Reflexivity, collaboration and ethical documentary filmmaking: a practice led approach.

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Abstract

This creative practice research concerns reflexivity, collaboration and ethics in authored documentary filmmaking—with a focus on the filmmaker-participant relationship. The written thesis provides a first-hand account and self-reflexive analysis of the production of Freedom Stories, consisting of a feature and six short documentaries. These constitute the creative component of the doctorate and utilise reflexivity in the quest to achieve a more ethical practice.

Recent scholarship has questioned the view of documentary participants as powerless in the filmmaking process, recognising their agency in relationships with filmmakers and the reality of consent as a process of ongoing negotiation, in which a right of veto is considered. Taking this as a starting point, I have employed an explicitly collaborative approach through which former asylum seekers were invited to share their stories of arrival, detention, and eventual settlement in Australia. An important aim was to explore how such an attempt to deal with this asymmetrical power relationship between filmmaker and participant might be carried into the creative product itself to render the filmmaking process more transparent.

The importance of mutual trust and what it means to sensitively engage with participants was central to this exploration. As Freedom Stories features people from the Middle-East, who have often been negatively represented as the ‘other’ in western commentary, I found the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas to be particularly relevant. This kind of filmmaking depends on the quality of the encounter with participants, and in a way, what I have articulated is a kind of heightened ethics of everyday life—the aim of which is to work for the benefit of the participants, not just the film.

This ethical tension permeates the filmmaking process, in which the rounded representation of participants is paramount. In the written thesis, I self-reflexively examine dilemmas experienced during filming and editing, when the processes involved and the imperatives of narrative storytelling tended to work against ethical representation. I also discuss the dilemmas of exploiting personal stories of pain, which are common among asylum seekers.
In experimenting with reflexivity in my filmmaking, I have articulated an approach that incorporates notions of performativity and improvisation. Through analysing the production process, including by means of a Production Journal, I have developed an iterative-reflexive approach to both practice and research.

The conclusions reached confirm the centrality of participants in ethical filmmaking; the importance of a collaborative model in which agency is encouraged; the requirements of personal integrity and self-awareness in the filmmaker; and the necessity of ongoing review as a mode of reflexive ethical practice. Such attributes require an environment that encourages their employment, which is not always the case in the film and TV ‘industry’.

The viability of this collaborative approach has been demonstrated through applying the ideas enunciated to achieve a more ethical practice, a greater transparency, and what might be termed a redemptive aesthetic, which calls on audiences through the performance of the documentary work to engage in deeper empathy with what really matters—that is, the life experiences of the people whose stories are explored on screen.
Accompaniments to the Written Thesis

As a practice led thesis, this written component is accompanied by *Freedom Stories*, a documentary project consisting of a feature film (2015, duration 99 minutes) and six short films (2016, total duration 100 minutes), which I directed and co-produced. The written thesis mainly concerns the making of the feature but reference is also made to three of the shorts (marked below with *). It is recommended that, where possible, the feature documentary be viewed in its entirety before reading the thesis, while the shorts referred to can be viewed as optional extras, if available to the reader.

The entire suite of documentaries is as follows:

*Freedom Stories* (‘the feature’, 99 mins)

Plus:

*Aamer’s Story – Someone I’m Trying to Forget* (19’)
*Amin’s Story – Only Sunday Off* (13’)
*Ferial’s Story – Fighting for my Children* (12’)
*Michael’s Story – A Place to Belong* (19’)
*Mohsen’s Story – Dreaming of Freedom* (23’)
*Najaf’s Story – We are Guests in this World* (19’)

Where the reader has access to the *Freedom Stories* DVD, the feature and all of the shorts will be available for viewing. The DVD is available worldwide via the *Freedom Stories* website (http://freedomstoriesproject.com/shop/) or Ronin Films (http://www.roninfilms.com.au/feature/13158/freedom-stories.html). For ease of location or review, particular film sequences discussed in the text are identified by reference to the *Chapters* and *More Stories* menus on the DVD.

For readers who are accessing this thesis through the University of Melbourne Digital Repository,¹ the main feature film sequences discussed are provided as separate downloadable files, each also being identified in the text by a number and title (NB: because of distribution arrangements and the nature of the digital depository, the entire film(s) are not available by this means).

