prevailing perceptions about their culture. The MacDougalls' films and the relationships that underpinned them were located in this environment and were also a product of it.

The core tenet of ownership is where different levels of collaboration can be delineated and a distinction drawn between the approaches characterised by a shared dialogue and those that reflect the complexities of forming relationships with and working with people who have their own agenda and claims over their representations. This is a critical line of demarcation and points more to MacDougall's (1998: 138) projection for ethnographic filmmaking as one involving multiple authorship leading to a form of intertextual cinema that incorporates the varied and sometimes conflicting views of reality held by all those involved in the making of the visual product. In this space, a product can be made that is unquestionably a result of the ideas of all players in the production. This is a mutual production. I have chosen to focus on the work of Jennifer Deger and her close working relationship with a number of her Yolgnu colleagues in Gapuwiyak, Northern Australia. Deger's work takes into full account the changing climate regarding the people who have been our/anthropologists' 'traditional subjects' and casts them in the environment we are all in now — one where the people with whom we work and research are demanding ownership of their representations, contributing from the empowered position of being equal owners, and independently making their own media. It is also an environment where we can no longer make images of Aboriginal people without their full partnership and permission. This is allowing for a completely distinct space in the making of ethnographic film, photographs and visual products.

The following section articulates the core tenets of respect, trust and ownership through the specific examination of the work of Deger and the relationships she establishes with her collaborators. Lassiter's (2008) process-based definition of collaboration provides a contemporary framework for highlighting the complexities of these relationships at each point in the collaborative process. As we will see in the articulation of Deger's process, contribution from each of the core people collaborating oscillates over time and in accordance with the nature of their contribution.

### **The Tenets of the Collaborative Process: Jennifer Deger, Paul Gurrumuruwuy, Fiona Yangathu and David McKenzie.**

I have chosen to draw on the work created by Jennifer Deger, Paul Gurrumuruwuy, Fiona Yangathu and David McKenzie to delineate the core tenets of respect, trust and ownership that underlie the collaborative process. Jennifer Deger in her work with the Yolgnu<sup>29</sup>, views collaboration as relationships based on respect — specifically respect of the social, spiritual, intellectual and cultural worlds of the people with whom she works. She sees 'shared ownership' as the foundation of collaborative practice. In the recent project she collaborated on to produce the *Christmas Birrimbirr Project* (2011), Deger worked closely with a video artist based in Darwin, David MacKenzie and two close Yolgnu friends and colleagues, Paul Gurrumuruwuy and Fiona Yangathu who developed the idea on which the project was originally based. Deger (2013) talks about the primary relationships in the following statement,

In the beginning we were four: two senior Yolgnu performers, a video artist and an anthropologist. Drawing on contemporary Aboriginal aesthetic and social values, we experimented in the spaces between ritual, visual art and ethnography. Our guiding principle was that our art had to work for Yolgnu audiences.

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<sup>29</sup> The Yolgnu people have been documented extensively in both written and visual mediums. The anthropologist Donald Thomson worked with the Yolgnu in the 1930s. His photograph of ten canoeists poling across the Arafura Swamp in 1936, became a point of discussion between filmmaker Rolf de Heer and Yolgnu actor, David Gulpilil. This discussion led to the making of *Ten Canoes* (2006), a film directed by de Heer and Peter Djigirr and the first film to be filmed entirely in Yolgnu Matha, the language group of the Yolgnu comprising twelve different dialects. Three versions of the film were made, one of which was a Yolgnu only version without subtitles (Ten Canoes Study Guide 2006).

Deger (2013) suggests that collaboration is layered and reflects different investments of cultural capital from the people involved. These investments vary depending on the skill set of the individual participating in the project and also increase or decrease at various points within the timeline of the project. With the *Christmas Birrimbirr Project* (2011), the basic shape and structure for the project was there at the start and was based on a 4 minute film taken by Deger of the family Christmas of her friend and primary contact for her PhD, Bangara. It was this film that spurred Paul Gurrumuruwuy and Fiona Yangathu's idea to develop a more extensive visual project based on the relationship between the *Wolma* (the thunder clouds that begin to develop in October that indicate the onset of the wet season) and Christmas as a time for the Yolgnu to mourn the passing of their relatives. Deger (2013) has written about this project from the perspective of collaboration and how four people with cultural, gender-based, experience and skill-based differences worked together on the project. The following comment from Gurrumuruwuy illustrates the dynamic interface of these relationships and how commonalities were forged based on respect and a willingness to appreciate what each brought to the project.

We don't push one person over the other. For example myself, my job is different to yours, and yours to mine and *Balang* different again. But everyone brings it into one. Like a nest and nursery, we've been nursing the plan. And that plan will grow into a *yindi* (big) strong project. That's how I see it from a Yolngu point of view... We bring different angles to it. We're all different corners and all those corners just fit in to make a table perfectly. Firm. I don't know how it happened but we're the right people, right *mulkurr* (mind), *ngayangu* (heart) and *djal* (motivation, desire). And we made it happen. (Deger 2013: 3)

Each of the people in the group bring different branches of knowledge based on the way they encounter the world. One perspective is not seen as more important than another, thus the project is able to develop on an equal foundation with each person's contribution seen as equally valid. Deger (2013) refers to these contributions as different forms of cultural capital, that is, everyone contributing their distinct knowledge to the project. The collaborative practice displayed in this project is a layered one, with each view point contributing to the whole. A poignant illustration of this is in a statement made by video artist, David MacKenzie,

Yes but that's all he (Paul Gurrumuruwuy) can do, because that's who he is and what he knows. I don't claim to know the ancestral force that he's referring to, but I do claim to feel it. And I think that's enough. So Paul doesn't have an understanding of cinematic structure the way I might. Or the way you might. But that doesn't matter because we found a common ground where all the elements can work together. And they will with different audiences have different meanings. (MacKenzie in Deger 2013: 6)

This approach creates a foundation for the way both the relationships develop during the project and endure beyond it, how the products that result from the project, develop, and how these products are received. As Deger (pers. comm. 2013) suggests, 'Proper collaboration can be seen (is palpable) in the film itself.' This ongoing negotiation yet respect of each other's differences augments a unique process of discovery and coming together of different types of knowledge versus a hierarchy of knowledge.<sup>30</sup>

The production of the *Christmas Birrimbirr Project* (2011) as a visual production is composed of three films projected onto three screens, a traditional documentary, *Manapanmirr, in Christmas Spirit* and a three hour video of footage compiled purposely for Gurrumuruwuy to give to family members. The choice to create three different visual products of the same subject matter demonstrated the intention of the group to find a visual format that would represent the melding of the different perspectives they brought to the interpretation of the subject matter. It also demonstrated the visual outcome of a project that was shaped by the interests of the group. As a result, there was a *body of material* rather than a single product. It was also intended that the three-screen format be a medium that would communicate to a Yolgnu audience. Deger (2006) strongly believes in the existence of a Yolgnu aesthetic that she suggests derives from the way the Yolgnu encounter the world — the three-screen approach is a format that comes the closest to approximating this Yolgnu aesthetic.

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<sup>30</sup> The value of this polyphonic contribution to knowledge evident in projects based on collaboration is further substantiated by Fleuhr-Lobban (2008: 175), who suggests that "...not only is collaborative research ethical, and thus morally preferable to historical models of research, but it is better research because its methodology emphasizes multiple, polyphonic perspectives, which will leave a richer heritage of ethnography to subsequent generations of ethically conscious researchers." Fleuhr-Lobban extends this to suggest that better theory will be developed from collaborative research.

Identifying the tenets of the approach taken by Deger and her colleagues in the formation and maintenance of their relationships in the *Christmas Birrimbirr Project* (2011), is important for deepening the discussion regarding collaboration and identifying Deger's approach as reflective of a relationship-focussed analysis of collaboration and the collaborative process in visual anthropological practice.<sup>31</sup> I want to stress that the following tenets are not prescriptive, but represent a starting point in exploring this expression of the collaborative process in action.

## **Respect**

Yolngu and Balanda, we have very different cultures. But through feelings we can be connected. (Deger 2013: 8)

This was a commentary from Gurrumuwy regarding the documentary version of the project. Feelings are what he considers the connecting point between the different people working on the project and underpin the development of *respect*. Feelings are the foundation for the establishment of respect between people and allow for their differences to be negotiated throughout the project. Deger expresses Gurrumuwy's notion of feelings in her own idiom in referring to it as 'resonance'.

Deger (pers. comm. 2013) proposes that resonance is founded in creating a respect for the lives and worldview of the people involved in the collaborative process. Respecting their lives and worldview is the means by which to understand them. The Yolgnu have their own demands and breadth of responsibilities that differ from those of Deger's and those of the video artist, David MacKenzie. It is only through a commitment to respect that these demands can be understood and negotiated. This commitment to respect has ensured that Deger always seeks permission from the people she is working with (Yolgnu and non-Yolgnu alike) regarding the screening and distribution of the visual products that derived from the collaboration. This has been one of the many practices that has contributed to a foundation of trust between the collaborators. This is critical to the maintenance of these relationships as well as the realisation of the project. Deger as the one who has the means and capacity to organise distribution, necessarily

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<sup>31</sup> Please note that Deger (2013) would not necessarily define the *Christmas Birrimbirr Project* (2011) as visual anthropology. It exists at the nexus between visual anthropology and art practice and is therefore between both worlds.

seeks their alignment, as this is not Deger's project, it is a product of the group and the individuals who make up that group. Trust as one of the tenets I have identified as instrumental in the collaborative process will be explored below in greater depth.

### **Shared ownership**

The foundation of shared knowledge where different types of knowledge from members of the group are viewed as equal, created a condition in the *Christmas Birrimbirr Project* (2011) for the sharing of other aspects of the project. This allowed for the products that derived from the project to be mutually shared and owned. This was legally grounded in Gurrumuway and Yangathu along with Deger being co-founders of Miyarrka Media (2013a: 356) which established a level of legality and formality to their collaborative partnership.

The development of shared ownership was underpinned by practices such as those already discussed (for example, Deger seeking permission from the group for the distribution or screening of visual products derived from the project). It also derives from the existing investments of cultural capital made by each member of the group. Paul and Fiona invested their ideas and vision into the project. David MacKenzie invested his filmmaking skills and Deger invested her access to the *Balanda* world and capacity to distribute the products from the project. A unique expression of ownership of the project and rights to the visual products stemmed from the view that each of these investments was of equal value and contribution to the project. Equally, the products that stemmed from this collaboration were designed to address the different audiences that would view them. The material that was of greatest cultural value to the Yolgnu was the 3 hour video of footage given to them for their use and record. The Three Screens installation best reflected a Yolgnu aesthetic and gave Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences the opportunity to embrace this aesthetic in a gallery space. The documentary, *Manapanmirr, in Christmas Spirit*, made with a traditional linear narrative, was designed to reach academic and film audiences. Within the project, every member of the group contributed to and produced visual products that addressed both their own needs and those of a wider audience. In a similar, though not parallel manner, the visual products that came from my collaboration with Aunty Ellen and a

number of other Ngarrindjeri elders also represent a *body of materials* that have been shaped by the collaborative process. These visual products fulfill different needs and are being used to reach different audiences. They include the still images from the Reburial of the skeletal remains of Ngarrindjeri old people, the broadcast quality film for public distribution and the teaching film that I filmed solely for Aunty Ellen and her commitment to have a visual recording of the weaving process and practice. These products and their relationship to my own collaborative process will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters Four and Five.

Within this contemporary context of collaboration, it is evident from the examples from both my project and that of Deger's — that ownership extends beyond the more simplistic understanding of it as seeking the permission from those with whom you work to include or exclude material, or who can or cannot view the film. This is in fact, a space of 'shared ownership' that derives from people working together and negotiating their different contributions, knowledge and status. This is not simply about who owns the material and who does not, this is a form of ownership that rests on each collaborator having rights over the material. It is a distinctive space and one that differs from previous demonstrations of ownership in ethnographic filmmaking practice. I will articulate how my project reflected and differed from previous expressions of ownership in ethnographic filmmaking practice including the model demonstrated by Deger in Chapter Five.

## **Trust**

The outcomes of the trust built between the various members of the *Christmas Birrimbirr Project* (2011) group are palpable in this project, specifically with the Yolgnu members, Paul Gurrumurwuy and Fiona Yangathu. It is primarily this trust that has resulted in the Yolgnu people involved in the project being empowered as they are left viewing themselves as instrumental to the success of the project. This critical element has been absent in the accounts of collaboration that I have discussed previously. Trust results in participation which as Deger suggests, then brings meaning and joy. 'If the Yolgnu are into it, they turn up' (pers. comm. 2013). It is important to note that the strength of the relationships and the foundation that gets built also ensures resilience with regard to the maintenance of the project. The death of Fiona Yangathu had the potential to halt further engagement in the



project, yet the strength of the collaborative relationships between the group members ensured the continued distribution and display of both the three screens installation and *Manapanmirr, in Christmas Spirit*, the documentary.

The involvement, ownership and participation from all of the collaborators has also inspired ongoing creativity. Trust between people working together for a mutual end creates a solid foundation. This foundation creates a space where creativity can be fostered, both individually and collectively. Deger (pers. comm. 2013) commented that this foundation of trust has enabled her own creativity and contribution to the project.

The core tenets of trust, respect and shared ownership that are expressed in the approach taken by Deger, Gurrumuruwuy, Yangathu and McKenzie in the *Christmas Birrimbirr Project* (2011), represent the foundation of a collaborative practice that reflects and embraces the vicissitudes of contemporary relationships between anthropologists and filmmakers and the people with whom they work. The resulting visual products appropriately represent the outcomes of this form of collaboration and address the needs of each of those involved in the project.

In the contemporary era of Anthropology's 'traditional subjects' demanding their own rights and access to their representations, the rights and ownership these people have to the products they have contributed to making, has necessarily had to change. Thus, shared knowledge and shared processes in the making of the film, have now extended to equal rights in the ownership and distribution of and contribution to the success of the product. As is the case with the *Christmas Birrimbirr Project* (2011), distribution was contingent on the agreement of the four collaborators, not solely Deger. Thus when articulating a framework for collaboration in ethnographic filmmaking practice, the tenets of trust, respect and ownership in the relationships between anthropologist/filmmaker and the people with whom they work, are defined in accordance with this contemporary era and in honour of the rights and world view of the people with whom we work.

## Summary

This chapter has articulated a framework for the analysis of the collaborative process in ethnographic filmmaking practice as examined from the perspective of the relationships formed during this process. I have explored the work of both Jean Rouch and David MacDougall by retrospectively applying this framework and examining the presence of trust, respect and ownership in the relationships they formed with the people with whom they worked. It became clear from this analysis, that the collaborative partnerships that developed as a result of both Rouch and MacDougall's commitment to their films being a shared space in which knowledge, ideas and advice could be exchanged, were unique. The expression of collaboration in Rouch and MacDougall's filmmaking practice was revolutionary within the period they were working, but was also a product of this period. There were levels of ownership that were reflective of the status and position of the people with whom they were working at that time, however, these did not encapsulate the full possibility of a 'shared' ownership. In exploring the work of Miyarrka Media in the *Christmas Birrimbirr Project* (2011), the expression of 'shared' ownership is realized through the changes, conflicts, differing perspectives, skills and communication between Paul Gurrumuruwuy, Fiona Yangathu, Jennifer Deger and David MacKenzie. The collaborative process in this *body of materials* shapes the type and form of the visual products that emerge from this project. It is also an expression of collaboration that honours the current status and position of Aboriginal people in a contemporary environment where they are reclaiming their right to control their own representations.

The following chapter charts a history of the key ways in which Aboriginal people have been represented as 'anthropological subjects' in film and photography. This chapter serves to establish two important points with regards to these representations and the environment in which Aboriginal people were being represented. Firstly, that the environment in which Aboriginal people situate and identify themselves is correlated with the collaborative partnerships they form with anthropologist/filmmakers, and secondly, that the level of intimacy in these partnerships is visible in these representations and influential in the way they are responded to by the viewer.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### Film, Anthropology and Aboriginal People – legacies of the past, relationships, representations, and collaboration

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#### Prologue

My perception regarding how Aboriginal people could be represented and, indeed, how they represented themselves altered in the viewing of Tracey Moffat's *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987) in the mid 1990s. The inversion of the traditional stereotype of Aboriginal people as inferior, powerless and primitive in Moffat's short, provocative film about two Aboriginal women out on the town in inner city Sydney, left me simultaneously shocked and changed my point of view. I confronted my patronising 'white fella' attitude and high-toned morality cloaked as *empathetic*. This, I saw, only served to maintain distance. I saw in this brief 17 minutes, a world that I had previously never accessed. This was a world that visibly displayed the condition of systemic discrimination against Aboriginal people since White settlement. It was also a world where Aboriginal people found ways to express their power. For this reason, *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987) remained on the list of films I showed in the various ethnographic film and visual anthropology courses I taught over a period of five years. It provoked and challenged mainstream perceptions and I wanted my students to be challenged in this way.

Moffat's portrayal of the power relations between the white 'King' and the Aboriginal women can be seen as a repeating metaphor for a particular expression of power by Aboriginal people in their relationship with institutions that are managed by white people. I encountered this in the building of my own relationships. While I found this confronting, it also revealed a specific process that consistently results in the institution or the Aboriginal people involved, achieving the outcomes they originally set out to achieve.<sup>32</sup> I will discuss how this was played out in the building of relationships with my Ngarrindjeri colleagues later in this chapter. In the period in which *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987) was made, the

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<sup>32</sup> This specifically relates to the making of my first film, which remains unfinished.

environment was one where an increasing number of Aboriginal people were making claims to their own representations. The films funded by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS)<sup>33</sup> in the 1970s/early 1980s, contributed to this environment, and can be seen as a positive movement in Aboriginal people claiming control over their representations and a critical step in establishing a foundation for increasing power and autonomy. While this funding and the films that resulted from it represented a significant step towards Aboriginal people being able to determine their own representations, the same institutional structures at the heart of the systemic discrimination and alienation of Aboriginal people also underpinned the AIAS project.

## **Introduction**

This chapter charts the establishment of relationships between Aboriginal people and anthropologists/filmmakers from the early stages of anthropology through to later periods where there were significant shifts in the relationships with and representation of Aboriginal people in visual media. It does not aim to provide a complete listing or overview of all photographic and film projects, but instead highlights key projects and changes in the manner in which Aboriginal people were identifying themselves and the relationships they had with anthropologists and/or filmmakers. I initially focus on the relationships established by Walter Baldwin-Spencer and Frank Gillen with the Aranda people prior to and during their 1901 and 1911 expeditions to Central Australia and the Gulf of Carpentaria. This is followed by an examination of the relationships between anthropological filmmakers and Aboriginal people during the 1970s and early 1980s, when the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS) funded a large number of films made at the request of various Aboriginal communities. This period of high film production and the establishment of a number of significant relationships between the filmmakers and Aboriginal people and communities represented the beginning of an era where Aboriginal people began to request control over their representations and in many cases, began to make their own media. However, rights and ownership in representation continued to remain an issue.

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<sup>33</sup> The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (later AIATSIS – the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) was established as a statutory authority in 1964, though it was formed with an interim council in 1961. The Institute established a film unit in 1961 to act as an archive for filmed material and also to record material of ethnographic and historic significance. The period of high production in the 1970s/80s will be discussed later in this chapter.

These relationships will be analysed by applying the framework for collaboration in ethnographic filmmaking practice I articulated in Chapter Two. I will also be demonstrating that a link exists between the nature of the collaborative relationship and the manner in which the person being filmed/photographed represents themselves in the image.

### **The Retrospective application of Trust, Respect and Ownership to key collaborative relationships between Aboriginal people and anthropologist/filmmakers**

I have based my discussion and analysis of collaboration on the presence of a series of broad criteria that are identifiable in the relationships formed between the filmmakers/anthropologists and the people being filmed. I acknowledge both the breadth and fluidity of these criteria and in no way consider these prescriptive. They do, however, create lenses through which relationships, both past and present, can be viewed, analysed and also distinguished from one another. They also create a starting point to examine the significant changes in how the people in front of the camera are now requesting ownership and reciprocal rights regards the films being made. Respect, trust and ownership were developed as criteria through an examination of Jennifer Deger's (2013) analysis of the relationships that constituted the making of the *Christmas Birrimbirr Project* (2011). While Deger does not articulate these as criteria as I have, they underpin much of her discussion about collaboration in the *Christmas Birrimbirr Project* (2011). The presence of these criteria in her relationships was reinforced further in an interview I conducted with her about her work and relationships with the Yolgnu people with whom she works. Both her written analysis and verbal commentary contributed to my articulation of these criteria in Chapter Two.

My choice to focus on Deger's work and relationships in no way precludes discussion about those ethnographic filmmakers that have preceded her and I retrospectively applied these criteria to the work of Jean Rouch and David MacDougall in Chapter Two. This revealed some important distinctions between

their work and that of Deger's, specifically with regards to ownership.<sup>34</sup> This chapter provides a broad overview of how Aboriginal people have been represented visually by anthropologists/filmmakers and the environment in which they have identified themselves and from which these representations have come. I examine the nature of the relationships that led to these representations within the framework for collaborative relationships that I articulated in Chapter Two. This highlights critical changes in the environment and the way in which Aboriginal people were being represented. This examination will run in tandem with a discussion of the increasing presence of Aboriginal autonomy in controlling their own representations and how this has impacted the relationships they established with anthropologist/filmmakers. This will be explored through a discussion of the AIAS era where the Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies (now AIATSIS – the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) provided funding for Aboriginal communities to work with filmmakers to make films on matters of importance to them. This exploration happens in conjunction with a discussion of the era beyond AIAS funding of self-representation projects and the increasing numbers of Aboriginal people demanding rights over their representations. This will shed light on the significant changes in the environment with respect to Aboriginal peoples' relationship to themselves as co-contributors and even principle controllers of the content of the films in which they feature. These changes are critical in any discussion regarding collaboration, because they reflect the shifts that no longer render the anthropologist/filmmakers as sole producers with principle rights to the content of any visual product involving Aboriginal people. While I am placing a lot of emphasis on this shift in Aboriginal peoples' relationship to themselves and the increase in their autonomy, it is also important to note that the rise in Aboriginal autonomy and ownership remains firmly entrenched within a paradigm that continues to reinforce division between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Australia. This is reinforced in the behaviour of some Aboriginal people to the domination of non-Aboriginal institutions and government. I will be discussing this with regards to my own experience in the making of my initial film in Chapter Four.

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<sup>34</sup> I identified 'shared ownership' as an expression of ownership that distinguishes Deger's collaborative approach from that of other anthropologist/filmmakers, specifically Rouch and MacDougall in Chapter Two. I discuss how ownership is expressed through my collaborative process and how this differs from Deger's given our work with two distinct Aboriginal communities in Chapter Five.

It is also important to note that while anthropologist/filmmakers may actively be addressing issues of ownership, co-contribution and collaboration in their relationships with their Aboriginal collaborators, people from different disciplines and modes of practice continue to seek out engagement with Aboriginal people with no intention to collaborate or reciprocate in the relationship. For example, within my fieldwork period, two French installation photographers set up photographic shoots with Aunty Ellen and her sister-in-law, Rita Lindsay.<sup>35</sup> Neither Aunty Ellen nor Aunty Rita received a copy of the book in which they are published or any form of return for their time since the photographs were taken. This demonstrates the vulnerability of Aboriginal people to exploitation despite significant shifts in their autonomy and control over their representations. A parallel can be made here with Sam Pack's work with villagers in Vietnam, who, as he said, were, 'as ethnic minorities... powerless to resist the intrusion [of government filmmakers] into their lives" (2013: 216). Pack trained the villagers to use visual recording technology so they as he says can, 'articulate *their* (my emphasis) present and future' (2013: 216).<sup>36</sup>

### **Spencer, Gillen and the Aranda people: early expressions of collaboration, visual excesses and intimacy in early representations of Aboriginal people**

The first of these relationships to be explored within the framework articulated for collaboration in ethnographic filmmaking practice are those that were developed between Walter Baldwin Spencer, the late nineteenth century biologist and early anthropologist, his friend and colleague, the Alice Springs Telegraph Stationmaster, Frank Gillen, and the Aranda people of Central Australia. Within the framework provided, it is clear that these relationships were at some level, collaborative. There is evidence of respect and trust being established in the initial relationships Frank Gillen formed with a number of Aranda people. This subsequently provided the foundation for Spencer and Gillen to conduct their

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<sup>35</sup> There are a number of short segments of the photographers and the installation they constructed in the first of two films I made with Aunty Ellen, *Stitch by Stitch* (2017).

<sup>36</sup> Pack (2013) proposes this form of collaboration where marginalised people are trained to use visual recording equipment so they can make their own representations as a model for ethnographic filmmaking. While a valuable model, it is not necessarily relevant for all groups and indeed for some, as with my Ngarrindjeri colleagues, there isn't the time nor desire to learn these skills. It points to the multiplicity of needs and intentions and knowledge that come from engaging with the people with whom we work as owners and co-contributors.

research. It was, however, Gillen's fluency in the Aranda language that reinforced and sustained these relationships. The long term impact this establishment of trust and respect had on the representations of the Aranda people will be discussed later in this section. While Spencer and Gillen's relationships with the Aranda people displayed evidence of respect and trust, the critical components of ownership and rights were absent, and this particularly showed up in which images were selected for academic and public consumption, and how they were disseminated.

Spencer and Gillen documented the Aranda people extensively in photographs, film, sound recordings and the written word over a period of eight years. The relationship between them clearly links these early forms of collaboration with the visual products that resulted from these relationships. This section demonstrates the connection between the level of intimacy, trust and respect in the relationship and the type of visual product that is produced from those encounters.<sup>37</sup>

The relationships between Walter Baldwin Spencer, Frank Gillen and the Aranda people were to some degree uncommon in the level of depth and inclusiveness they displayed.<sup>38</sup> There was a connection formed that extended beyond the simple documentation of physical characteristics and cultural practices. This exploration of Spencer and Gillen's work will provide evidence for this depth of relationship. It will more importantly demonstrate that the display of intimacy and humanity in many of the visual products of Spencer and Gillen's relationships with the Aranda people reflects long term deep associations; that indeed, the nature of such relationships directly influences the manner in which subjects were represented on both still and moving film.<sup>39</sup> Thus, despite the narrowing constraints of the prevailing survivalist agenda in the positioning of Aboriginal people, the influence of genuine connection brought about a more varied and humanitarian portrayal that provided a holistic access into the lives of the Aranda people as lived and

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<sup>37</sup> I have specifically used 'encounters' rather than 'encounter' here as Spencer and Gillen's photographic and filmic documentation of the Aranda people (as I mention later), was the result of numerous encounters rather than a single encounter.

<sup>38</sup> This is not to single out Spencer and Gillen's relationships as one of a kind. Even in this early period dominated by *Evolutionism* and 'survivalist' Anthropology, anthropologists formed relationships with their subjects that extended well beyond the prescriptive nature of their research agendas.

<sup>39</sup> This argument is based on the idea proposed by McIntyre and McKenzie (1992), that the degree of emotional distance between the anthropologist and subject could be equated with the physical distance between the lens and the subject. Thus, extended physical distance = emotional disconnection.



experienced. This early form of collaboration demonstrated that despite a restrictive theoretical paradigm where constraints were enforced on the way people could be represented, the relationships that Spencer and Gillen formed with the Aranda people transcended these prescriptions, such that their images (both moving and still) captured the expressions, gestures, and 'everydayness' of those they photographed. The range and volume of the expressions displayed in Spencer and Gillen's early images is evidence for a constant series of encounters between them and the Aranda people.

In addition to establishing the link between the relationship Spencer and Gillen had with the Aranda people and the way in which they represented them visually, my analysis will also draw on alternative ways of understanding and interpreting visual images that move beyond existing theories of representation.<sup>40</sup> These provide a framework for linking the connection between collaborative relationships and the types of images produced by Spencer and Gillen. Poole (2005: 159) argues that visual images have levels of 'presence, uncertainty and contingency' that make possible the range of expressions displayed by subjects and other ways for them to be photographed. The indeterminacy of visual images means that information is often captured that the person taking the image did not necessarily want or predict. Barthes (1977) referred to this unintended information as a *third meaning* in photographic images whereby information is recorded that was neither noticed at the time of taking the image nor intended by the photographer. In the case of early anthropology, a smiling face, direct eye contact or a quirky gesture, were considered 'visual excesses' (Poole 2005: 164). This was information that represented the *encounter* with the anthropologist or a result of a deep relationship established as a result of numerous encounters. Such information was considered unnecessary within the parameters of the 'survivalist' anthropological agenda that framed early anthropology and visual practice. The unpredictability of the visual medium was perceived as a threat to displaying the evidence needed to support

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<sup>40</sup> Popular theories of representation placed the indigenous person or people represented within a paradigm that reinforced the binary opposition between oppressor and oppressed and the hegemonic enforcement of power by colonialist nations on their colonized subjects. Within this paradigm, categories such as the 'noble savage' (see Edwards 1992) and Tobing-Rony's (1996) idea of the 'ethnographic spectacle' were popular models by which to define the indigenous people being represented. Poole's (2005) alternative approach to interpreting photographic images creates a less fixed interpretation of the representation made of indigenous people and allows for the exploration of the relationships behind the making of the representation rather than basing the interpretation solely on the influence of external forces.

this agenda. Poole (2005) argues, however, that photographs can be read as documents of encounter as much as they can be read as records of data supporting the scientific project. 'Encounter contained within it the spectre of communication, exchange and presence – all factors that challenged the ethnographic claims to objectivity' (Poole 2005: 166). It also created access to the less quantifiable world of human cultural expression that provided a more holistic picture of the cultural milieu being represented.

This analysis will demonstrate that in the hands of many anthropologists, the anthropological project has extended beyond the anthropological agenda of the time, to 'document' and record culturally specific information that encompasses the world of relationships, communication, connection and the less quantifiable elements of cultural knowledge and expression, such as gesture, expression, and nuance. This world is visible in the images of Spencer and Gillen. These images are products of the immediate temporality of the visual image and the repeated series of encounters between the Aranda people, Spencer and Gillen. While many were not displayed in the public and scientific domains in the era they were taken, they have found their way to visibility in recent decades through the work of scholars such as Batty (2005) and Jones (2005, 2011).

### **The nature of the relationship between Spencer, Gillen and the Aranda people: early forms of collaboration**

There is no question that, as a result of the long term connections between Spencer, Gillen and the Aranda people developed both prior to and during the eight year research period they undertook together, relationships were formed that extended beyond collecting data for a survivalist anthropological agenda. Batty (2005) proposed that Spencer and Gillen, like all social researchers, had divided or dualistic relationships with their Aboriginal subjects. These relationships displayed a mixture of empathy and cold pragmatism, and, for the most part, these two aspects were kept separate, at least while conducting research in the field.

The cold pragmatism came from a commitment to the prevailing survivalist agenda that was underpinned by a belief that the Aboriginal people they were studying would ultimately die out. Batty (2005) posited that Spencer and Gillen viewed

Aboriginal culture as an anthropological quarry from which they were determined to extract as much as possible. Evidence for this was the extensive amount of documentation collected during their expeditions.

The relationship built by Spencer and Gillen with the Aranda people was established on the foundation of an already existing relationship between Gillen and the Aranda people. In his role as the Telegraph Stationmaster at Charlotte Waters and later at Alice Springs, Gillen forged an allegiance between himself and the Aranda people (Jones 2011: 5). As mentioned previously, he was fluent in the Aranda language and had also arrested and charged a police officer with the murder of Aboriginal people. Gillen was entrusted with significant ceremonial knowledge as a result of his commitment to the rights of Aboriginal groups in his area. The establishment of trust in this relationship was significant and formed the foundation for the relationships between the Aranda people, himself and Spencer. This was at both research-based and personal levels. Like his Canadian counterpart, George Hunt, who had a similar grasp of the Kwakiutl language and culture, this foundation of trust was displayed in the subjects' responsiveness to Gillen as a photographer.<sup>41</sup> Evidence of this relationship in the images he made will be discussed below.

Having said that a clear division existed between the research-based and personal relationships with the Aranda people, there were occasions where this division became blurred. Batty (2005: 126) noted, 'the line dividing their scientific project from their close engagement with Aboriginals sometimes grew indistinct, especially during intensive encounters in the field.' An example was Gillen assuming the role of a sorcerer while studying the *Warumungu*. Batty (2005) says Gillen dropped his scientific objectivity and took up the role of an accomplished sorcerer. Gillen's actions were naturally in service of capturing a complete photographic and filmic series of the *Warumungu* mortuary ceremonies. Nevertheless, this could not have been done without Gillen's extensive knowledge and connection with the Aranda people. These moments where the boundaries become blurred revealed the deeper levels of relatedness established between Gillen, Spencer and the Aranda people. The blurring of boundaries speaks to both

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<sup>41</sup> See Jacknis (1992) on the correlation between the images taken by George Hunt and his close relationship with the Kwakiutl.

the lack of distance between the subjects and anthropologist/photographer, and the level of intimacy and trust. This indicates that even when the relationship is established on the foundation of a research agenda, there is the flexibility to draw on the intimacy and trust established through the personal connection in the relationship. The result is that 'scientific' images are underpinned by the familiarity and intimacy that underlies their production. The familiarity and ease with which the subject in front of the camera responded could be found in Gillen's images particularly. Jones (2011: 18) commented that the sense of confrontation often imbuing frontier photography of the 'other' was largely absent in Gillen's photography.<sup>42</sup> Evidence of this closer, less formal engagement with his photographic subjects became more pronounced in his later work (Jones 2011). This level of informality was notably distinct from the impersonal portraits that stemmed from Huxley's (in Jones 2011: 8) call for a systematic record of Queen Victoria's native subjects, and Jones (2011: 13) comments that 'his portraits provide the first humane, engaged images of the Arrernte (Aranda) as individuals'. The photograph below is illustrative of the informality, level of engagement and humanity discussed above. Taken during the period 1894-1898, it is not clear whether Gillen or Spencer took this image, but it is a product of their collaboration and Gillen's long-term connection with the Aranda people.

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<sup>42</sup> It is important to note that the photographs of Gillen referred to by Jones were not selected for public and academic display specifically because of what Poole (2005) refers to as their 'visual excesses' or overt display of connection with Gillen. Poole's ideas will be explored in the discussion following this.



Two Arrente women with a baby, Alice Springs (1895), F.Gillen & W. Baldwin Spencer in Batty, Allen & Morton (2005)

Gillen, Spencer and other early anthropologists failed to take into account what Poole (2005) refers to as the troubling spectre of intimacy in their photographic and filmic work. Poole (2005: 159) argues that visual images have levels of 'presence, uncertainty and contingency.' These make visible types of human expression that display the relationship and connection between the person photographing and those being photographed. These expressions are not intended by the photographer and nor do they fit within their scientific agenda. The smiling facial expression or direct eye contact between the subject and anthropologist behind the camera was a disconcerting discovery for anthropologists when the images were printed. These details were understood as 'visual excesses' by anthropologists, which rendered photography in their eyes an unpredictable medium for meeting the criteria of their totalising project. Poole (2005: 164-166) notes that many early anthropologists controlled this uncertainty by enforcing stricter and stricter parameters on the content of the images and the way subjects were photographed. Huxley's anthropometric method saw subjects photographed against a grid that was designed to accurately measure the physical

features of the subject. It was also documented that Haddon had subjects re-enact myths so that he could be assured of recording them accurately (in Poole: 2005). Therefore, both methods necessitated a different temporality than that evident when the camera was used as a spontaneous recording device.

The concept of the image being unpredictable is not new and has been raised by other theorists.<sup>43</sup> This again reinforces Barthes (1977) concept of the 'third meaning' in visual images mentioned earlier in this chapter. The third meaning is located in the unexpected visibility of a part of the image that was not visible to the eye when the image was taken. The information contained in the material that was previously invisible alters the meaning of the image as a whole and is unexpected by the person taking the image.

The visibility of the third meaning in the actual image is directly connected to the way the eye sees. The eye only sees a small focused portion of the scene it is viewing — the peripheral vision is out of focus and therefore not immediately detectable. The camera on the other hand takes in the entire scene and captures it in focus (this is dependent on the size of the aperture which determines the focal range). This explains why the photographic image displays more than originally seen by the eye when the scene was first viewed, and accounts for the 'extraneous' information, that is, the 'visual excesses' that anthropologists found frustrating (Poole 2005). An unseen gesture or smile or the presence of objects that find themselves in the frame, disrupt the intention of the anthropologist when first shooting the image.

The emergence of the third meaning is not restricted to the still image. It is also apparent in moving images. Footage of a ceremony taken by Spencer during the 1901 expedition to Central Australia and the Gulf of Carpentaria showed not only the performers, but also their dogs moving in and out of the frame.<sup>44</sup> Those observing the ceremony quickly removed the dogs. This gave the recording a comical and human edge, and an immediacy that only moving film could capture.

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<sup>43</sup> Other than the perspectives provided by Poole (2005) and Barthes (1977) on the unpredictability of the image, MacDougall (1998: 263) has also spoken extensively of the capacity of the visual image to show up the indeterminacy of the empiricist anthropological agenda.

<sup>44</sup> This was a result of the camera being fixed on top of the tripod that rendered it unable to move when the subjects moved.

Visual images are therefore an extensive resource for conveying features of culture that are not immediately evident and, therefore, often not recordable through written description. They also provide access to the immediate or 'in the moment' temporal realm that Judith MacDougall (1996) suggests best approximates the experience of 'being there' in the field. This immediate or 'in the moment' temporal realm enables the documentation of that spontaneous human gesture or expression. In this realm, the camera moves beyond recording the content that defines culture to convey the relationships behind and in front of the camera to the audience.

### **The absence of ownership and rights in early forms of collaboration**

Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen's relationship with the Aranda people was unquestionably the product of *many encounters* over a significant length of time. This led to a level of engagement that could be defined as an early form of collaboration. While not wanting to conflate this with any notion that Spencer and Gillen had established a relationship of equality with the Aranda people, there was a level of intimacy, trust and respect that revealed information well beyond the data required to meet the criteria of a prescriptive scientific agenda. This information created a more holistic portrayal of the nuances of daily life as lived and experienced by the Aranda people. This relationship coupled with the immediacy and 'communication, exchange and presence' (Poole 2005) of the visual image, meant that the nature of this relationship could be communicated with detail and depth in a way that directly impacted the viewer. It is not surprising then, that Gillen's letters to Spencer document a number of Aranda people expressing feelings of being 'immensely pleased' and 'flattered' with the photographs (Morton 2005: xiv). Many also requested copies of the photographs to be stored with sacred objects relating to the ceremonies being documented (Jones 2011: 10). This pointed to the value attributed the photographs by the Aranda people as evidenced by the use of the images in their daily and ceremonial lives.

Spencer and Gillen clearly made images that resonated with the Aranda people at the time of their taking and in the century since. The majority of the images were taken and displayed for the purposes of reinforcing the survivalist paradigm. The

extensive documentation of ceremonies and rituals were principally data gathering exercises in service of a 'near extinct' people. As Morton (2005: xiv) comments, 'it would be too simplistic to read back to the past and merely say that contemporary Aboriginal people owe Spencer and Gillen a debt, for theirs was not a heroic legacy in these terms.' It was as, Morton and Batty (2005: xiv & 124-7) suggest, 'an opening up...' to '...a more informed and appreciative understanding of Aboriginal people that was largely unintended.'

In viewing these images and reading Gillen and Spencer's relationship with the Aranda people, the danger is that the 'closeness' of this relationship could be associated with ideas of equality and rights, particularly with respect to the ownership of their images. It was clear from Gillen's correspondence to Spencer that the Aranda people understood that Gillen was making visual documents of their ceremonies (Jones 2011: 9). In December 1895, Gillen wrote,

[The] Udnirringeeta *betheren* just arrived, inform me that they are prepared to allow me to photograph a Corroboree this afternoon in return for a blow out of flour, tea and sugar. (in Jones 2011: 9)

Jones (2011: 10) goes on to suggest that the Aranda took Gillen's photography seriously as displayed by their willingness to engage in his requests and adjust their performances to fit with the limitations of his camera. Gillen also projected lantern-slides of his images outside the Alice Springs telegraph station so that the Aranda people could review the images made of them. Yet even though Spencer and Gillen gifted some of their images to their Aranda informants, the Aranda did not have any form of ownership in the way they were represented nor how these images were distributed. As Morton (2005: xiv) suggests, 'Rights in the images once rested solely with Spencer and Gillen themselves, together with their publishers; and the images were widely disseminated completely without regard to the views of the photographic subjects and their families.' With respect to defining the relationship between Spencer, Gillen and the Aranda people as an early form of collaboration, the tenets of trust, respect and partnership in the relationships between Spencer, Gillen and their Aboriginal subjects definitely indicate this. The absence of ownership, however, is reflective of the environment in which Aboriginal people were situated, and popular and scientific perceptions of their inferior status in the socio-evolutionary hierarchy. The overarching dominance of



the scientific project reinforced the social hierarchy in the relationships between Spencer, Gillen and their subjects.<sup>45</sup> The use, display and distribution of their images of the Aranda people and other Aboriginal subjects demonstrated this dominant positioning.