¹ At https://minerva-access.unimelb.edu.au/.
Alternatively, readers can view the *Freedom Stories* feature and shorts in full via streaming from the Ronin Films website (http://www.roninfilms.com.au/feature/13158/freedom-stories.html), or they may be available on request from your educational institution or a library (e.g. via Kanopy – https://www.kanopystreaming.com/product/freedom-stories).

**NOTE:** Although not accompanying this thesis, interested readers may wish to view other examples of my documentary work referred to in the text, namely:

*Black Man’s Houses* (1992)  
*Hope* (2008)


NB: All the internet links referred to above were current and active on 1 February 2017.
Declaration

This is to certify that:

(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the Doctor of Philosophy except where indicated;

(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used;

(iii) the thesis is fewer than 50,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, figures, maps, bibliographies, references and appendices.

........................................
(Signature of candidate)
Acknowledgements

I wish to thank and pay tribute to all of the *Freedom Stories* participants, named below, who have so generously given of their time and shared their stories—both painful and joyous. Without their trust and wholehearted commitment to the documentary project, there would, of course, be no films worth discussing:

Feature Participants: Mustafa and Amir Jawadi
Shafiq and Mahdiya Monis
Reyhana and Mariam Akhy
Amir Javan
Sheri, Mohammad, Hamid and Ali Shoari
Arif Fayazi
Alana Elias
Jamila Ahmadi
Parviz Avesta

Shorts Participants: Najaf Mazari and family
Dr Aamer Sultan
Mohsen Soltany Zand
Michael Aboujundi
Ferial and Fatin Al Khil Khali
Amin Sherzad

Because of the number of participants, I have provided in Appendix A, thumbnail photos and brief background descriptions of each. The reader can refer to these to help identify who’s who.

Extra thanks go to those participants who feature in this written thesis and have permitted me to discuss our filmic relationships. I also acknowledge those former asylum seekers who declined to participate in filming but actively supported the project, including Mustafa Najib and Shahin Shafaei. I have learned so much from all of these people and it has been a privilege to collaborate with them.
Documentary filmmaking is a collaborative effort all round, and I thank the members of the *Freedom Stories* production team for their commitment, support and creativity—especially producer Lisa Horler, editor Uri Mizrahi, principal cinematographers Philip Bull, Jenni Meaney and Peter Zakharov, and composer Brett Aplin. A full list of the feature credits is attached as Appendix G.

Appreciation is also due to the members of the *Freedom Stories* Advisory Panel (see feature credits for details) and to those individuals and organisations that provided financial assistance to the production. Here I acknowledge the support of Screen Australia, Film Victoria, Bokhara Foundation, John T. Reid Charitable Trusts, R.E. Ross Trust, Scanlon Foundation, Victorian Multicultural Commission, Amnesty International and the University of Melbourne, as well as the Documentary Australia Foundation and Creative Partnerships Australia, which both provide mechanisms for channeling philanthropic grants to films.

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I express my appreciation to Professor David MacDougall for his inspiring documentary work (both practical and written), and for giving time to meet and correspond with me during the course of this research. My thanks also go to Dr Kate Nash, whose pioneering PhD on the experiences of documentary participants, and further writings, have been sources of reference and stimulation.

The VCA School of Film and Television has been my workplace and a spiritual home for the better part of two decades, and my colleagues there, the students I have learned from, and my fellow practitioners in the documentary community, have all been constant
sources of inspiration. I hope that this thesis gives back something of practical use, including to future generations of documentarians.

No list of acknowledgements would be complete without paying tribute to my wife, Dr Anne Cloonan, and my family and friends, who have provided steadfast sustenance, love and support—as well as great tolerance when I have failed to emerge from my study for long periods.
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Introduction

Editorial note on writing style

I have chosen to use a first person voice in the writing of this thesis because doing so mirrors the theoretical position taken. Its deployment addresses the reader in a personal and vernacular manner consistent with the ethical practice that I am advocating. In articulating a kind of heightened ‘everyday ethics’ in my relationships with documentary participants I believe this personal style is suited to the diarist, anecdotal, reflexive and, at times, conversational exposition that structures the work.