### **The AIAS era and beyond: Aboriginal autonomy, independence and freedom of expression in film**

This section identifies the significant shifts in the relationships Aboriginal people formed with anthropologist/filmmakers and charts the rise in Aboriginal self-determination and demand for control over their representations. Giving definition to this environment is crucial in discussing my own collaborative process and those of others that reflect the tenets of trust, respect and ownership.

Having my perception altered through the viewing of *Nice Coloured Girls* (1980) was the beginning of a deepening interest in how Aboriginal people were claiming rights and ownership of visual media and using it for the promotion of their own agendas. *Nice Coloured Girls* (1980) was released during a period when the AIAS Film Unit was funding a large number of films where filmmakers such as David MacDougall, Judith MacDougall and Roger Sandall were working in close partnership with specific people in Aboriginal communities. This era will be explored in detail in this section. The era signified the beginning of Aboriginal people directing the content of the films with which they were involved including equal partnership in narrating and editing.

This section will specifically focus on a number of the films produced during this era — *Coniston Muster: scenes from a stockman's life* (1972) directed by Roger Sandall and featuring Coniston Johnny, an Aboriginal man and chief stockman. *Familiar Places* (1980) directed by David MacDougall in collaboration with anthropologist Peter Sutton, and *Waiting for Harry* (1980) shot by Kim McKenzie and featuring anthropologist Les Hiatt and Frank Gurrmanamana. In all three films, the filmmakers use a participatory approach and have key Aboriginal people

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<sup>45</sup> Spencer was top of the hierarchy as a result of his academic credentials. Frank Gillen was next in this hierarchy and in many ways acted as a liminal figure between the 'academy' and the contingency of the 'field' as well as between the scientific project and his relationship with the Aranda people. Those who were Spencer and Gillen's Aboriginal subjects were at the lowest level of the hierarchy.

collaborating both on screen and behind the camera. Each film deals with a set of issues requested by the Aboriginal communities being filmed. Areas such as assimilation, tradition, 'modernity', and racism were woven into the narrative structure of the films.

In *Coniston Muster* (1972), it is the voice of Coniston Johnny that is heard most, providing an insight into the unexamined world of an Aboriginal stockman from his perspective versus that of the white man who leases the station. Loizos (1993: 171) defines this as an approach that is 'unprecedented enough to be remarkable'. In the period of the early 1970s, this was groundbreaking to have a personalized level of Aboriginal representation. In *Familiar Places* (1980), an Aboriginal family, the Namponens, take anthropologist Peter Sutton and the filmmakers, David and Judith MacDougall into their hereditary lands north of where they are currently living outside of Aurukun, Northern Queensland. The films are constituted by an ongoing dialogue between Sutton who is mapping the land and Angus Namponen. As such, the audience is guided by Angus' desire to return to live on his clan land and his use of Sutton to facilitate that should he decide to do so. Again, the Aboriginal people in the film feature predominantly.

The difference between these films and previous representations of Aboriginal people and communities are numerous. As stated previously, the relationship of the anthropologist and/or ethnographic filmmaker to the Aboriginal people about whom the film is being made, majorly shifted within the dynamic of the filmmaking process to incorporate their direction, ideas and commentary. This created a condition where Aboriginal people could make claims for ownership of the film given their level of involvement. Secondly, the level of direct engagement with the audience through the dialogue/narration of a major Aboriginal character allowed for a consistent source of identification by the audience with the subject through an overt subject-driven narrative. It is the combination, therefore, of the length of the films (which allows for a complex picture of the characters and their lives to be built up), and the more interactive/participatory style in which the films have been shot and edited, that provides the space in which the subjects are able to articulate

their perspectives. This allows for a greater level of accessibility between the subjects and the audience. Loizos (1993: 169) says that these films, 'are distinctive by virtue of the strong voices of their Aboriginal subjects, reaching us through their collaborations with white filmmakers.'

The presence of the key Aboriginal participants on screen acknowledges the development of the relationships between the anthropologist/filmmaker and subject(s) off screen. The central involvement, both on and off screen, of key Aboriginal people in the films marks a major shift in the approach of anthropologists and ethnographic filmmakers to their subjects and their relationship to them as co-directors of content and approach. These relationships signify a willingness on the part of the anthropologist/filmmaker to embrace the potential fissions that arise in the relationships and collaborative process where multiple and sometimes conflicting points of view are negotiated.

*Waiting for Harry* (1980) was filmed and directed by Kim McKenzie and showed Les Hiatt as the anthropologist actively engaged with his central informant and 'brother', Frank Gurrmanamana. This relationship was a central feature of the film and explicitly documented on screen. Such an overt display of the collaborative partnership between an anthropologist and their primary informant represented one of the first times this had happened in ethnographic filmmaking practice.<sup>46</sup> Kim McKenzie provided visible evidence of the long-term relationship between Hiatt as an anthropologist and Gurrmanamana as his long-term informant, the nature of which had been known only by implication up until this point in ethnographic filmmaking practice. The opening scene sees Hiatt introducing himself and Gurrmanamana, saying, 'That's Frank Gurrmanamana. We've been working together now for 22 years. He's been my chief instructor. Frank calls me brother and I call him brother.' (Loizos 1993: 181) Not only does this statement confirm the

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<sup>46</sup> This also happened in *Jero on Jero: A Balinese Trance Séance Observed* (1981) with anthropologist Linda Connor and Balinese healer, Jero Tapakan.

extensive collaboration between them, but it also emphasises the depth of the relationship between them such that they would refer to each other by kin names.<sup>47</sup> The approach taken by McKenzie, Hiatt and Gurrmanamana in the making of *Waiting for Harry* (1980) definitely makes the depth of existing relationships between anthropologists/filmmakers and Aboriginal people, visible.

Loizos (1993) proposes that this period was marked by closer collaborations between anthropologists and Aboriginal people. I argue that this increased closeness was a result of the structure created by making the film where the three main instigators were pulled together to negotiate and discuss how the film should be made. There are also many occasions in the film where McKenzie captures the spontaneously expressed frustrations of both Hiatt and Gurrmanamana as they negotiate with other members of the group to have the mortuary ceremony take place. The display of these interactions makes clear the underlying dynamic that occurs when a group of people set out to make a film. In the case of this film, a new set of relationships had to be forged given that the relationships between the people working on the film stemmed from a past where the agenda of the anthropologist had precedence. It can be said that this was achieved when Frank Gurrmanamana proclaimed at the end of *Waiting for Harry* (1980) that the film was indeed his. This statement reveals a distinct shift in Aboriginal people now relating to themselves as central to the dynamics and relationships of power within the filmmaking process and having ownership of the final product. Both the relationship with Hiatt and the negotiated process of making a film contributed to this.

*Waiting for Harry* (1980) represented a critical development in collaborative practice between anthropologist/filmmakers and Aboriginal people, through the

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<sup>47</sup> It is important to note that Baldwin Spencer also became a classificatory brother as a result of Gillen's long-term connection with the Aranda people. Gillen himself was already incorporated into the kinship networks of the Aranda people whom he had befriended.

incorporation of the anthropologist on screen, as well as the central character playing a significant role in the narration and direction of the film. This pointed to a much broader development in the confidence and status of Aboriginal people in their ownership of the films being made about and with them.

The films of the AIAS era ushered in a new set of dynamics in which the direction and requests of the Aboriginal groups they were representing, were heard and incorporated as part of the filmmaking process and the film as the final product. This was the beginning of a movement towards increasing levels of integration on the part of ethnographic filmmakers and anthropologists with their Aboriginal partners. It signified an important shift in collaborative practice between non-Aboriginal anthropologists/filmmakers and their participants, such that the research agenda of the anthropologist/filmmaker no longer directed the content and shape of the product; rather the engagement of many perspectives was taken into account. This said, the AIAS films still retained the legacy of film production being constituted within the institutions of non-Aboriginal Australia. These included government funding, rules and structures. This maintained the pre-existing position Aboriginal people had held of having to speak through us (white people) (Myers 1988). Aboriginal people and the specific communities in which these films were made were still subject to these rules and structures as the benefactors of AIAS' financial contribution and as such, had to work within them rather than outside them. This also notes that up until 1970 there hadn't been any Aboriginal representation in the AIAS and that copies of the films made during this era are publically available for purchase through the AIATSIS website.

The potential for Aboriginal people to work outside these structures became apparent in later expressions of their use of film, specifically in self-representation projects and, equally, found a unique expression in their work with non-Aboriginal collaborators. This will be discussed at length in Chapters Four and Five.

### **Training Aboriginal people to make their own media: the advent of Aboriginal owned and run media**

The work of Eric Michaels (1986) in Yuendumu followed the AIAS era and was at

the forefront of Aboriginal people being trained in using video technology. What started as an AIAS appointed study on the impact of introducing television to remote Aboriginal Australia, turned into an extensive commitment on the part of Michaels to train people in the Warlpiri community in using visual technology. Michaels' work was a seminal project and contributed greatly to an environment where the numbers of Aboriginal people using visual technology increased significantly. After Michaels' untimely death in 1988, communications technology in Yuendumu grew substantially. By June 2001, there were four television stations, two radio stations, access to the internet, telephones and video conferencing (Hinkson 2002: 207). Michaels was concerned that the increase of global communications technology would lead to the loss of Warlpiri identity in its localized expression. This was not an uncommon concern regarding the rise of global communications technology and the perceived threat to the maintenance of local identities, however, like many small scale communities, the Warlpiri successfully negotiated the impact of globalization to reinforce their identity (Hinckson 2002). As Hinckson (2002: 212) states,

Globalisation has become embedded in Warlpiri social relations in complex ways, meaning at base that Warlpiri identity is no longer simply enacted through the highly localized social formations that have long been associated with Aboriginal societies but also, and increasingly, through more abstract, technological modes of exchange.

The incorporation by the Warlpiri of communications technology into their daily lives and the specific use of it to maintain social relations in the face of the increasing movement of Warlpiri people as a result of globalisation, is illustrative of a trend that is also happening with other Aboriginal communities. This also demonstrates the increasing control Warlpiri and other Aboriginal people are having over the distribution and type of representations of them through the use of communications technology.

The dialogic and participatory approach<sup>48</sup> established by David and Judith MacDougall, which was also evident in Kim McKenzie's *Waiting for Harry* (1980),

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<sup>48</sup> This approach was characterized by a central focus on capturing what people were saying, specifically through more informal methods such as the filmmaker just being there with the camera rather than setting up formal interviews. This enabled a freedom for the subjects to express themselves and talk about information that was relevant to them rather than addressing the agenda of the filmmaker and/or anthropologists which is called for in a question and answer format.

created new ground for relationships between filmmakers, anthropologists and Aboriginal groups committed to having their presence and issues made visible on film. This heralded a critical development in collaborative practice between anthropologists/filmmakers and Aboriginal people. Combined with the training of Aboriginal people in video production beginning with Michaels in Yuendumu, this created a condition in which Aboriginal people developed the confidence and capacity to not only direct the content of films made about them, but actually make film themselves. This represented a significant development towards Aboriginal autonomy, but, even so, Aboriginal people remained largely dependent on government institutions to fund their projects. The government still retained ultimate power, and projects and relationships built between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people were always negotiated through the lens of history, specifically the historical precedence of exploitation in the relationships between Aboriginal people and white run institutions. This historical precedence lay just below the surface of all the negotiations, interactions and proclamations of autonomy that were made during and beyond this era. Again, I refer to the statement made by Myers (1988: 205),

while they (Aboriginal people) attempt to define themselves in their own terms, Aboriginal people must deal with white values and interests, explaining themselves to us. They desire to control their representations yet need to speak through us.

This comment speaks to the difficulty Aboriginal people faced in wanting to separate themselves from white domination as an expression of their ownership and autonomy. It became apparent with a number of my Ngarrindjeri colleagues, that the ongoing perpetuation of the legacy of these historical relationships by themselves and members of the institutions from which they were sourcing their funding, served to make this separation difficult and seemingly untenable. Hence, any discussion of Aboriginal autonomy or the relationships Aboriginal people formed with filmmakers and/or anthropologists needs to take into account the legacy of the past and the shaping of these relationships by non-Aboriginal institutions.

The following chapter will explore the development of my collaborative partnerships with the Ngarrindjeri people I worked and continue to work with in the

making of the first film and the two films that constitute the second stage of the project. It will explore these against the backdrop of historical relationships established between Ngarrindjeri people and non-Aboriginal missionaries, anthropologists and researchers from other disciplines. This chapter will shed light on the underlying factors that contributed to the failure of the making of the first film and demonstrate the complexity and vicissitudes involved in establishing relationships based on trust, respect and shared ownership.



## **CHAPTER FOUR:**

### **Collaboration with Ngarrindjeri people – history, politics and the development of collaborative partnerships with my Ngarrindjeri colleagues within the filmmaking process**

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#### **Introduction**

This chapter provides a critical framework for the discussion of the development of the collaborative partnerships I developed with my Ngarrindjeri colleagues in both the making of the first film and the two films that constituted the second stage of the project. Ngarrindjeri relationships with non-Aboriginal anthropologists and researchers from other disciplines are marked by a long and involved history over which Ngarrindjeri people have had little ownership regarding the products that resulted from these relationships. As discussed, in the case of the Hindmarsh Island Royal Commission, the information they provided was used against them. This has resulted in the development of a high level of political acumen among a number of groups of Ngarrindjeri people. It was in this environment that I began to establish my relationships with the Ngarrindjeri people with whom I intended to work. I map the development of my collaborative partnerships inside this often conflicting and ever changing environment and provide reasons for why I failed to maintain the relationships in the making of the first film and equally, why my relationship with Aunty Ellen Trevorrow has sustained and resulted in the making of two films.

#### **The historical backdrop**

The politically active group of Aboriginal people who became the group I was to make a film with, were distinct from the small, contained Aboriginal communities of the past with whom the majority of ethnographic films had been made. The Ngarrindjeri people are generally thought to comprise 3000 people. The Ngarrindjeri Nation is comprised of 18 tribes who lived throughout the lower

Murray area, the Coorong and the Encounter Bay region in South Australia before European settlement (Bell 1998: 28- 29). They identify as the people of the lower Murray Lakes and The Coorong (*Kurang*)<sup>49</sup>, though they are currently geographically dispersed, with many living in urban areas.

My 'coming to know' this group of people within the project was a result of a series of ongoing connections with individual people. The relationships I formed with them, however, were also underpinned by a long history of social relations of research between Ngarrindjeri people and researchers and Ngarrindjeri people and non-Aboriginal people since the mid-1800s. My work and relationships with my Ngarrindjeri colleagues has evolved against this historical backdrop of collaborative and often politically driven research relationships. The next section identifies some of the key events and relationships that form this historical backdrop. It also begins to articulate the environment in which the Ngarrindjeri people with whom I worked, situated themselves and created the parameters for their relationships with non-Aboriginal researchers.

## **Early Collaborative Relationships with Ngarrindjeri people**

The following section explores Ngarrindjeri/researcher relationships by examining the network of these relationships from the mid 1800s through to the present. The three primary anthropologists who worked with Ngarrindjeri people up until the 1960s, were Norman Tindale, and Roland and Catherine Berndt. Prior to this, George Taplin conducted detailed research into Ngarrindjeri language and customs through his role as the missionary at the Point McLeay mission, Raukkan. Taplin's relationship with Ngarrindjeri people represented an early form of collaboration drawn from the commonplace desire among missionaries, administrators and scientists to record the customs and language of the indigenous groups they were researching and/or administering.<sup>50</sup> From 1859 to the

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<sup>49</sup> *Kurang* is the Ngarrindjeri name for The Coorong.

<sup>50</sup> I have discussed the nature of this early type of collaboration in my examination of the research of Baldwin-Spencer and Frank Gillen regarding their engagement with the Aranda people. Taplin also displayed a commitment to support Ngarrindjeri people, as Gillen did in his relationship with the Aranda when he had a police officer charged with the murder of Aboriginal people. With this in mind, the relationships Taplin formed with the Ngarrindjeri were ultimately defined within a Euro-centric framework where ownership of

time of his death in 1879, Taplin kept a detailed journal, currently housed in the Mortlock Library, Adelaide. As a result of his relationship with the community at Raukkan, he also dedicated his time to writing a volume on the grammar of the Ngarrindjeri language as well as an account of the 'Folklore, Manners and Customs of the South Australian Aborigines' (1879). It is clear from both written and oral accounts, that Taplin had a substantial influence on the Ngarrindjeri — their conceptualization of themselves, their practices and their relationship to Europeans.

The research relationships that followed Taplin in the 1930s and '40s continued to be housed within the paradigm of 'salvage anthropology'. The research conducted by the Berndt's sought to capture the Ngarrindjeri world that had existed prior to European influence and was one they considered would naturally die out with the passing of the elders. It was reflected in the title of their book, *A World That Was: The Yaruldi of the Lower Murray and the Lakes, South Australia* (1993). These crucial relationships of the 1930s and '40s will be the focus of the following section.

Norman Tindale (1900-1993) was an anthropologist who worked extensively with the Ngarrindjeri, though specifically with Clarence Long (also known as Milerum). Clarence Long was keen to relay his knowledge about his people to address his concern that this knowledge would be lost (Bell, 1998:442).<sup>51</sup> Through the recording of songs, stories, the making of coiled baskets, Milerum conveyed rich knowledge that Tindale recorded in rich detail. This resulted in thirteen archived folders known as *The World of Milerum* (unpublish.) housed in the South Australian Museum. Milerum and Tindale's relationship was a long term relationship, one that is commensurate with long term fieldwork and consequently reveals the depth and layers of information that comes from such a relationship. Tindale described his relationship with Long as one of friend, intellectual and

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the information remained the property of Taplin. The administering of ownership in this way was one of the defining criteria of collaboration in these early periods of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal engagement.

<sup>51</sup> The commitment of Aboriginal people to share their knowledge with European researchers in service of having this information recorded is a recurrent theme. This has necessitated a level of trust, but often the desire to have the information documented has superseded demanding the level of trust necessary for the negotiation of the rights and ownership regards this information. In the era in which Long was relaying information to Tindale, the environment regarding the rights of Aboriginal people was such that Tindale's ownership of this information was unquestioned (even by Long himself). In the contemporary environment, Ellen and Tom Trevorrow (dec.) are still calling for their knowledge to be documented, and while there is still evidence of exploitation, the rights and claim to ownership of this knowledge is largely being directed by Aboriginal people themselves.

travelling companion (in Bell 1998: 442).

Ronald and Catherine Berndt conducted their fieldwork in a more sporadic fashion, over a shorter period (1940-43) and through visiting a variety of sites along the Lower Murray. Their main informant was Albert Karloan. In a fashion similar to Tindale, they recorded his songs, stories and his knowledge. Their secondary informant was Margaret (Pinkie) Mack who worked primarily with Catherine Berndt. The Berndt's collaboration with Albert Karloan and Pinkie Mack came about through a series of visits and it is not clear from *A World that Was* (1993) exactly how many visits were made. One of the central criticisms of the Berndt's work was that the sporadic visits over a shorter period did not allow for the immersion into the social life of their informants. Indeed, a feature of salvage anthropology was the reliance of anthropologists and researchers from other disciplines on the recording of large amounts of ethnographic data. This methodology retained the style of collecting that was characteristic of expeditions taken by early anthropologists. The flux and variability of daily life appear to be absent in the Berndt's account. At a general level, this absence is a common feature of the collaborative relationships of this time as well as the absence of control Aboriginal people had over the documentation of their culture.

## **The politicization of collaboration – the impact of the Royal Commission**

In May 1994, a group of Ngarrindjeri women went to the Commonwealth Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Robert Tickner, seeking his intervention to stop the building of a bridge between Hindmarsh Island and Goolwa. They claimed that the building of the bridge would damage or disturb an area of significance to Ngarrindjeri tradition. The Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement appointed anthropologist Deane Fergie to assist in the process of verifying the claims made by the Ngarrindjeri women.<sup>52</sup> She began a short period of research with the Ngarrindjeri women on the 19<sup>th</sup> June, 1994. Tickner used his Commonwealth powers to ban the building of the bridge for a period of 25 years

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<sup>52</sup> Dr Deane Fergie was my first principal supervisor and contributed greatly to the factual information regarding the Hindmarsh Island Royal Commission evident in this section.

on 10 July 1995. The banning of the bridge was the beginning of an intense period of engagement between various researchers (mainly anthropologists)<sup>53</sup>, specific Ngarrindjeri individuals and groups, and the State and Federal governments. What ensued during this period was a division between two groups of Ngarrindjeri women and two groups of anthropologists. On one side were the proponent women, who claimed that the building of the bridge would disrupt an area of significance to Ngarrindjeri tradition. On the proponent women's side were anthropologists, Deane Fergie, Steve Hemming, and Diane Bell. On the other side, there was the group of dissident women who said the claims made by the proponent women were fabricated. On the dissident women's side were anthropologists, Phillip Clarke and Phillip Jones. This began a bitter debate that eventually resulted in the claims made by the dissident women being overturned in a series of legal maneuvers that ended in 2001.

### **Later Collaborations: the influence of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge controversy on collaboration and Ngarrindjeri autonomy and power**

The controversy surrounding the building of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge resulted in intense political, public and academic interest in Ngarrindjeri people. This had a significant impact on how those involved in the Hindmarsh Island Bridge controversy identified and located themselves in an environment that had become increasingly hostile for both the dissident and proponent women. What emerged was a group of politically aware Ngarrindjeri people who used the political acumen they had developed to continue advocating for issues of importance to Ngarrindjeri people such as repatriation, land and waterways management and native title. They established organisations to provide a structure to support the fulfillment of these agendas. These included, The Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee Inc.<sup>54</sup>, The

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<sup>53</sup> These included Dr Deane Fergie, Professor Diane Bell, Dr Phillip Clarke, Dr Philip Jones and Dr Steve Hemming. All positioned themselves differently in relation to the claims of fabrication against the proponent women.

<sup>54</sup> The Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee are a politically active group of Ngarrindjeri people who fight for issues of importance to Ngarrindjeri people. The purpose of the Heritage Committee is to assist the Ngarrindjeri People to protect areas of special significance to them in accordance with tradition and custom (Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority website - [www.ngarrindjeri.org.au](http://www.ngarrindjeri.org.au)). In conjunction with the other Ngarrindjeri organisations listed above, these issues have included the management of the waterways directly affecting the Ngarrindjeri people such as the Murray River and the extensive estuary system near the Murray

Ngarrindjeri *Tendi* Inc., The Ngarrindjeri Lands and Progress Association Inc. and the Ngarrindjeri Native Title Management Committee. More recently these organisations have been incorporated into the regional body, the Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority (NRA). The NRA was established in 2007 as the primary body for providing care and assistance and promoting the needs of Ngarrindjeri people. Representatives from each organisation comprise the board and leadership of the NRA. Bell (2014: xxvi) noted that, “Through the NRA, the Ngarrindjeri leadership sought a coordinated approach in dealing with government agencies’.

The Hindmarsh Island Bridge controversy represented a turning point in the expansion of autonomy and power among significant groups of Ngarrindjeri people, including those with whom I have worked and continue to work with at Camp Coorong. As discussed above, it marked in a series of critical developments at the organisational level that both legitimized and gave structure to the issues these groups were advocating for. It also represented a shift in the way in which these groups maintained and continued to foster relationships with anthropologists and researchers from other disciplines. This shift was identifiable by the degree to which Ngarrindjeri people were enlisting researchers on the basis of their skills and drawing on their positions in educational institutions to support the credibility of their own agendas.<sup>55</sup> There were clear indicators of Ngarrindjeri people now directing the work of their non-Aboriginal research colleagues. It was in this environment of increasing self-determination and political awareness that I established my relationships with the Ngarrindjeri people I initially worked with and those I continue to work with. The specific nature of these relationships will be discussed later in this chapter.

The key Ngarrindjeri stakeholders in the Hindmarsh Island Bridge controversy were instrumental in fostering and maintaining long term collaborative partnerships with a number of the anthropologists that supported them during this period. Steve Hemming testified in favour of the proponent women and went on to maintain a

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mouth known as The Coorong/Kurang. They have also been deeply involved in the repatriation of the skeletal remains of Ngarrindjeri people housed in Australian and international museums, and the instigation of a native title claim for the lands of the Ngarrindjeri people ([www.ngarrindjeri.org.au](http://www.ngarrindjeri.org.au)).

<sup>55</sup> In my discussion later in this chapter of how I established my relationships with the Ngarrindjeri people I have and continue to work with, I note that I was initially enlisted to work with a specific group of Ngarrindjeri people as a result of my skills as a photographer. These skills matched the commitment of these people to have key cultural events and evidence of the fulfillment of their agendas, documented.

long and fruitful partnership with Ngarrindjeri elder Tom Trevorrow. His collaboration with Trevorrow and Ngarrindjeri scholar, Darryl Rigney, among others, resulted in multiple papers<sup>56</sup>, the writing of agreements and an ongoing exchange of ideas, advice and knowledge. Many of their contemporary collaborations have had political intent. As mentioned, Hemming supported the proponent women in The Royal Commission into the building of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge in opposition to his colleagues at the Museum of South Australia, Phillip Clarke and Phillip Jones. This signified his alignment with the political agendas of these key Ngarrindjeri stakeholders and organisations and a continued role of advocacy on behalf of these organisations. He has continued to advocate for The Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee and engage in research principally in service of the issues of land and waterways management.

Diane Bell also began a long and rich collaborative relationship with Aunty Ellen Trevorrow and other Ngarrindjeri men and women during and after the period of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge controversy. An extensive body of work was produced out of this collaboration. This includes Bell's first book, *Ngarrindjeri Wurruwarrin: A World that is, was, and will be* (1998), a revised edition published in 2014, a one act play, 'Whispers and Weaving: *Miwi* wisdom' (2014), and a further book on Ngarrindjeri women and weaving which she wrote in partnership with Aunty Ellen and other elders, *Kungun Ngarrindjeri Miminar Yunnan: Listen to Ngarrindjeri Women Speaking* (2008).

*Ngarrindjeri Wurruwarrin: A World that is, was, and will be* (1998) was one of the major academic products of this period. It has been described as a new kind of ethnography in that it is written in a style that reflects the close collaborative relationships Bell formed with specific Ngarrindjeri elders — Aunty Ellen, Uncle Tom and Doreen Kartinyeri. It draws upon historical texts, the work of other anthropologists and Ngarrindjeri oral tradition. Bell weaves together sources that are sometimes oppositional, to create an account which facilitates the emergence of knowledge rather than dictating a singular interpretation.<sup>57</sup> Her approach and

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<sup>56</sup> See Hemming, S., Trevorrow, T. & Rigney, M. (2002), Hemming, S. & Rigney, D. (2003), Hemming, S. & Trevorrow, T. (2005), Roberts, A., Hemming, S., Trevorrow, T., Trevorrow, G., Rigney, M., Rigney, G., Agius, L. & Agius, R. (2005), Trevorrow, T. & Hemming, S. (2006).

<sup>57</sup> Simons (2003:423-434) provides a counter argument to the status of Bell's book as new ethnography, suggesting that Bell's interpretation of Ngarrindjeri oral tradition did not create the legitimacy that either the

products explicitly represent the relationships she has established and maintained with her Ngarrindjeri colleagues. She is an advocate for an active, transparent, collaborative approach she refers to as 'cultural hopscotch'. She articulates this approach as constitutive of the following: "immerse oneself in the culture, step back and analyse: share findings with the community and colleagues; look to comparative case material; re-immerses and test one's findings" (2014: xxxv). Bell (2014: xxxv) makes it clear that she in no way thinks her "affection for and engagement with the Ngarrindjeri compromise(s) her standing as a social scientist." On the contrary, she considers this allows her to engage in friendships with her Ngarrindjeri colleagues in conjunction with contributing her expertise to areas where this is most needed. The long term professional and personal relationship Bell formed with many Ngarrindjeri people was a forerunner in collaborative partnerships with contemporary Aboriginal communities. The parallels in Bell's relationships with those of other anthropologists and researchers, as well as the connections with the broader discussion of collaborative relationships within the current environment in which Aboriginal people situate and identify themselves, will be discussed later in this chapter. Bell continues to collaborate with Aunty Ellen Trevorrow and maintain a close personal relationship.

Bell's relationship with Aunty Ellen Trevorrow was a precursor for the establishment of a number of other collaborative partnerships between Aunty Ellen and other researchers, myself included. Against the background of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge controversy and the increased visibility this brought to Ngarrindjeri people as well as Aunty Ellen's development as the central figure in Ngarrindjeri weaving practice, her own profile and recognition has elevated significantly. Consequently, other researchers have approached her with a request to work with her. In addition to Bell, she has also maintained long term personal and working relationships with Dr Karen Hughes, a historian based at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, Jelina Harris, a doctoral student at Flinders University in Adelaide, and myself. The commonalities in the nature of the relationships each of these four women (of which I am one), have formed with Aunty Ellen will be discussed later in this chapter.

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Ngarrindjeri nor Bell intended. She argues that there needed to be a greater reliance on what the Ngarrindjeri elders say rather than on the interpretation provided by Bell.



## **My 'coming to know' Ngarrindjeri people – the beginning of the collaborative process**

Within an environment constitutive of the historical circumstances and collaborative relationships outlined above, my connection with the group of Ngarrindjeri people I was to work with, began via an evening telephone conversation with an anthropologist with whom one of my supervisors, Dr Deane Fergie, recommended I speak. The conversation I had with Dr Steve Hemming that night carried a historical weight of which, at that time, I was not fully aware.<sup>58</sup>

The tension and complexity of this environment underpinned both the relationships established by Ngarrindjeri people with non-Aboriginal people and was the undercurrent behind establishing my relationship with them. It also provided some explanation for the difficulty I had in sustaining my relationships with the filmmakers in the making of the first film.<sup>59</sup> As will be discussed later, this was not directly attributable to the controversy surrounding the Hindmarsh Island Bridge, because neither filmmaker was involved in either of the groups from which the proponent and dissident women came. Rather, it was their general mistrust of government run organisations that was reinforced by the environment that developed as a result of Hindmarsh.

My positioning within this nexus of historical and contemporary relationships was one that was aligned with one of my supervisors, Deane Fergie. This incorporated her role in the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Royal Commission and the Matthews Inquiry, and her position as an academic staff member of the University of Adelaide. While I was not fully aware of the network of relationships I was stepping into, and the historical weight of these relationships, my phone call with Steve Hemming that night opened up a pathway to engage in a powerful and provocative set of relationships with a wise and politically adept group of Aboriginal people. I

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<sup>58</sup> As I outlined in the previous section above, both Deane Fergie and Steve Hemming provided evidence for the proponent women in the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Royal Commission. I continue to unravel the implications of this in the development of my own relationships with the Ngarrindjeri people I came to work with throughout this chapter.

<sup>59</sup> The difficulties in these relationships and their relevance to the collaborative process will be discussed later in this chapter.

found myself acknowledging the bias of my positioning yet at the same time and noting the distinct position I held as someone who had not been involved in the debates, the State Royal Commission and the Matthews Inquiry associated with the building of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge. I could therefore revisit this historical set of circumstances, yet equally ensure that I not find myself immersed in them. This gave me the unique position of being able to work with the Ngarrindjeri women in the making of the second film from a empathetic, yet distinct position that facilitated our collaboration and fostered the production of two films about the future rather than the past.

A core part of my fieldwork was the long-term building of relationships with a specific group of Ngarrindjeri people. How these relationships developed was through a series of *significant encounters*<sup>60</sup> with key individuals with whom long-term relationships were formed. These were to become the nexus points for the network of relationships within the project and through which I formed my connection with more peripheral members of the community. Many of these relationships have been sustained throughout the project and display the length, breadth and depth of 'relationship' that can only be developed as a result of long-term associations between people. In my case, these relationships did not simply represent the association built between an anthropologist and their close informants, or a filmmaker with their subjects, rather throughout a period of eleven years and multiple moments of connection, a number of my key relationships have become lasting friendships. This direct one-on-one connection represents a type of relationship that as I argue later in this chapter, is critical to subverting the systemic issues of mistrust created by Aboriginal peoples' relationship with government institutions.

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<sup>60</sup> I purposely call these significant encounters in reference to the haphazard nature of the fieldwork process, a process that largely revolves around connecting with people who become significant in the project and in many cases, establish the direction of the project. This was definitely the case with a number of key 'significant encounters' in this project.

I commenced my 'fieldwork' for the project in 2006, where the phone call with Steve Hemming led to the first in a number of significant encounters that have given definition and direction to the project. He gave me the contact details of a The Reburial of Ngarrindjeri *Old People*, Hack's Point, 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 2006. Photo: Naomi Offler

Ngarrindjeri archaeology student who had made a short film about the repatriation of Ngarrindjeri remains from the Melbourne Museum in 2004. The result of my conversation with the student was an invitation to photograph the first reburial of Ngarrindjeri remains repatriated by The Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee from Australian and International museums. My first trip to Camp Coorong, the location where the repatriated remains were held and the location to which I would travel



multiple times over a period of eleven years, was on Saturday, 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 2006.<sup>61</sup>

My fieldwork from this point onwards was identifiable as multi-sited and multi-faceted, not only in terms of the diverse geographic locations in which my meetings, conversations and filming took place<sup>62</sup>, but also in terms of the various

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<sup>61</sup> I have made over thirty trips to Camp Coorong since 2006, some involving extended stays and some simply to have a yarn with Aunty Ellen about the project, to shoot footage that she or I have requested or to show her the completed films for her approval. These trips have been interspersed with extended periods of minimal contact as a result of the deaths or illness of significant people associated with the project. I will discuss these later in this chapter

<sup>62</sup> The locations include attending a range of events and meeting points in suburban areas within Adelaide and the Adelaide Hills, Murray Bridge, Meningie, various locations on The Coorong including Hack's Point, Parnka Point, Rabbit Island, Bonney Reserve, Browns Beach and the former Aboriginal Mission, Raukkan at Point McLeay and an interview conducted in Canberra.

mediums through which communication occurred. These included face-to-face, phone conversations, fax, electronic communication in the form of emails, text, and voice-mail and non-verbal communication.<sup>63</sup> During this period, I attended exhibition openings, meetings, funerals, book launches, interviews, talks given by Aunty Ellen and Uncle Tom, photographic shoots, weaving workshops at Camp Coorong, and had multiple informal conversations — *yarning*, over many cups of tea in the office at Camp Coorong. This is a fieldwork process defined by multiplicity — multiple conversations, multiple relationships, multiple layers of power, multiple film shoots, multiple disruptions due to lack of funding, deaths and illness, multiple areas of importance to Ngarrindjeri people, and multiple threads of knowledge that have been woven together in this exegesis and two films. The nature of my fieldwork process is reflected in a number of critical ways in the body of material that constitutes this project. I will provide a critical analysis of the approach I took and the two films that resulted from this process in Chapter Five.

### **The Making and Unmaking of the First Film – reinforcing and reconstituting the past**

The beginning of my relationship as a photographer and filmmaker with Ngarrindjeri people began at the reburial of the reclaimed remains of twenty-three *old people*<sup>64</sup> on Saturday, September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2006, who were buried back in *country*.<sup>65</sup> I photographed the event in black and white still images. The reburial represented the first event where my relationships began to be consolidated. It was also the event where the complex network of relationships that constituted the making of the first film in this project were at play, yet it was beyond my capacity at this point to see the complexity of this network.

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<sup>63</sup> I discuss how the non-verbal communication between myself and Aunty Ellen contributed to the formation of a strong collaborative partnership and lasting connection later in this chapter.

<sup>64</sup> The Ngarrindjeri refer to deceased members of their community as their *old people*.

<sup>65</sup> *Country* refers to the land that is identified as home by Aboriginal people. Land is an insufficient simile for *country*, which incorporates Aboriginal peoples' relationship to the land at a spiritual, physical and ecological level.

The Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee invited two Ngarrindjeri filmmakers<sup>66</sup> to make a formal documentary about the reburial. Their film was seen as the next step in formalising the documentation of the reclaimed remains. The intention was that the footage from the reburial would be used to make a documentary on the Committee's ongoing project to reclaim Ngarrindjeri remains from around the world. This would bring visibility to the Committee's commitment and create awareness of it in the public sphere through broadcasting its importance to a much wider audience.<sup>67</sup> For me, this event signified the first steps in establishing two critical relationships in my project, those with the two Ngarrindjeri filmmakers as the foundation for making the first film.

The Ngarrindjeri filmmakers were well known and had established their own film company for Aboriginal filmmakers in S.A. I befriended the assistant filmmaker at the reburial and this established the first of a series of strong relationships in my fieldwork. I decided at this point that I wanted to make a film of their process of making the reburial film. The intention was to document the dynamics of the social relationships unfolding in the reburial film between the filmmakers and the community as well as with myself as the anthropologist/filmmaker. I identified the community at this time to comprise the Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee in addition to a number of outsiders, both Ngarrindjeri and non-Ngarrindjeri, who were linked to the project through government and universities.

The secondary intention of the project was to capture how contemporary Aboriginal filmmakers were using film to communicate issues of importance to Aboriginal people and in what ways this differed from past practices used by Aboriginal people to fight for ownership of their representations in film and photography. The way in which these filmmakers identified themselves as both filmmakers and advocates, how they perceived film and the ways they used it, was something I wished to explore through the filmmaking process. However, as the project unfolded, it became apparent that issues of ownership and representation

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<sup>66</sup> I have chosen to keep names of the filmmakers, archaeology student and funding bodies anonymous given the sensitive nature of the material. One of the filmmakers also made an explicit request to remain anonymous.

<sup>67</sup> It was intended that the documentary be shown on the ABC or SBS. At this point in the project and throughout the project, the completion of the documentary was conditional on funding. The filmmakers began shooting without funding then secured funding for a certain portion of the film. The documentary is currently not yet complete.

were subsidiary to the complexity of the relationships housed within the project. In fact, I found that claims to ownership and control over representation were secondary areas of concern compared to the perpetuation of resistance to government institutions. This contributed an additional dynamic in my understanding of the social relations that were being unveiled on the filmmaking site and revealed a complex network of relationships that had their legacy firmly entrenched in the past.

The project centred on the making of the film about the Ngarrindjeri filmmakers making their documentary. At this point, I had only ever considered making one film. During the three years in which the filmmakers were editing the documentary, a number of significant challenges occurred, which included the need to source funding for the completion of the documentary. This combined with the filmmakers' perception of certain government institutions as the major impediment to their status and recognition as filmmakers, necessitated changing my initial intention and making of a second film with a different group of Ngarrindjeri people.<sup>68</sup> The relationships behind the second film were established as a result of those I established in the making of the first film. It was my platform for being known by critical people in the community (specifically members of the Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee). It was on the foundation of these relationships that I could establish my relationships with the Ngarrindjeri women who were to become the primary focus of the second film. This enabled me to form a close working and personal relationship with Aunty Ellen Trevorrow as the central figure in the practice of weaving at Camp Coorong.

This chapter will discuss the vicissitudes of the collaborative process as it developed in the establishment of my relationships with the two filmmakers that underpinned the making of the first film. This will provide the context for the critical analysis of my own positioning in and part of the collaborative process in the making of the second film and subsequent teaching film.

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<sup>68</sup> The circumstances behind making a second film will be discussed later in this chapter.

## **The building of relationships: developing and maintaining relationships in the filmmaking process**

I established my first relationship with one of the two Ngarrindjeri filmmakers the Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee had asked to film the reburial just prior to the commencement of the ceremony. He was the assistant filmmaker, managed sound and shot back-up footage. He became my point of contact and also my guide in culturally appropriate practices during the reburial. During the preparations for the reburial, he directed me to smoke myself in ti-tree smoke before entering the room in which the remains were housed. Our relationship became firmly established during this period. He had spent part of his childhood on Raukkan, the former Aboriginal mission where a large number of Ngarrindjeri people lived and continue to live. He had strong connections as a result of his ties to Raukkan with the various Ngarrindjeri groups, including those at Camp Coorong. His connections helped establish me as an accepted visitor and later family friend at Camp Coorong. I observed his interactions with the key people managing the reburial and based my own on these. My relationship with him became one of good friendship built over time through our work on the reburial documentary and my own filmmaking process. Prior to the reburial, I assisted him in the set up of an interview with three of the principal Ngarrindjeri women connected to the reburial. One of these was Aunty Ellen and one of the others was Alice Abdulla, who also features in *Stitch by Stitch* (2017), the documentary style film on the practice of weaving produced as one of two films in this project. This initial connection was then cemented further when the reburial commenced. He provided me with the access into the community at a crucial time in the early stage of the project.

The next stage of the project saw the establishment of my relationship with the principal filmmaker. This happened as a result of establishing my project and the making of my film. My intention was to use the images I had taken of the reburial to create further connection with the assistant filmmaker and the archaeology student who had enlisted me as the photographer for the reburial. Both were my access point to engaging them in the idea of making of my own film. My meetings with them failed to provoke any interest from either of them. This was my first experience of many where I lacked the awareness of who held the power within

the group and could sanction my project. The principal filmmaker held this position. His directorial role in the reburial documentary saw him making the majority of decisions regarding the film. The assistant filmmaker frequently directed me to address any requests I had to him which included scheduling meetings with the group, organising filming times and negotiating copies of the footage. The progress of the documentary and my own film lay predominantly in the hands of the principal filmmaker. Having my own film approved was one illustration of a much more complex set of relationships in which I was located. These relationships were intricate at the personal level yet also underpinned by the legacy of historical relationships with non-Aboriginal researchers/filmmakers. There was also the underlying impact of systemic discrimination experienced by the filmmakers and therefore a difficult relationship with a number of key State and Federal government institutions. My actions and outcomes were dependent in many ways on the state of the filmmakers' relationship with these institutions at any given time. At times, this was unpredictable. This in particular set the tone for my relationship with the filmmakers.

I then met with the principal filmmaker to seek his permission to document the making of the documentary about the reburial. I was heartened by his enthusiasm for my project and felt as if I had at last made the connection I needed. I commenced filming immediately. This filming spanned the period April 2007 to mid 2009. It was within this period that my relationship with the principal filmmaker deepened. At times, there were points of conflict. As my filming continued, it became increasingly clear that any disruption in my relationship with the principal filmmaker or with the making of the reburial documentary had the potential to put an end to my project. I realised that both the complexity of the relationships in which I had become entwined and the difficulties experienced by the filmmakers with regards to funding the project, were making my project untenable.

It was during this period that I also made a number of visits to Camp Coorong, where I began to establish myself within the broader Ngarrindjeri community who were based primarily in and around Camp Coorong. As the project continued, my relationships deepened with not only the filmmakers and the archaeology student, but also with Aunty Ellen, Aunty Noreen Kartinyeri and Aunty Alice Abdulla. These women were to become the focus of my second film.



## **Social relationships and the filmmaking process: filmmaking, agency and conflict**

This section will focus on the nature of key relationships, including the way in which I positioned myself in my relationship with my Ngarrindjeri colleagues. My role in the project was as an anthropologist, filmmaker and friend. The varying degrees of emphasis I gave to each of these roles at particular points in the project gave access to different types of information and more importantly, directed the project in specific ways. The way in which I identified myself and the way I behaved in the network of relationships that constituted my fieldwork site influenced the existing social networks and the project as a whole.

Similar to Deger's (2006) positioning in the network of relationships that constituted her PhD project with the Yolgnu in north-east Arnhem land, I too was not only an anthropologist but also a filmmaker and a friend in my relationships with the Ngarrindjeri people I was working with. Unlike Deger, who was in the role of being a media trainer/producer and an anthropologist, I was in the roles of photographer, filmmaker and anthropologist. This was influential in two respects. First, I had identified myself very strongly in my relationships with my Ngarrindjeri colleagues as a filmmaker and as a photographer and secondly, the primary medium for ethnographic exploration being used in my project was film. This created a different dynamic in my relationships with them. Prior to this, my role as a photographer held a lot of currency for me in establishing relationships with this particular group. In fact, my visual skills gave me immediate access to the group, as illustrated by the invitation extended to me by the student archaeologist to photograph the Reburial in my capacity as a photographer. In this way, I contributed value to the relationships I had begun to establish with my Ngarrindjeri colleagues.

Film was a medium of self-interest to the Ngarrindjeri filmmakers I was looking to work with and therefore seen as non-invasive. In addition, it was a medium that elicited responses from people distinct from someone simply observing them with a pen and notepad. As Deger (2006: xxxiv) suggests, these roles bring about differing points of view that necessarily alter as time passes and relationships

became more personalised. She says more specifically, 'particular kinds of relationships and ways of relating generate particular kinds of experiences, which, in turn, allow for particular kinds of insights.' My role as a filmmaker, while at this point in the project, was more directly connected with the Ngarrindjeri and ethnographically focused, certainly was the catalyst for the establishment of my core relationships in the community and for the 'particular kinds of insights' resulting from being the one who had the camera and ultimately being the one who was directing large parts of the project.

As a research site, making my film about the making of the reburial documentary provided an incredible opportunity to explore the shifts and changes in social relationships, and as these were influenced by my presence and positioning as an anthropologist and filmmaker. I became an integral part of the web of relationships that constituted the research site, specifically those between myself, the filmmakers and the archaeology student. My role became critical in their process of making the documentary, as I became one of the principal drivers in the project, seeing to it that meetings were scheduled and critical actions were taken. As Deger (2006: xxxiv) notes, the point of view of an anthropologist undertaking a research project is necessarily self-interested. The making of my own film was heavily contingent on the Ngarrindjeri filmmakers, and my access to securing their participation in my project was a direct result of the relationships I established with them. I therefore instigated and maintained the relationships with the three Ngarrindjeri men over time. This made for a complex social situation, one that extended beyond participant observation and one that I would define as collaborative. There were periods during our negotiations where I questioned whether my increasing levels of influence and occasional interference in their project were detrimental and had potential impacts on the research process. In my exploration of the negotiated process that was going on between us, it became apparent that being grounded in the actual vicissitudes of relationship building and my being involved at the grass roots level as opposed to an observational one, was a necessary component of having anything to say of value about collaboration and the collaborative process. It was also clear that my level of involvement was not dissimilar to that of non-Aboriginal researchers with whom they had previously established relationships, and that we both exercised positions of dominance at various points in the project.

I positioned myself in my relationships with the filmmakers and archaeology student as not only a non-Aboriginal person, but also as a filmmaker and a woman. It was critical that trust be built in my relationship with these central players in the making of both of my films. This was particularly necessary given the legacy of historical relationships established between Ngarrindjeri people and non-Aboriginal anthropologists.<sup>69</sup> I built this trust over a substantial period through consistent engagement and providing photographic advice when requested. The provision of my own skills enabled me to become an integral part of the group. My skills had value and therefore began to be seen by the others as an important contributor to the project. I provided a specific type of knowledge that the others didn't have. As a result, my role became more what I define as 'collaborative' than that of a participant observer.<sup>70</sup> This establishment of trust through both engagement and the contribution of my skills, enabled me to become the main person driving the post-production of the footage on the reburial. I also took on the role of catalyst in the making of a trailer of the footage to be distributed to secure further funding.

The dynamics in my relationships with the members of the group were similar to those described by other researchers taking on the dual roles of filmmaker/anthropologist. Both Van Dienderen (2007) and Perez (2007) refer to points where they become dominant in the relationships they had established with their subjects. Perez (2007) acknowledged being driven by his own agenda regarding the content of the film and used his superior technical skills in editing and project management to drive this agenda. Van Dienderen (2007: 248) noted that her role changed during the five years that she worked in a participatory

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<sup>69</sup> As discussed earlier in this chapter, these relationships had principally seen the Ngarrindjeri used as research subjects. On a number of occasions, the research that came from these relationships had been used against them, notably during the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Royal Commission. On a number of occasions, one or both of the filmmakers also made reference to the discrimination they experienced from institutions that were potential sources of funding, not only for the reburial documentary, but for other projects they had previously had at design stage. This experience can be linked to the systemic discrimination that exists in Australia as a result of past based and current discriminatory practices and behaviours that continue to be perpetuated. I discuss this in depth later in this chapter.

<sup>70</sup> I have expanded on the input of different skills in the collaborative process in my discussion of the variety of perspectives and skills of those involved in the *Christmas Birrimbirr Project* (2011). In my relationships with those involved in the first film, there was unquestionably a correlation between my contribution of skills not held by the others, my direct involvement in the filmmaking process and the establishment of a genuine spirit of collaboration between us all.

capacity with the *The Return of the Swallows*<sup>71</sup> where it was sometimes as an observer, sometimes as a participant and sometimes as a consultant. Each of these roles had her be more or less dominant in her relationships with the group making the film. The relationship I had established with the three Ngarrindjeri men (filmmakers and student) developed over a number of years since the reburial. As with Van Dienderen (2007), my role changed in nature over the period I was working on the project from participant observer, to consultant, to protagonist. While I have defined these three roles as distinct, a clear demarcation between each one did not exist. At no stage in the project did I stop being a participant observer. My role as a visual consultant altered the dynamics of my relationships with the group from outsider to valued contributor and this increased the levels of respect, trust and connection in their relationship with me. By mid 2008, I had firmly established my role as a catalyst and this created conflict between members of the group as they negotiated whose responsibility it was to ensure the documentary got made. I was an intrinsic part of this conflict and was also able to observe how the conflict was played out with the others and also myself. Deger's (2006) description of the multiple roles she played in her relationships with her Yolgnu colleagues approximates my experience with my close group of Ngarrindjeri filmmakers and researchers. As Deger (2006: xxxiv) noted, as these relationships became more personalised, the roles shifted and brought forth new insights and as such, were in a constant state of fluctuation. This speaks to the fluid rather than fixed nature of relationship building and roles I experienced during the filmmaking process.

By the end of 2009, the promise of post-production funding from the ABC for the reburial documentary did not eventuate. The documentary currently exists as a number of short trailers. I determined the need to find another 'research site' through which to fulfil my principal research aim of exploring collaboration between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal anthropologists/filmmakers.

## **The collaborative process explored in the first film**

The formation and development of the key relationships in the making of the first

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<sup>71</sup> Film Project: E. Diettrorst *The Return of the Swallows* (2000-2006).

film were comprehensively outlined earlier in this chapter. This built a picture of the key points that marked the unfolding of these relationships. This picture highlighted both the disjunctions and unity in these relationships in the making of the film. The purpose of the following section is two-fold; firstly, I will discuss the disjunctions in the relationship that point to the deeper influences that shaped these relationships, and ultimately led to the first film not being finished. Secondly, I will use my discussion of these disjunctions to highlight the contested and negotiated space in which collaborative relationships in the making of ethnographic film exist and develop.

I established my relationships with the Ngarrindjeri filmmakers and student with the intention of building strong collaborative relationships. My mode of contact with them was personal, that is, we met face-to-face, often in their homes and at events, and communicated regularly via phone and email. I assumed that this level of personal connection would be a sufficient foundation on which to develop my project in partnership with them. This was not the case. It was not due to the lack of depth in the personal connections I had developed, rather I was increasingly aware that in establishing these personal connections within the context of making a film, I was in fact dealing with their relationships with both government and a variety of state and federal institutions, all of which were run by non-Aboriginal people and from some of which they had experienced discrimination in the past as Ngarrindjeri people.

They had relationships with these institutions and government that were both problematic and plagued by systemic discrimination. This influenced their present-day relationships such that actions and decisions made by people in these institutions were consistently filtered through the experiences that had happened in the past. As I began to explore this at a deeper level, it became evident that the filmmakers experienced being caught in a vicious cycle with regards to their autonomy as Aboriginal filmmakers. Producing their own films was dependent on both financial backing and a solid experience base. Both were pre-requisites for the other. They had applied for funding from a leading organisation in South Australia numerous times, only to be told that they had insufficient experience to produce a film in its entirety. Interestingly this organisation had not yet funded an Aboriginal only film project, despite funding a number of films that by their

definition, had high Indigenous content.<sup>72</sup> The filmmakers experienced themselves being caught in a cycle that was seemingly futile. The parallel with the past was also clear. George Taplin, the Mission Chief Superintendent at Raukkan, the Aboriginal mission at Point MacLeay from 1859-1879, promoted a small scale fishing industry that resulted in Ngarrindjeri people being exploited by European middle men (Jenkin 1979: 98). This illustrates the repetitive cycle of patronage and denial that has seen Aboriginal people (specifically the Ngarrindjeri in this instance), caught in structures of authority and power that severely restrict the opportunity for independence, ownership and autonomy. Discrimination as such has become underlying and systemic.

The systemic nature of this discrimination has cultivated modes of behaviour by government, state and federal institutions, Aboriginal people and organisations that has ensured the maintenance of these discriminatory practices. It has also ensured that Aboriginal organisations have emerged as gatekeepers for Aboriginal beliefs, freedom and rights. The Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee took on this protectionist role in relation to the Ngarrindjeri people and the issues of importance to them including repatriation, the maintenance of the waterways and their native title claim. As mentioned, the Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority, has taken over this gatekeeper role since its inception in 2007.

The modes of behaviour that have arisen as a result of this systemic discrimination, can be identified as a form of disempowerment that keeps the effects of the discrimination in place. This illustrates the tangled network of power relationships that exist within a context of systemic discrimination. I was blind to this context at the time of my association with the filmmakers and the making of their film. It was only on reflection and in communication with others that I saw the network of relationships in which the filmmakers were enmeshed. All of these relationships demonstrated the effects of systemic discrimination. While I perceived I was communicating within a one-on-one relationship scenario with an

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<sup>72</sup> Indigenous content is defined as subject matter in films and television programs that is specifically connected with Aboriginal people. Many leading funding bodies for film and television are able to claim their indigenous content quota based on the funding of films that have Aboriginal subject matter but are directed and/or produced by non-Aboriginals. The organisation with whom my Ngarrindjeri filmmakers had a contentious relationship had funded only seven projects that involved Aboriginal directors and/or producers and no feature films.

expectation of trust being built (as is commonly the case in these intimate connections), it later became apparent why I was unable to ensure the completion of the documentary. This arose as a series of barriers that impeded the final editing stage of the documentary. These barriers ranged from the need to source personal income to allocating time for other projects. At various points in the process of making the documentary, there were spikes of activity either incited by me, as a result of the death of an important elder that made the completion of the repatriation documentary more pressing, or as a means to source funding. However, these remained as contained periods of activity and were not sustained.

The relationships in the making of the first film were characterised by both a complexity and a level of distance that even my personal connection could not transcend. Despite my one-on-one connection, I was actually in many ways one step removed. I was one step removed from the people in the documentary and was one step removed from the filmmakers in that I was actually interacting with their relationship with government institutions and the Ngarrindjeri organisations acting as gatekeepers for the knowledge they were communicating. My relationships with the Ngarrindjeri filmmakers were *relationships impacted by institutionalism* and as such, were distinct from the relationships I formed with the seven women in the making of the second film.<sup>73</sup> Bell (1998: 113-116) discusses the division between the Ngarrindjeri women arguing for or against the existence of secret women's business in the State Royal Commission on the building of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge as one based on whether the women did or did not live at Raukkan. There is evidence to suggest that those who remained outside the mission developed a level of autonomy distinct from those who grew up with it. The filmmakers with whom I had been dealing had their past located in Point Pearce and Raukkan. Consequently, my relationships with them were based on constant negotiation regarding their responses to funding bodies and government. Within this space of sustained dissension, there was an insufficient foundation to maintain a shared vision to see the project through to completion. To recall a telling statement from Myers (1988: 205),

while they (Aboriginal people) attempt to define themselves in their

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<sup>73</sup> The distinction drawn between *relationships impacted by institutionalism* and those developed outside these structures, will be explored fully in Chapter Four.

own terms, Aboriginal people must deal with white values and interests, explaining themselves to us. They desire to control their representations yet need to speak through us.

The prevalence of white values, interests and structures dominated this situation through both the perceived and actual discrimination my Ngarrindjeri colleagues experienced. Their responses to discrimination was a sufficient barrier to prevent the critical need to speak. Within this structure, little could be accomplished beyond seeing the 'speaking through' these institutions as domination or submission.

The impact on the collaborative process was such that the level of contestation was too great. There was insufficient foundation to establish the trust and intimacy to complete the making of my own film. As a non-Aboriginal woman, I had very little standing to intervene in a set of relationships that carried with them the historical weight of the past. Any new space for collaborative practice in ethnographic filmmaking had to demonstrate establishing and maintaining relationships in a space that allowed for intimacy, trust, respect and ownership of a shared vision. The final section of this chapter will explore the development of this kind of relationship, the impact on the collaborative process and on the filmic product.

The final section will both conclude and extend this exploration through examining the collaborative process as it unfolded in the making of the second film. Making this film became the looking glass through which the process of collaboration was revealed as distinctly negotiated. It will also examine how the development of these relationships reinforced the use of specific techniques by myself as the filmmaker to create a holistic portrayal of the experiences of the Ngarrindjeri women represented in the film. The collaborative process therefore not only promoted a specific presentation of self by the subjects on film, but also influenced the methodological choices made during the filmmaking process.

### **Building relationships in the making of the second film**

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

Aunty Ellen Trevororrow (Ngarrindjeri Weavers 2013)



The statement made by Aunty Ellen Trevorrow identifies the context in which key aspects of my project developed. The relationships that constituted the second film<sup>74</sup> were developed in the same step-by-step manner as those with the filmmakers in the first film. The relationship I established with Aunty Ellen Trevorrow began during the making of this first film. During this period, there was little spoken interaction between us, as she was not as directly involved with the reburial as others. Despite this, we established a connection over time through seeing her at a variety of events including exhibition openings, funerals and the reburial. This created the foundation for our relationship, such that when it came time to discuss the possibility of making a film, our pre-established connection enabled this.

The nature of this relationship also derived from one-on-one, direct personal negotiation and communication. Over time this developed into a relationship built on trust and mutual respect. There were distinct differences between this relationship and those I established with the filmmakers. As said above, the relationship with the filmmakers was characterised by being one step removed. I was never directly negotiating with them despite our consistent one-on-one communication. I was in fact communicating through a lens of systemic discrimination, principally mediated by their relationships with government institutions. While Aunty Ellen as an Aboriginal woman also had her own experiences drawn from a history of systemic discrimination, I attribute her separation from these to a number of factors. As with her husband, Uncle Tom Trevorrow (dec.), Aunty Ellen, while born at the Point McLeay mission (Raukkan), but did not spend her childhood there. She was initially raised by her grandmother on a Reserve (*Murrungung*) on the banks of the Murray River near Wellington. She later moved to Meningie where she attended school and lived with her mother, Daisy Rankine. After her marriage to Tom Trevorrow, both she and Uncle Tom established a relationship with the Uniting Church. Shortly after their marriage they leased land outside of Meningie from the Aboriginal Lands Trust and built Camp Coorong as a source of employment for Ngarrindjeri youth. This later developed into an educational centre for Ngarrindjeri heritage, where native flora and fauna

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<sup>74</sup> I will be referring to the second film as the weaving film from this point onwards.

tours, weaving workshops and a small museum constitute a successful enterprise. Aunty Ellen continues to manage Camp Coorong with the assistance of a number of family members.

The establishment of Camp Coorong was an act of autonomy and represents the independence with which the Trevorrowes have constructed both their lives and their relationship with non-Aboriginal people. This has enabled the championing of their own agendas for Ngarrindjeri people and has created a firm foundation for their relationship with non-Aboriginal people. It was against this backdrop that I established a powerful independent relationship with Aunty Ellen. Her own structural and personal autonomy combined with her personal and cultural commitment to sustaining the practice of weaving across generations created an unhindered space in which to collaborate on the making of the weaving film. This was in sharp contrast to the complexity I dealt with in my previous relationships with the filmmakers. Distinct from being one step removed, I experienced being invited in to contribute to the fulfilment of Aunty Ellen's personal and cultural vision. As she says of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, 'Everything's connected...it's about working together'.

In mid-June, 2009, I had an extended stay at Camp Coorong with the intention of finding a new direction for my project. During this period, Aunty Ellen and I had numerous conversations. The *yarning* we did at this time touched on most of the personal and cultural areas of importance to her. Her discussion about her relationship with her husband and chair of the Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee, Uncle Tom Trevorrow, was as much about their connection as it was about developing Camp Coorong to raise awareness of Ngarrindjeri issues and values. Similarly, it was during a trip to collect the fresh water rushes, that weaving as a source of *yarning* and coming together was raised in conjunction with the importance of carrying the knowledge and practice of weaving on into future generations. It was during one of many conversations about weaving that the idea arose about making a film on the importance of weaving.

The practice of weaving was re-established in the 1980s by a senior elder, Aunty Dorrie Kartinyeri (née Gollan) (Bell 2014: 70). Aunty Dorrie conducted a workshop at Meningie school with a group of Ngarrindjeri men and women. Aunty Ellen

attended this workshop and subsequently became the custodian for maintaining the cultural practice of weaving. Aunty Ellen became the central point of connection with all of the women and she was the nexus point through which I could establish a relationship with the other women. My relationship with both Aunty Ellen and the women who feature in the weaving film developed gradually through a series of short and long-term connections. At first, my meetings with Aunty Ellen were chance meetings, because my attention was primarily on the reburial with which she was partially associated. We saw each other at various events and a familiarity was established through these series of encounters. This familiarity built to the point that when it came time to discuss the possibility of a film about weaving, the ensuing discussion was one between good friends. In reality, we had spent very little time with each other, however, there existed an ease and trust in our relationship that made our working together both timely and productive.

I saw later that the relationship between Aunty Ellen and myself was developed on the basis of non-verbal communication. Our connection in the initial stages of our relationship had developed through a series of unspoken acknowledgements in the form of gestures – smiles, nods, and making simple but connected eye contact. Through this repeated contact, familiarity and trust were built. This level of non-verbal connection was not dissimilar to that which MacKenzie (in Deger 2013) describes in his relationship with Paul Gurrumurwuy. After the establishment of our connection through the non-verbal realm, it then deepened as a result of a number of significant conversations. My trips to Camp Coorong to shoot footage for the film also increased and this was also a contributing factor.

I commenced the filming for the weaving film with Aunty Ellen and Aunty Noreen Kartinyeri in late 2009 in locations in and around the Coorong that included Camp Coorong, Browns Beach and Bonney Reserve. Typically, one shoot would lead to discussion about the time and date for the next shoot. It was in this organic way that the footage for the film was taken. In the period between late 2009 and early 2011, the footage features three principle Ngarrindjeri women, Aunty Ellen Trevorrow, Aunty Noreen Kartinyeri and Edie Carter. Edie is Aunty Ellen's niece and is a generation behind Aunty Ellen and Aunty Noreen. She had immersed herself in multiple projects to do with Ngarrindjeri issues, specifically those associated with the degradation of The Coorong through increased salinity. She

emerged as the obvious person to pass on the practice and cultural significance of the weaving. Just after a number of important shoots for the film, Edie had an aneurism while at a conference in Tasmania. This left her hospitalised and incapacitated for over two years. It is only in the last year that she has returned to live in Meningie to continue building a life for herself and her daughters. Shooting for the film stopped during this period. The halt on the filming continued as a result of the deaths of a number of very important elders, including Uncle George Trevorrow, his wife Shirley and Uncle Matt Rigney. This culminated in the death of Aunty Ellen's husband, Uncle Tom Trevorrow in April, 2013.

I continued to visit Aunty Ellen during this incredibly sad period for her personally, however, made no mention of recommencing the film until mid 2014. Filming commenced again in late 2014 and finished in early 2015. During this time, Aunty Ellen's niece on her brother's side, Deb Rankine, began to emerge as the one to whom Aunty Ellen would pass on the practice and cultural significance of weaving. She had been awarded the Don Dunstan prize for her *sister basket*<sup>75</sup> modelled on one originally made by Aunty Dorrie Kartinyeri and was regularly participating in projects and exhibitions started by Aunty Ellen. It was as a result of Aunty Ellen's direct request that Deb began to participate in the filmmaking process in early 2015. As the filming continued, it became apparent that Aunty Ellen was using the film as a vehicle for establishing Deb as the custodian of the weaving. On numerous occasions throughout this final stage of filming, Deb declared her intention to step into this role. In fact, the final verbal commentary in the weaving film, *Stitch by Stitch: the art and practice of Ngarrindjeri weaving (2017)*<sup>76</sup> comes from Deb when she says,

I will carry it (the weaving) on. Deb Rankine, *Stitch by Stitch (2017)*

Four Ngarrindjeri women feature in the footage shot between 2014 and 2017 — Aunty Ellen, Aunty Millie Rigney (Edie's mother and Aunty Ellen's sister), Alice Abdulla (Aunty Ellen's sister in law, Uncle Tom's sister) and Deb. The total footage

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<sup>75</sup> A sister basket is used by women to carry their personal items and is made from two round or oval pieces joined together and finished with a long handle (Ngarrindjeri Weavers 2013: 59).

<sup>76</sup> From this point onwards, the abbreviated title of the weaving film, *Stitch by Stitch (2017)* will be used. *Stitch by Stitch (2017)* was edited by Philip Elms and Teresa Robinson in partnership with myself and Aunty Ellen.

shot was fifteen hours from which two films have been produced. The first is the film that accompanies this exegesis, *Stitch by Stitch* (2017). The second is a teaching film that documents the steps of the weaving process. The latter was made at the request of Aunty Ellen and Deb Rankine who saw it as critical for the continuation of the practice of weaving across generations.

### **Salient features of the collaborative partnership established with Aunty Ellen Trevorrow by non-Aboriginal researchers**

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Aunty Ellen has established a series of ongoing and long-term collaborative relationships with four non-Aboriginal researchers. There are two salient features about the nature of these relationships (which includes my own). Before I define these, however, it is important to point to one of the critical factors as to why Bell (2014) describes Ellen Trevorrow as a generous human being committed to true reconciliation. When you meet Aunty Ellen, her gracious spirit is one of the first things that strikes you. Aunty Ellen has mentioned many times in our conversations that her husband, Tom Trevorrow was born and raised in the fringe camps on The Coorong. Similarly, Aunty Ellen was born at Raukkan but raised at *Murrungung*, an area where the one mile, three mile and seven mile fringe camps were on the River Murray. She speaks about an abundance of food and fond memories of being raised by her grandmother, Ellen Brown until the age of eleven (2014a:6). Neither Uncle Tom nor Aunty Ellen were institutionalised. Although subject to discrimination, both retained a spirit of autonomy that I argue stems from the absence of institutionalisation that so many Aboriginal people experienced through the Missions and as subjects of the Stolen Generation. This stands in contrast to the subjectification to institutionalisation that the filmmakers I worked with in the first film experienced. This I argue is a possible explanation for their continued mistrust of government run organisations.

The salient features of the relationships established between myself, Diane Bell, Karen Hughes, Jelina Harris and Aunty Ellen, are their long term nature. All have extended beyond a decade. These long-term collaborative partnerships have been characterised at a general level by repeated and consistent engagement that has included multiple interactions and exchange of information in person and via other means when not in the same physical location. While I do not propose to speak for Bell, Hughes and Harris with respect to their own views on the relationship they

have established with Aunty Ellen, I am clear that there are parallels between each of these collaborative partnerships. Many of the commonalities can be attributed to Aunty Ellen, her self-identified status as a Ngarrindjeri woman, and her commitment to foster relationships that create visibility of those issues she considers of vital importance to Ngarrindjeri people. While Aunty Ellen as an individual possesses a unique capacity to foster deep abiding relationships, she is unquestionably a product of the changing environment in which the Ngarrindjeri and Aboriginal people in general, have fought for their self-determination and control over their representations, land and heritage.

The second salient feature of the relationships established by specifically Bell, Hughes and myself, is that all have resulted in a body of material.<sup>77</sup> In other words, rather than the production of a singular piece in the form of a book or a film, there have been multiple articles, books, films and other work that are outcomes of this long term collaborative engagement. This also parallels the multiple products that have come from Jennifer Deger's work with her Yolgnu colleagues. These products reflect the shifts and changes in the relationship over time and the demand or need for a specific type of product to be created to meet this need. These products also extend in many cases beyond the traditional form of a book, article or documentary to include styles and genres that communicate to different audiences and better represent the dynamic nature of a collaborative relationship firmly embedded in the day-to-day, month-by-month, year-by-year expression of that relationship over time. The incorporation of testimony from Ngarrindjeri elders in Bell's *Ngarrindjeri Wurruwarrin: A World that is, was, and will be* (1998, 2014), was the precursor to the inclusion of written styles that better represented these collaborative partnerships. Similarly, Deger's Three Screens installation in the *Christmas Birrimbirr Project* (2011) was designed in keeping with a Yolgnu aesthetic and way of seeing the world. The products that resulted from the collaborative partnership I established with Aunty Ellen, while seemingly more traditional, have incorporated metaphor, testimony and an embodied observational style in the recording of the weaving practice. I will discuss the relationship between the choices I made regarding style, technique and approach in the making of the films and the collaborative process in Chapter Five.

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<sup>77</sup> I have not included Harris here as her work with Aunty Ellen remains incomplete until the completion of her doctorate in 2018.

The discussion of the relationships above point to the development of a collaborative practice that has been fostered as a result of building long term relationships that fit within the environment in which many Aboriginal people operate and identify themselves. This, as I will point to in Chapter Five, is not one that suits the 'living in the community' methodology characteristic of traditional ethnographic fieldwork, rather invites the opportunity to establish an extended relationship that involves the continued partnership of the researcher over time. The nature of this collaborative practice is critical to future work with Aboriginal people and will open up a space through which they speak and aid in the formation of new knowledge.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### The Collaborative Filmmaking Process and Products explored – complexities, contestation and negotiation

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*Aunty Ellen's fingers deftly weave a single rush around a group of rushes that form the central core of the weaving thread and will soon become a basket. She methodically says as she weaves, 'Over, under, and bring it up through, over, under, and bring it up through.' I am transfixed watching her gracefully repeat each loop of the single rush and observing the growing form of the basket.*

I have chosen to open the final chapter of this exegesis with this brief vignette. For me, it is indicative of the changing nature of my personal emotional and sensory experience, as well as the cognitive attribution of new knowledge from one of the critical segments of filming conducted at Aunty Ellen's request.<sup>78</sup> This small vignette holds within it many of the factors that illustrate the successes and failures of this project. Before discussing these, I outline what I initially set out to accomplish in the project before returning to this segment, which is found in both of the films that constitute this project — *Stitch by Stitch* (2017) and the *Ngarrindjeri Weaving Teaching Film* (2015).

#### **Intended Outcomes of the filmmaking site as the research site**

My idea of examining the social relationships between the people represented on screen and anthropologist/filmmaker as they play out within the context of making a film, was an idea that could be seen to be a natural extension of the observations and ideas that anthropologist/filmmakers had already been engaged in regarding their relationships with the people with whom they were working. Using the making of the film as the research site was intended to reveal not only the vicissitudes of the relationships but also to explore the construct of collaboration 'in practice' and gauge how this shaped the visual product. I perceived this space to be the most dynamic and, therefore, the most accessible

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<sup>78</sup> I discuss filming this segment later in this chapter when talking about the changes I had personally as a result of my collaboration with Aunty Ellen and the other women in the filmmaking process.



in terms of examining social relationships. Others have also argued that the space of production is a dynamic and fluid one that breaks down traditional theoretical constructs. For example, Dornfeld (1998: 12) argues that the space of production offers a 'place in between' the traditional binary oppositions of production versus reception, and ideology versus agency. He argues that identities shift and the aforementioned categories meld and blend with each other in this fluid, in-between space. This provides access to relationships as mediated within and by the site of production.

As both the anthropologist and filmmaker, I began the project intending to build my relationships in the project from the basis of collaboration. This was not simply a means to explore collaboration, rather it came from a strongly held position that relationships established within an anthropological project are paramount in the receptivity of the products that come from these relationships. This was one of two major points of exploration in this project. The second was exploring the collaborative approach as one that honours the contemporary environment in which Aboriginal people situate and identify themselves, and the relationships they are willing to build with non-Aboriginal researchers. Taking a collaborative approach from the outset, therefore, was an issue of ethics for me. Having grown up in 'White Australia', I was very much aware of the impact of discriminatory and stereotypical representations of Aboriginal people. Additionally, given the increasing self-determination in Aboriginal communities with regards to the production and ownership of their images (Langton 1993), I was also aware that a new environment now existed in which to negotiate and explore a collaborative relationship with a group of Aboriginal people who were actively engaged in the construction of knowledge they wished to make available to public audiences.

The opportunity of using the making of the film as the site through which to explore collaboration in practice was the opportunity to discover the tenets that defined the relationship between the anthropologist/filmmaker and Aboriginal people in this new space. For me, it was far more of a negotiated and contested space than I expected, given that previous writings about collaboration had painted it as a more uniform process. It was a space where core values of respect, trust and ownership became intrinsic to the development of the project and also to the maintenance of the relationships that resulted in the two films that constitute this project along with

this exegesis. A comprehensive critical analysis of my process is discussed below against the intended outcomes of the project.

## **A critical analysis of my process in the project**

### **Background: Photographer not Filmmaker**

This project was unquestionably a fluid and unpredictable process that had as outlined above, a basis defined by two overarching intentions. Yet at the beginning of the project, I was ill equipped to fulfill either. I commenced my fieldwork as an anthropologist and a photographer. I had never made a film, apart from a few experimental forays in an ethnographic filmmaking workshop run by David and Judith MacDougall in 1997. I was not, and nor did I classify myself as, a filmmaker. However, in this project, I wanted to make a film. Film was the medium through which the majority of the sub-discipline, Visual Anthropology, had found expression and validity amidst many debates with anthropologists. It was also the medium that students of anthropology had been given access to and through which they had come to experience the people anthropologists had written about extensively.<sup>79</sup> Making a film was therefore important to me and I had to train myself to shoot a film. As I will discuss below, this influenced a number of critical choices I made regarding the techniques used and the style of the films I ultimately produced.<sup>80</sup>

### **'In my time I reminisce...' Aunty Ellen Trevorrow *Stitch by Stitch* (2017)**

Driving away from having photographed the reburial of Ngarrindjeri *old people* back to country in 2006, I remember being in high spirits in the knowledge that I had found what I wanted to make a film of. My first foray into the filmmaking

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<sup>79</sup> As I discovered in the research I conducted on the reception of ethnographic films by anthropology students, many of their responses reinforced negative stereotypes and were counter to the humanistic goals of anthropology (Offler 1999). It was on the basis of this research, that I held strong conviction that the way people presented themselves on screen was directly correlated to the nature of the relationship they developed with the anthropologist/filmmaker. I will examine whether the films I made in partnership with Aunty Ellen Trevorrow actually made visible the long term collaborative relationship I established with her later in this analysis.

<sup>80</sup> I use style here to refer to the way the film has been constructed rather than my 'style of shooting'. The cinematic approach I employed in the two films in this project is observational-participatory. The *Ngarrindjeri Weaving Teaching Film* (2015) demonstrates a more embodied observational approach.

process, however, did not match my initial high spirits. I was clumsy, uncoordinated and constantly dealing with the embarrassment of not knowing what I was doing. The Ngarrindjeri filmmakers of whom I was making my first film often guided me in these early stages of my filmmaking practice. This was the first of many inversions in my roles with my Ngarrindjeri colleagues throughout the process of making the three films in this project, a number of which I have already mentioned in Chapter Four, and illustrate the dynamic and negotiated nature of a long term collaborative process.

After developing my capacity to use the moving camera more effectively, I became aware that I was filming through the lens and perspective of a still photographer. This became obvious when I commenced filming the second film in the project, *Stitch by Stitch* (2017). The interviews that had constituted the majority of the footage in the first film involved little movement and thus, the way I was using the camera was not made visible for me. On one occasion where I had travelled with Aunty Ellen, Aunty Noreen and Edie Carter to pick rushes, I found I was holding the camera on a single scene for too long. While it was beautifully framed within the design elements of a still image, the action had moved outside the frame and I was not following it. This awareness saw me begin to develop my skill in following movement in my filmmaking practice. I was equally confronted with the use and incorporation of sound into my visual practice. Again, this was not something I needed to consider as a photographer. There are a couple of important points to make about my rudimentary use of the moving camera as it pertains to the style of the films that were produced in the project. These points are communicated in the following two sections.

The development of my capacity to follow movement did not develop to the point where my sometimes awkward use of the moving camera is not evident in the films. There are a number of occasions in both films where the frame dips as my camera becomes unsteady. An example is the initial footage of Deb Rankine in *Stitch by Stitch* (2017) where she answers my questions while weaving at the bench outside Camp Coorong. Similarly, there are a few occasions where it is possible to hear the sound of me moving the camera or something external touching the microphone. For example, just as Aunty Ellen begins talking through the lineage of women weavers that precede her and those that come after, I

accidentally move the camera leaving a slight rustling on the sound track. While not significantly disruptive to the flow of the film, it does illustrate a lack of proficiency in my camera practice.<sup>81</sup>

My commitment to develop this proficiency in being able to follow movement and work effectively with sound was also a result of the way in which those ethnographic filmmakers I considered my greatest influences and mentors used the camera. Rouch, McKenzie and MacDougall all chose to use the handheld camera in service of being 'in amongst it' — the people, the action and the environment. McKenzie and MacDougall used the handheld camera in a more embodied observational manner while Rouch used it more provocatively to capture action that would *provoke* viewer response.<sup>82</sup> My lack of technical expertise led to a failure on my part to fulfill the immediacy, fluidity and continuity that a proficient use of the handheld camera would have realised, however, there were a number of scenes in *Stitch by Stitch* (2017) that do demonstrate this. I refer specifically to the number of scenes where the *nori* (pelicans) are filmed flying along The Coorong, the opening scene where Aunty Ellen introduces herself as we are driving towards Browns Beach and the scene where I follow her and Jelina Harris into the shed where the rushes are dried. This scene particularly mirrors the scene in *Waiting for Harry* (1980) where Kim McKenzie follows anthropologist Les Hiatt and Frank Gurrmanamana into the bush.

The impact of my lack of technical expertise and the influence of a still photographer's perspective, resulted in an edited film that was not what I had originally envisioned. The following section will outline why the second of the three films made as part of the project, *Stitch by Stitch* (2017), is more a series of visual vignettes rather than a fluid visual evocation of the practice of weaving and Aunty Ellen's relationship to this practice, and how I addressed the absence of this fluidity in the making of the third film.

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<sup>81</sup> The footage of Aunty Ellen talking through the lineage was included at her request and was filmed twice. On both occasions, there were technical difficulties that impacted the quality of the footage.

<sup>82</sup> I note here the powerful scene from *Les Maitres Fous* (1955) where Rouch's camera is right in amongst the dancing of the men possessed by spirits.

### ***Stitch by Stitch* (2017): a series of visual vignettes**

I embarked on the filming for *Stitch by Stitch* (2017) with the vision of making a powerful evocative film in the same style as that of David MacDougall in *Tempus de Baristas* (1993). I envisaged it as a fluid, evolving account of each of the areas of importance to Aunty Ellen Trevorror regarding the continuation of the practice of weaving. The resulting film, as I have discussed above, displays some of this fluidity, but ultimately portrays the issues of central importance to Aunty Ellen regarding weaving as a series of visual vignettes. The re-edited version of the original version of *Stitch by Stitch* (2015) lengthens these vignettes and the key themes explored in the film —the weaving process, the visibility of the practice of weaving through teaching, the passing of the knowledge of weaving on to the younger generation, the environment and the future of weaving.<sup>83</sup> The structure of the film is based on these key themes as these are the areas predominantly discussed by Aunty Ellen while filming. In reviewing my field notes and the transcripts I made of each of the film shoots, these themes emerged as areas that Aunty Ellen repetitively talked about. I selected key statements made by her and one by Uncle Tom, as the introductions to each of the key themes. These are placed as important signposts throughout the film.

Another contributing factor to the construction of *Stitch by Stitch* (2017) as a series of themes and visual vignettes was the nature of my fieldwork and that of the film site, Camp Coorong. As outlined in Chapter Four, my fieldwork is not ‘traditional’ in the sense of living with the community for an extended period. On the contrary, while extensive in length and well beyond that which most anthropologists have engaged in, my fieldwork was marked by multiple short and long-term stays at Camp Coorong. This was an approach that suited the lifestyles of both myself and Aunty Ellen. I was doing my PhD part time and engaged in a multitude of other

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<sup>83</sup> The use of weaving as a means to sit round and yarn and pass on stories of importance, is less visible for a number of reasons. There is footage that is included and some that is not that shows the women talking about the practice of weaving as a vehicle for keeping the stories going and also yarning about the things they are dealing with on a daily basis. Stories are a strong feature of Ngarrindjeri oral tradition (Bell 1998). Knowledge for Ngarrindjeri people is not simply passed from one generation to another indiscriminately. As Bell (1998: 47) writes, “Knowledge is attributed to the elders of this generation and the ‘old people’ who have now passed on, but it takes more than age to be considered an elder. Elders must be wise in the ways of the land and bestow their knowledge on members of their families who are worthy of such wealth.” Stories of cultural significance are therefore not readily communicated and this is the main reason why they are not evident in the film.

activities in my life and Aunty Ellen's life was and continues to be marked by running Camp Coorong, managing a variety of weaving projects, attending funerals (of which there is an average of one a fortnight), dropping grandchildren off at basketball, attending meetings and giving talks and presentations, sometimes in international locations. There were a number of occasions where I had driven down to meet with her and she had been called out to attend to an urgent matter. Equally, as Karen Hughes (pers. comm. 2017) says, 'Camp Coorong is not a place to simply hang out'. Aunty Ellen's lifestyle is mirrored in Camp Coorong as a film site where there are constant comings and goings of researchers, school camps, weaving groups, visitors to the museum and family. In part, the construction of *Stitch by Stitch* (2017) as a series of visual vignettes reflects this diverse array of activity.

It is also largely a reflection of what Aunty Ellen said she wanted and was happy with being in the film with regards to representing those issues about the practice of weaving that she considered most important. As mentioned below, the collaborative partnership between us was not defined solely by Aunty Ellen's wishes. There were many agendas that were negotiated and resolved within the collaborative process underpinning the making of *Stitch by Stitch* (2017). One of the principal points of conflict was the absence of the step-by-step stages of the weaving process in the original version of *Stitch by Stitch* (2015). The following section outlines the process of negotiation behind the resolution of this conflict in the making of a teaching film specifically for the education of later generations of Ngarrindjeri people in the practice of weaving.

### **The Making of the Teaching Film — *Ngarrindjeri Weaving Teaching Film* (2015) as an expression of the collaborative process**

Coupled with the apparent fluidity of the collaborative process in the making of *Stitch by Stitch* (2017) were periods of dissonance and interruption. Ideas from some members of the group differed from those of the others and threatened to add a complexity to a film that already contained multiple themes. During our initial discussions about making a film, Aunty Ellen expressed her desire to capture the process of weaving on film so that a record of this could be passed on to future generations. After the passing of Uncle Tom, she added an additional commitment

to have the film express Uncle Tom's vision and legacy. Deb Rankine explicitly stated that she wanted the film to capture the footage of the weaving so that there is an accurate record of weaving techniques for future generations after Aunty Ellen has passed. I wanted the film to express Aunty Ellen's voice, not just about the practice of weaving but also about her commitment to the land and desire to have the weaving carried on by younger generations. It became apparent that a single film could not effectively communicate all of these agendas. On the foundation of the relationship built between us, Aunty Ellen, myself, and Deb acknowledged these differences. It was agreed that we would make two films, one that focused on weaving through which the visions of Uncle Tom and Aunty Ellen would be carried on into future generations — *Stitch by Stitch* (2017), and the other that would document the process of weaving and provide an educational film for maintaining the techniques and methods of the weaving process. This was a clear demonstration of key principle of respect in the collaborative process (as outlined in Chapter Two), an analysis of which I will develop further below.

While the negotiation between Aunty Ellen, Deb and myself was a smooth one, it belied my own resistance to making what I considered would be a boring, didactic film. I had come into my negotiations with Aunty Ellen about making a film with a firm commitment to not make a film that in anyway reflected the ethnographic films I had been required to sit through as a student. While considering them valuable, I railed against their lack of aesthetic appeal and their linearity. This underlying personal agenda proved a limitation on the construction of the original version of *Stitch by Stitch* (2015), where I consciously chose not to include a lengthy section on the weaving process as it seemed incongruent with the other footage. The decision to make a separate teaching film — the *Ngarrindjeri Weaving Teaching Film* (2015) resolved the issue of content and style at that time.<sup>84</sup>

I shot the footage for the *Ngarrindjeri Weaving Teaching Film* (2015) in one long take. The impact of making this film on my filmmaking practice was indelible. I had

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<sup>84</sup> A further expression of this period of negotiation and resolution in the collaborative process was my choice to include some of the footage I had shot of the weaving process in the re-edited version of *Stitch by Stitch* (2017). Given the realization of Aunty Ellen's commitment to have the stages of the weaving process documented in the *Ngarrindjeri Weaving Teaching Film* (2015), the choice to include several sections of this footage contributed an additional level of knowledge about both the practice of weaving and its place in Ngarrindjeri culture.

approached shooting the footage with the sole intention of fulfilling Aunty Ellen and Deb's commitment to document the stages of the weaving process in their entirety. This was to produce film that would provide an educational tool for Ngarrindjeri people to maintain the practice of weaving. Aunty Ellen directed the entire process, from setting up the table from where she would weave, having examples of different applications of weaving readily available to show on camera, and ensuring the book *Ngarrindjeri Lakun, Ngarrindjeri Weaving* (2013) was on display to illustrate the stages of weaving.

I was there as her agent. I put my eye to the viewfinder, rather than looking at the digital screen. This was one of the legacies from my photographic practice that I found beneficial, as opposed to limiting. I noticed that using the viewfinder gave a greater sense of intimacy to viewing what is in the frame. I pressed record and Aunty Ellen began speaking; 'Naomi, I'm here today to show you the weaving.' From this point on, I became the student and she the teacher. I found myself transfixed by observing her fingers weaving the thread of the rushes. I was drawn to move in closer so as to capture the intricate detail of each movement. It was meditative and I understood why Aunty Ellen had on many occasions referred to weaving as her therapy. It was during the filmmaking process that I became aware that my approach was anything but distant — a historical notion of 'Observational objectivism'. There were in fact, occasions where I was completely unaware of the camera. It was as a result of shooting the footage for the *Ngarrindjeri Weaving Teaching Film* (2015), that I discovered the potency of non-verbal communication in an embodied observational approach.

## **The collaborative process realised on screen and in the filmic product**

I commenced this exegesis by proposing that the nature of the relationship between the anthropologist/filmmaker directly impacts how the people being filmed or photographed present themselves in the visual product. In other words, collaboration is visible in the film or photograph. The natural extension of the use of the connection and intimacy that results from long-term collaborative relationships is that these relationships are represented as powerfully and intimately on screen



as they are evident off screen. Deger (pers. comm. 2013) commented that the quality of the relationship between those behind the camera with those in front of it influences how those in front of the camera present themselves. The nature of the relationship between Paul Gurrumurwuy and Jennifer Deger is clearly based on Deger's (2013a: 357) commitment to 'participatory and long-term practice based research', which she says has allowed her 'to attune to the unfolding demands and dynamics of Yolgnu 'media worlds'.

I argued that there is evidence for collaboration in some of the early photographs taken by Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen in their work with and documentation of the Aranda people. Others, such as Herle (2009), have also argued that there is evidence for the connection between the anthropologist's relationship with the people they were documenting in the images they made. In an extensive study of the images of early anthropologist, John Layard, Herle (2009: 249) suggests that Layard's close connection with the people he was working was mirrored in the close proximity of his camera to the action he was documenting and in fact has greater veracity.

In the two films made as part of this project, there is little overt evidence for the collaborative partnership I built with Aunty Ellen and the other women who feature in the films. I could have made conscious choices to include particular footage that displayed intimate gestures and facial expressions. For example, Jero Tapakan placing her hand on the arm of anthropologist and friend, Linda Connor in *Jero on Jero* (1980). These non-verbal demonstrations of connection were, I argued, evidence of the connection between the anthropologist/filmmaker and person/people being visualised on film. There were many displays of such gestures, body language and facial expression in the footage I shot for the two films, including scenes where we joked together and a poignant scene where Aunty Ellen thanks me for documenting the weaving process, however, these did not fit within the parameters of *Stitch by Stitch* (2017). They would have detracted from the central message about the importance of the weaving and Aunty Ellen's desire to have it carried on. The way I incorporate a discussion about collaboration into *Stitch by Stitch* (2017) is through my opening and closing narration. I then allow the viewer to explore these relationships themselves in their viewing of the film.

I argue that evidence for the collaborative partnership I established with Aunty Ellen and the women with whom I worked is found more off screen and in the spaces that exist between us than on screen. There is a quality in the relationships that comes from having access to another's view of the world that can only happen as a result of long-term engagement. This quality is expressed in the tangible aspects of the filmmaking process, such as the choices about what is spoken on screen, the content that is included, and the locations and people that are invited to participate. Collaboration is an active process and, while it may not be as evident as I would have intended in the films that constitute this project, its visibility is there in Zemiah running in to weave with her Granny, Aunty Ellen picking up the book showing the women weavers in her lineage and showing it on camera, and Edie spontaneously talking about weaving from other materials if the rushes were to die out. The following section gives full articulation to the evidence for collaboration behind the scenes and in every aspect of the process of making the two films that constitute the project.

### **The Practice of Weaving: a metaphor for collaborative practice in ethnographic filmmaking into the future**

In the rhythmical action of bringing multiple threads together and containing them within a series of repeated circular stitches, the parallel with the collaborative process as it developed within the context of making *Stitch by Stitch* (2017) became increasingly apparent to me. Aunty Ellen, myself, Aunty Noreen, Edie, Aunty Alice, Aunty Millie and Deb, all came together at various points throughout the project, each bringing a different perspective and agenda. While only certain members of this group remained at the end of the filmmaking process, the contribution and presence of each member remained and was woven into the fabric of the film as a whole. This single connecting rusher is the agent in this process of connecting everything together. This thread loops around each of our contributions to form the whole. It is a whole, however, that is not necessarily unified as a static piece, rather it comes together through the rhythm and fluidity created by the repetition of each stitch. This central rusher could be likened to the

quality of *resonance* that Deger (2013) identifies in the making of *The Christmas Birrimbirr Project* (2011). There is not one overarching person whose contribution dominates that of the others, rather the film unfolds in the space of the in-between, in the shared space. The single connecting rusher is this space of *resonance* where all the elements are brought together.

This metaphor is visually evident in the film in the movement of the *Nori* (pelicans) flying down The Coorong, the use of slow motion to add emphasis to the rhythmical and textural nature of weaving and the incorporation of Ngarrindjeri songs that underpin the movement of Aunty Ellen's fingers as she weaves. The combination of these non-verbal signifiers, illustrates my commitment to reinforce the underlying themes of relationship, collaboration and resonance that are evident in the films and the exegesis. This sees both the verbal (testimony) and non-verbal (gesture, facial expression, movement) realms being brought together for the audience to access the subjective experience of the Ngarrindjeri women and the weaving process.

MacDougall's collection of essays (2006) focuses primarily on the sensory realm that he argues provides a unique form of communication about culture distinct from the realm of explication. Similarly, Deger (2013) suggests the non-verbal realm constitutes *certain kinds* of knowledges and relationships. She writes,

I was drawn to exploring certain non-verbal modes of engagement and response; interested in sensation and affect as constitutive of certain kinds of knowledges and relationships; concerned with the links between seeing, feeling and knowing, and with creative practice as a new direction for anthropology. (Deger: 2013)

My relationship with Aunty Ellen was unquestionably constituted in part through the non-verbal realm. It is this less visible realm that underpins the connection I created with her and was mirrored in the filmmaking process and in the relationships I formed with the other women who were central to the film. The non-verbal realm was the basis of connection in all of these relationships. Each relationship, as a distinct *encounter* between myself and the other person, contained within it 'the spectre of communication, exchange and presence' (Poole 2005: 159). While Poole talks about photographs as documents of encounter, her identification of the encounter in the process of image making between the

anthropologist and person being represented as that containing communication, exchange and presence, points to the flow of communication and connection evident in the ongoing interactions between myself and the Ngarrindjeri women involved in the making of the film.

This process of relationship building is not static: it ebbs and flows, and takes different forms through the various stages of the image making process. The flow of communication and connection in my relationship with the Ngarrindjeri women is mirrored in the practice of weaving. As I have already suggested, this provides a useful metaphor for capturing the dynamic and fluctuating nature of the relationships constitutive of a new form of collaboration inside the filmmaking process. The consistent flow of the weaver's hands as they bend and turn and weave the freshwater rushes into a network of patterned threads, parallels the thread of communication that has remained constant in my relationship with Aunty Ellen. While not always visible and having periods of physical disconnection, the underlying connection has always been sustained. There is the salient quality of not just consistency, but *constancy* here. The other salient feature is *flow* – the consistent flow of communication and connection. This is visibly evident through movement — the constant movement of the weaver's fingers parallels the constant movement of people's speaking, gestures and body language as they connect with each other within and outside the filmmaking process.

The bringing together of MacDougall's focus on the sensory realm, Deger's (2013) reference to the non-verbal realm, Poole's (2005) identification of communication, exchange and presence, and Grimshaw and Ravetz's (2015) focus on *attunement* creating a space where knowledge that is processual and emergent is expressed, creates a new perspective on the actual process of forming, maintaining and relating collaboratively in the relationships that underpin image making practices. This leaves us, as filmmakers and anthropologists, with new pathways best expressed in film to communicate the breadth and depth of the experiential realm that is encompassed in the complex, intertwined relationships we develop during our work.

## **Future directions for collaboration in ethnographic filmmaking practice in Aboriginal communities: trust, respect and shared ownership**

No project can be made by one single person. But when you've got three or four or five people that work together, talking and planning, over time, we've got a team...Balang (David), you and me and ngarndi (Fiona Yangathu). We share one mulkurr (mind). Our minds talk to each other, our hearts speak back and forth, we share a sense of purpose.

(Paul Gurrumuruwuy in Deger 2013: 3)

Gurrumuruwuy's statement points to an expression of collaborative practice that reflects a fresh approach to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people working together as expressed in my analysis of *The Christmas Birrimbirr Project* (2011). It emphasizes the shared nature of this project, as one based on mutual responsibility, respect and ownership with regards to the relationships within the team and outcome of the project. This statement sets the tone for the critique of my collaborative process in the making of the two films.

There are differences and parallels between the approaches taken by Deger and myself. The differences are illustrated by the distinct histories and relationships with anthropologists fostered by these two geographically and culturally unique Aboriginal groups. The parallels are the general identification of trust, respect and shared ownership as foundational for collaborative partnerships with Aboriginal people that acknowledge and further the agendas of both anthropologist/filmmakers *and* the Aboriginal people with whom they are working.

### **Trust**

I have articulated earlier in this chapter the process by which Aunty Ellen and I developed and sustained a powerful relationship prior to and throughout the filming process. Primarily based on non-verbal communication in the initial stages of our relationship, we established a condition of trust between one another as we negotiated the many barriers and disruptions in the making of *Stitch by Stitch* (2017). In establishing my relationship with Aunty Ellen, I was able to gain credibility with the other women who participated in the making of the film. This was

largely a result of Aunty Ellen's seniority amongst this community of women, which enabled her to request the participation of the others. My role in having them engaged as active participants involved sharing information about the project, and seeking their views and input regarding making this film. Of course, this included seeking their permission to participate in the project, but their active participation centred more on their cultural and personal investment in the making of the film. A parallel can be drawn here with the Yolgnu; as Deger says, 'If the Yolgnu are into it, they turn up' (pers. comm. 2013). Participation is therefore linked strongly with investment, which in turn is derived from a foundation of trust and leads to ownership.

In the latter stages of filming, Deb Rankine came into the project. She was to become one of the critical participants in the film, yet in the beginning of our relationship, I sensed a level of suspicion and mistrust. At one point, she told me that what I had just heard in a conversation between her, Aunty Ellen and I would be good for me to write down in my 'little black book'. In this moment, I experienced a separation from my role as a collaborator in the project and from Aunty Ellen and Deb. At this late stage in the project, this separation was incongruent with the foundation of trust I had established with Aunty Ellen both with respect to our relationship and with the making of the film. This foundation of trust had sustained the project, my relationship with Aunty Ellen, and the film through some significant periods of disruption. I had not anticipated this emergence of mistrust and it took me by surprise. My relationship with Deb, however, did not carry the weight of time nor connection that underpinned my relationship with Aunty Ellen. I had overlooked this. I also realised that there was an absence of personal investment regarding Deb's relationship to the film. The trust I had established with Aunty Ellen was an insufficient foundation for my relationship with Deb and required me to foster a relationship with her independent of Aunty Ellen.

The establishment of a deeper relationship with Deb happened in impromptu circumstances. I had planned to meet with Aunty Ellen, however she had an unexpected trip to Adelaide. I asked if Deb was around and was directed to the back room where a lot of the weaving for various projects takes place. Deb was weaving. I sat down with her and we began to talk. I talked about the film and how critical it was to record the importance of weaving for future generations. I asked

her why she thought the making of this film was important. It was in this moment that Deb became invested in the project as a means to fulfilling a personal and cultural vision to keep the weaving going. She shared with me how she wanted to have a record of Aunty Ellen teaching the weaving so that people visiting Camp Coorong could learn from her after she had passed. Equally, long-time visitors to the Camp could still experience her presence 'on the TV'. Trust was established and from this point onwards, Aunty Ellen, Deb and myself worked closely together to complete the film. On several occasions during filming, Aunty Ellen commented that the film would not be happening if it were not for me. This 'coming together' was poignantly illustrated by MacDougall's (1975) suggestion that long-term association reaches a point where the people being filmed do not notice or care that the camera is on. Similarly, Aunty Ellen and Deb exclaimed during the last shoot of them together, 'She's always filming us' and burst into laughter! We all laughed together. All of us expressed a knowing that important footage was being captured and our mutual commitment to this.

## **Respect**

The foundation of trust in the relationships between myself and the women in the film resulted in a level of respect being established between us. This developed through our long-term association and my participation in exhibition openings, book launches, and the funerals that took place during the project. There were many times during our conversations where I listened to their stories about the weaving, about growing up in the fringe camps, about the degradation of the environment in and around The Coorong and Murray Lakes, and about those they knew who had been taken away and become part of the stolen generation. Many of these conversations have contributed to a constant deepening of my respect for these women, have extended my knowledge of Aboriginal history, and have changed me irrevocably. My reciprocation has been the films, where I have become their vehicle for communicating what is of critical importance to them. Ensuring that the film communicates what they have identified as important has been something I have been continually mindful of and has been expressed in us viewing the footage together, making corrections as required and ultimately making a second film that focuses strictly on the stages of weaving as an educational tool.

Respect has also been evident in a number of personalised interactions between Aunty Ellen and me. When Aunty Ellen and I met to discuss the finalisation of the original version of *Stitch by Stitch* (2015) on the 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 2014, she introduced me to her friend Margie as a 'friend of the family'. This was the first time I had been given a personalised reference that specifically illustrated my connection with Aunty Ellen. Aunty Ellen had granted legitimacy to my participation in her life and our process together in making the film by referring to me as someone connected to her family. This was further reinforced by her recognition of me as the person responsible for the *Ngarrindjeri Weaving Teaching Film* (2015) to her extended family at an informal gathering before Christmas 2016. These acknowledgements demonstrate a deep level of respect that has accrued as a result of the commitment to building an ethical and mutually beneficial long-term association.

### **Shared Ownership**

I entered into making the original version of *Stitch by Stitch* (2015) with Aunty Ellen with an awareness of the manner in which Ngarrindjeri knowledge had been interpreted and distributed by the anthropologists and filmmakers preceding me. Bell (2014) comments that Ngarrindjeri people have a range of opinions about the interpretation of their culture by outside researchers. These opinions vary from favourable to oppositional. It was against this background of multiple interpretations and multiple researchers, that I established a set of verbal and formal agreements with Aunty Ellen regarding the ownership of the film. These agreements were also made with the awareness that Aboriginal people overall had experienced having minimal rights with regards to the representations made of them and how they were distributed (Langton 1993). The condition in which this absence of rights was established began with early anthropologists such as Spencer and Gillen. Morton (2005: xiv) accurately pointed out that the Aranda people did not have ownership rights over the images taken of them and that they were distributed without regard for the impact on the people being represented and their families. In my initial discussions with Aunty Ellen, I made it clear that we would both own the rights to the film and that any distribution would need her approval. We also agreed that she had the right to veto any content she considered inaccurate or inconsistent with her agenda. This verbal agreement was formalised in a written agreement that I had drawn up by a lawyer from Adelaide



Research and Innovation (ARI, The University of Adelaide's research commercialisation arm). This was signed by Aunty Ellen and ensured the legitimacy and legality of our collaborative partnership in making the film. While it was critical to formalise ownership rights to the film, the foundation for this partnership and ownership rights developed organically through the long-term nature of our relationship and the value I placed on maintaining a high level of respectful, ethical conduct.

Early in 2014, I said to Aunty Ellen that she should own the rights to the film. She said it was my film also, so we should share them. I said to her that we would work it out together. It was from this point that our roles in the making of the original version of *Stitch by Stitch* (2015), the *Ngarrindjeri Weaving Teaching Film* (2015) and the re-edited version of *Stitch by Stitch* (2017) ebbed and flowed with our personal and cultural agendas.

In the process of making these films, both the ownership of the content and the distribution of the film, were viewed and identified as shared by both Aunty Ellen and myself. In the latter stages of the filmmaking process, with the foundation of trust, respect and shared ownership having been firmly established, Aunty Ellen began to engineer the content of the film by directing who should be filmed and what she thought needed to be communicated. I took on the role of being the vehicle for recording the information about weaving she considered necessary for the future.<sup>85</sup> Her ownership of the film was communicated at several key points during the making of the films. When viewing the preliminary edit of *Stitch by Stitch* (2015), she turned to me and requested more images of the baskets and of the men weaving. I was able to include the additional images of the baskets, but could not include the images of the men as there was no footage. We agreed that these images would be included in the teaching film. A similar scenario arose with the final viewing of the re-edited version of *Stitch by Stitch* (2017). Aunty Ellen and I had many conversations about content throughout the process of constructing the film, however, on viewing the film she asked if images of Uncle Tom engaged in

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<sup>85</sup> This part of the 'participatory' process and expression of shared ownership is not dissimilar to that which Friedman (2013) identifies in his collaborative relationship with the Budhan Theatre in Ahmedabad, India. As Friedman (2013: 391) states, 'another form of collaboration took place in front of the camera: a series of negotiations between the filmmakers and the members of the Budhan Theatre (and their families) over how much the film should reveal about their lives.'

everyday practices of office work or fixing a car could be included. The last word of her request had hardly left her mouth when she acknowledged that it was probably too late for this to happen, demonstrating both her awareness of and participation in the filmmaking process.

The space of shared ownership is one of constant negotiation, but it is not negotiation driven by the desire of any one individual to have their agenda dominate those of the other members. Rather, it is a commitment to resolving the view of each person inside the shared vision for the film. This was powerfully illustrated in my relationship with Aunty Ellen and our mutual ownership of the film.

My process of building collaborative relationships within the context of making a film over a period of twelve years has substantiated Deger's (2013) view that the establishment of trust, respect and shared ownership are crucial to producing a visual product that reflects the negotiation of individual viewpoints and agendas, and shared vision of the group. I extend this to argue that the core tenets of trust, respect and shared ownership are foundational to the development of this space, and are in fact constitutive of a new space for collaborative practice between anthropologists/filmmakers and Aboriginal people.



Aunty Ellen Trevorrow viewing footage at Camp Coorong. 16<sup>th</sup> June, 2015. Photo: Naomi Offler

## **Outcome of a Collaborative Approach and the relationship to the visual product**

There is an irony in the disjunction that has grown up steadily between anthropologists and filmmakers, in that anthropologists, by and large, have wished film to make increasingly accurate, complete, and verifiable descriptions of what can be seen – that is, of behaviour, ritual, and technology – whereas filmmakers have shown a growing interest in precisely those things that cannot be seen. It was never the physical body that was felt to be missing in ethnographic films. The body was constantly and often extravagantly before us in its diversity of faces, statures, costumes, and body decorations. It was all too easy to present such images with their accompanying exoticism. What was missing was not the body but the *experience of existing in it*. (MacDougall 1998: 121 *my emphasis added*)

MacDougall's commentary expressed in the statement above points to the quest of ethnographic filmmakers to elicit the experiential realm of the subject and to do so in such a way that the viewer is connected and drawn into the world of the subject. My discussion will now focus on the potential directions of the collaborative process in ethnographic filmmaking practice, based on the

exploration of collaboration in both my own and Deger's work. In his extensive written and visual output,<sup>86</sup> MacDougall has examined various approaches to ethnographic filmmaking practice, specifically those that strive to incorporate the 'subjective voice' of the film subjects. His work has created a rich body of knowledge and a practical place from which to discuss potential directions. MacDougall's ideas form an important backdrop to the discussion of the collaborative process in that the techniques and approaches he discusses in relation to eliciting the 'subjective voice' complement the influence that long-term collaborative relationships have on the filmic product.

I propose then to link MacDougall's (1998) idea of film eliciting the *unseen* with my proposal that the foundation and maintenance of long-term collaborative relationships lie in both the *non verbal* and *verbal* domains. It is the domain that MacDougall defines as the *unseen* which calls forth evocation rather than representation, and the personal versus the abstract. Through this domain, the audience may be able to access what it is to experience the world of the subject through the less differentiated realm of feelings, gestures and body language (non-verbal) as well as personal testimony (verbal). It is particularly the unseen and the non-verbal realms, however, that allow access to the experiential or embodied realm of the subject. MacDougall (2006) later referred to this realm as the sensory.

There has been considerable research into the physiological and emotional responses viewers have to moving film that indicates the validity of the emotional and psychological connection viewers have with the subject matter they are viewing on screen.<sup>87</sup> In his research on viewer experience of fiction film, Grodal (1997) proposed that cognitive and perceptual processes are in fact closely linked with emotional processes in audience responses to film. The viewing experience is, therefore, not solely cognitive; rather, both emotional responses and thought patterns arise together when someone views a film. Turvey (1997) extends this by proposing that emotional responses are firmly tied to the audience's perception of

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<sup>86</sup> David MacDougall has published on a diversity of areas, issues and theories regarding ethnographic filmmaking and visual anthropology since his seminal article, 'Beyond Observational Cinema' (1975). His most notable contributions to the written literature on visual anthropology include, 'Transcultural Cinema' (1998) and 'The Corporeal Image, Film, Ethnography, and the Senses' (2006). He is also an acclaimed ethnographic filmmaker.

<sup>87</sup> Please see Grodal (1997), Turvey (1997), Platinga (1997), Smith (1997) and Smith & Allen (1997) for further information regarding this research.

the cinematic image as real. This work, along with the work of Vivian Sobchack (1997, 2004), pointed to the viewing experience of film as embodied. Sobchack expanded this to suggest that the interaction the viewer has with what is happening on screen is multi-sensory. She also proposed that the boundaries between viewer and viewed are blurred and that within a phenomenological framework, an embodied viewer response does not distinguish between that which is represented on screen and what is real.

As with Turvey and Grodal, Sobchack's (1997, 2004) extensive writing on the phenomenology of the viewing experience points to the limitations of basing an explanation of viewer response to film solely on cognitive processes. Sobchack (2004: 54) skillfully brings together the ideas and research of philosophers, visual theorists and neuroscientists to argue for the inclusion of the 'carnal sensuality of the viewing experience' and recognition of the viewer's 'corporeal material being'. This, she says, defines the viewing experience as one where all the senses arise together in a multifaceted response to what is being experienced on screen. This in turn dismantles the prevalent notion that the viewer and that which is being viewed are separate, and that direct experience is somehow more 'real', even 'truthful' than the cinematic experience.

The acknowledgement of the complexity and multi-sensory nature of the viewing experience in conjunction with the changing environment where Aboriginal people are now requesting full ownership, partnership and respect in their work with the anthropologist, indicates the importance of considering and incorporating the nature of the relationships we form with the people with whom we work into our practice and products.

### **Collaboration realised through the approaches of Deger, MacDougall and myself**

Deger, in the *Christmas Birrimbirr Project* (2011) purposely sought out a medium beyond the traditional approaches employed in ethnographic filmmaking with the intention of communicating through photography, video and painted sculptural elements the layered experience of Yolgnu life to both Yolgnu and non-Yolgnu audiences. She chose a gallery space in which to communicate the multiple

elements of the project rather than the linear format of a film. She said she 'felt strongly too that there were other directions that ethnographic filmmaking should be pushing beyond the often slightly cold detachments of the observational' (Deger 2013: 3). Deger's perception of the observational is clearly framed within what has become a standardised notion of the observational as being equated with detachment. While accurate in some cases, her visual application of the shared ideas stemming from the collaborative partnerships formed between herself, Gurrumuwy, Langathu and MacKenzie, reflect the use of an embodied camera that intimately captures scenes of daily Yolgnu life. The sights, sound and texture of the images in the Three Screens Installation of the Christmas Birrimbar Project (2011) draw the viewer into Yolgnu life as lived and experienced, and embody what Gurrumuwy and Langathu regard as a Yolgnu aesthetic. A parallel can be drawn here with Grimshaw and Ravetz's (2009) account of the observational approach taken by MacDougall in *Schoolscapes* (2007) and Barbash and Taylor's *Sheep Rushes* (2007), which foreground aesthetics over dialogue and allow the viewer to immerse themselves in the experience of the daily life of those being filmed.

MacDougall spent much of his theoretical work exploring the possibilities for new directions and approaches in ethnographic filmmaking practice, specifically those that involved the active participation of the subjects in the making of the film. The following statement captures his position on participatory cinema and collaboration:

In the foregoing essay, I sketched a possible future for participatory cinema as one of collaboration and joint authorship between filmmakers and their subjects. Today I am more inclined to see this as leading to a confusion of perspectives and a restraint on each party declaring its true interests. I would prefer in its place a principle of multiple authorship leading to a form of *intertextual* cinema. Through such an approach ethnographic film may be in a better position to address conflicting views of reality, in a world in which observers and observed are less clearly separated and in which reciprocal observation and exchange increasingly matter. (MacDougall 1998: 138)

MacDougall talks about collaboration as potentially softening down or reducing the ideas, positions and points of view of the different authors so there is a melding of these ideas, rather than a clear definition of the different perspectives. His

proposal to create a type of intertextual cinema suggests the possibility of multiple viewpoints being expressed in the one visual product; in many ways Deger's *Christmas Birrimbirr Project* (2011) realises this proposal.

MacDougall argues for difference being clearly defined and expressed, yet in doing so, perhaps forgets that all the coming together of people, ideas and technologies involves the space 'in-between' that Deger (2013: 2) refers to. This in-between space is best articulated in Deger's discussion about the influence of the Yolgnu use of the camera on her own practice. The Yolgnu approach the use of the camera creatively. They use it as a tool to convey their life as it is lived experientially. This approach enables the expression of the many layers that constitute Yolgnu life including the ritualistic, spiritual and functional. These layers, however, are only conveyed by virtue of the moment by moment capturing of the activity and action of Yolgnu life. There is an immediacy and a sense of enlivenment that comes from this approach. Deger (pers. comm. 2013) suggests this enlivenment is a result of the Yolgnu being 'into' the project, how they encounter the world, and what they value. If the Yolgnu are engaged, they participate and this in turn 'spurs creativity...and this world is ever evolving' (Deger pers. comm. 2013). Deger (pers. comm. 2013) says that the Yolgnu taught her about the use of the camera as a *technology of enlivenment*, which differs from the way anthropologists have used the technology of filmmaking. As demonstrated in Chapter Two, the anthropological approach has largely been about recording others and using it to freeze people in time for posterity within a survivalist paradigm. It was only in this 'in-between' space, in the sharing and influence of approaches and ideas that Deger began to use the camera in a similar way to the Yolgnu. This is potently evident in the three screens production of the *Christmas Birrimbirr Project* (2011).

A further expression of this shared space is summed up by David MacKenzie's account of filming *Christmas Birrimbirr Project* (2011) and points to the mutuality of practice between Deger, MacKenzie, Gurrumurwuy and Yangathu:

There's a place that you go to when you're behind the camera which is in a sense very alone. The time and the space that I enter behind the camera is very much an individual one and if we put aside technique and style and the basic operations of the camera, you're still essentially very

isolated, even though I knew that everyone was there and that we'd all had a shared vision. But what makes you come to the decision that you won't just set it up on a tripod and let it unfold in front of the camera? Or you follow something and you go into a place that you're drawn to as well?

Even though you're surrounded by others and I know that you're there, and I know Paul is there and I can actually feel you both watching me. So then there's already established this invisible connection between the three of us. And a trust.

And then I'd always look at Paul and he'd wink or nod, he'd never really say anything. And in there is the beauty of that collaboration.

So that style and that way of filming is shared as well. (MacKenzie in Deger 2013: 5-6)

MacKenzie expands on Deger's notion of the in-between space in the above commentary. The 'knowingness' that the others are there and watching him, informs his filmmaking practice in a way that reinforces trust and most importantly, the actualisation of the shared vision. There is a working together that is both tangible and intangible. It is the intangible connection that is most significant here, as it is this level of connection that comes from what Deger refers to as *resonance* and Gurrumurwuy refers to as *ngayangu* (heart), both of which link back to feeling as being the ultimate source of connection. MacKenzie reinforces this when he says, 'Paul talks a lot about feeling, and I think essentially that's what guided this project. He says it doesn't matter if you're Yolngu or Balanda, it sits above everything and guides everything. It's bigger than any of us. That power, that feeling' (MacKenzie in Deger 2013: 7). Gurrumurwuy says in the documentary version of the project that, 'Yolngu and Balanda (non-Yolgnu), we have very different cultures. But through feelings we can be connected.' It is from feeling as the source of this connection that trust, respect, shared ownership and an overarching shared vision are natural outcomes. This is a mutuality that extends beyond MacDougall's sharing of ideas and the incorporation of different viewpoints. This is a space where, as Gurrumurwuy says,

No project can be made by one single person. But when you've got three or four or five people that work together, talking and planning, over time, we've got a team...Balang (David), you and me and *ngarndi* (Fiona Yangathu). We share one *mulcurr* (mind). Our minds talk to each other, our hearts speak back and forth, we share a sense of purpose. (Gurrumurwuy in Deger 2013: 2)



Having clearly demonstrated that collaborative partnerships built by anthropologist/filmmakers on a foundation of trust, respect and shared ownership with Aboriginal people honour the contemporary environment in which Aboriginal now locate and identify themselves, the question as to how these collaborative partnerships be best expressed in ethnographic film became the natural extension of this research process.

While ethnographic filmmaking practice cannot be identified solely with a particular historical notion of the observational approach, as indicated in the reappraisal of this style by Ravetz and Grimshaw (2009) and discussed extensively in Chapter One, Deger in the construction of The Three Screens installation component of *The Christmas Birrimbirr Project* (2011) was clearly in search of a radical expression that would break the mold of customary approaches. It did break this mold and was a product of the collaborative partnership of Gurrumuruwuy, Yangathu, MacKenzie and Deger. Yet, as with my own project, Three Screens was one component of a larger body of material designed to communicate to different audiences.

My own work and filmmaking practice did not seek this radical approach in the same manner as Deger, but it did express this multiplicity of products in the form of two films and a series of photographs comprising the body of material rather than a single ethnographic film. Having examined the nature of these collaborative relationships in the making of the film as the research site, I then sought to discover evidence for these relationships within a fairly conservative methodology and framework. This was an ethnographic film composed of visual vignettes that reflected the multiplicity of areas of importance to the Ngarrindjeri women with whom I worked and an educational film which I made using an embodied observational approach. I raised the question as to whether the connection I had developed over years with my Ngarrindjeri friends and colleagues was in fact evident in the footage that I had taken. I wondered whether this would be visible? These were the questions I was asking in linking ethnographic filmmaking practice with collaboration.

My approach was to find evidence for the quality of relationships I had formed in the finished product. As Deger (pers. comm. 2013) says, ‘proper collaboration can be seen in the film itself.’ I purposely sought to incorporate the dialogic approach used by the MacDougalls’ so that the presence of the camera became an integral part of the relationships I was forming and incited intimacy, communication and connection. As much as I was out to demonstrate that this would lead to evidence of the relationships I had developed in the visual products, these were not overtly evident in either film. What in fact occurred, as I argued earlier in this chapter, was the production of visual products that reflected the requests made by the Ngarrindjeri women I worked with. The collaborative process was intrinsic to the development of these films and the quality of these relationships is evident in every aspect of making of the films — the information conveyed, the locations chosen, the content included and the yarning that links each of the multiple threads.

## CONCLUSION

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This project, which includes both two films — *Stitch by Stitch, the Art and Practice of Ngarrindjeri Weaving* (2017), *Ngarrindjeri Teaching Film* (2015) and an exegesis, has examined a number of critical ideas concerning the connection between collaborative relationships with anthropologists/filmmakers and Aboriginal people, and the ethnographic filmmaking practice. These ideas have been examined within the practical context of myself as an anthropologist and filmmaker making a film with a group of Ngarrindjeri women about the artistic and cultural significance of the practice of weaving.

The project has a number of key elements that are foundational to examining the link between collaboration, the making of ethnographic film and the way the people being filmed present themselves on screen. These elements when brought together suggest that the relationship between the anthropologist/filmmaker and the people being represented on film can impact the way the people being filmed present themselves on screen. I argue that long-term relationships between anthropologists/filmmakers and the people being represented on film are critical to the production of ethically appropriate visual products.

I explore the connection between long-term relationships and the display of these relationships in the visual product through an examination of the relationships established by early anthropologists with Aboriginal people and their documentation of these people in photographs and on film. My examination of the relationships between Walter Baldwin-Spencer, his colleague, Frank Gillen and the Aranda people demonstrate that early anthropologists developed relationships with the people they were studying that were far more connected than originally thought. The personalised nature of these relationships led to the display of what Poole (2005) refers to as visual excesses. Poole (2005) defines them as excesses because they did not fit the prevailing survivalist agenda of the time, however, they pointed to the personal domain of the relationship between the anthropologist and the people they were documenting. They also pointed to the medium of film as a medium that had the capacity to record these spontaneously expressed facial

expressions or gestures. The presence of a smile or gesture visibly displayed the personalised nature of the relationship in the image.

This identified film as a medium of communication that had the unique capacity to capture the personalised or humanistic domain of anthropology. This domain specifically expresses peoples' lived experiences through personal testimony and non-verbal forms of communication such as spontaneously expressed gestures or facial expressions. These enable an emotional/empathetic identification and connection between the viewer and people being represented on film, resulting in positive identification and expanded understanding.

In choosing to make a film with a group of Ngarrindjeri women, underpinned by my intent to develop strong collaborative relationships, I was able to explore the complex and negotiated process that establishing and sustaining these relationships over time involved. I discovered first hand the numerous moments where I as the anthropologist/filmmaker was impacted by a facial expression or something said that indelibly altered my own perceptions. I also saw the moments where something I said was incorporated into the understanding and knowledge of my Ngarrindjeri colleagues. In between all of this was a fluid space, a space of *resonance* (Deger 2013) in which the film was shaped and molded to reflect both their lived experience and mine, as well as the relationship we had built.

This project demonstrates that collaborative relationships, founded on the intentional development of a long-term collaborative relationship between anthropologist/filmmaker and the people represented on film, has led to a visual product that not only displays the nuances of human expression and their lived experiences, but sees a mutually crafted visual product that represents the 'coming together' of a group of people who were able to negotiate their distinct agendas and sometimes conflicting perspectives. This is a visual product that I argue successfully honours and communicates the expression of cultural difference and the richness of the human domain both on and off screen. It points to new pathways for the effective integration of strong, long-term collaborative relationships with ethnographic filmmaking practice.

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Australian and New Zealand Anthropology Conference (2014)  
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## **Interviews and papers**

Associate Professor Jennifer Deger, James Cook University. Interview conducted at ANU, 2nd October 2013.

Professor Sarah Pink, RMIT. Paper given at The University of Melbourne, 24<sup>th</sup> April, 2013.

Dr Karen Hughes, Swinburne University. Informal conversation. Camp Coorong, 11<sup>th</sup> April, 2017.

Professor Amanda Ravetz, Manchester School Of Art. Doctoral examination feedback. 2017

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