I am aware that this methodological style resists conventions of impersonal academic writing (just as my films are at odds with conventions regulating factual television). It invites the reader to receive the text in a spirit of critical collaboration and empathy, consistent with the ethical imperatives central to the arguments developed.

Moreover, the second half of this written thesis (Chapter Three onwards) contains quite intimate discussion of particular participants and their personal stories, and I would ask that readers respect that intimacy and treat the material with the kind of sensitivity and reserve that it deserves.

It should also be noted that, whilst generally using the past tense to discuss the making of Freedom Stories, as is common practice in writing on film, when describing the content of the documentary feature or shorts I will use the present tense. Because Freedom Stories consists of a feature and six short documentaries, I shall refer to the project in the plural, i.e. ‘films’ rather than ‘film’.

In the literature, it is common usage that documentary participants are referred to as ‘subjects’. However, I prefer the term ‘participant’ because ‘subject’ can refer to the subject matter of a film, potentially creating confusion. I also tend to use the term ‘sequence’ rather than ‘scene’, finding the latter too resonant of fiction filmmaking.

Finally, all references to starting times pertaining to film sequences will be written in the standard format of hours:minutes:seconds (e.g. 00:15:30 refers to 15’ 30” into the film).
A note on Australia’s asylum seeker policy

For the benefit of overseas readers or others who may not understand Federal Government strategy, I provide this brief explanation. For some 25 years, Australia has operated a bi-partisan policy of the indefinite mandatory detention of asylum seekers arriving by boat without documentation. This is despite the right—instilled by the United Nations Refugee Convention of 1951, to which Australia is a signatory—of anyone fearing persecution to seek asylum in another country.

Around the period of 2001, when the Freedom Stories participants arrived, there were a number of mainland detention centres, of which the Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre was one, and the Howard Government also introduced offshore processing on Christmas Island and Nauru (since joined by Manus island). There being no limit imposed on the duration of mandatory detention, asylum seekers remained incarcerated until such time as they were either accepted or rejected as genuine refugees.

Prior to 2001, the Howard Government introduced Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) for refugees released from detention, enabling them to live in the community. However TPVs were of limited duration and forbade either family reunion or travel from Australia by the holders. A typical scenario for Freedom Stories participants would be 1–3 years in detention and several more on a TPV, meaning that they lived for years with no hope of permanent residency, or of bringing their immediate families to join them. The Rudd Labour Government abolished TPVs in 2007, but they were reinstated by the Abbott Government following its election in 2013.

Today there are various types of temporary visas in operation, including bridging visas, which severely limit the rights of holders. Furthermore, the current Government’s stated position—in support of its election platform of ‘stop the boats’—is that no asylum seeker arriving by sea will ever be allowed to settle in Australia. This has led to ongoing and prolonged periods of offshore detention for people whose asylum applications have been rejected, or for whom a third country of settlement cannot be found (which applies to the vast majority of those accepted as being refugees).
Setting the scene

Like life, documentary filmmaking is full of surprises. For example:

In a suburban lounge room, two men are being interviewed. One moment they are chuckling heartily over old photographs of themselves, and then, in the next moment, one of them is overwhelmed by tears and cannot speak. In another lounge room, a mother and daughter argue about whether the immigration detention centre they were in was a haven or a hellhole. In the head office of a busy construction company, one of its directors picks up a dambora and sings a Hazara love song.\(^2\) In a shopping mall, a young man and his 94-year old Australian ‘mum’ joke at the camera with comments such as: ‘Come on, let’s action’ and ‘I can’t stop, I’m on Candid Camera’. In yet another lounge room, a middle-aged woman dismisses a question about why she wants to be a truck driver when she could drive taxis with the reply: ‘No, no, taxis are too small’.

What is the common factor between all these people and these brief but surprising moments? Apart from the fact that they are all former asylum seekers who are now Australian citizens, the answer is that they are collaborating with me in the production of a documentary project entitled Freedom Stories (Thomas 2015/16), the making of which is the subject of this thesis.

As I write this, other moments, happy and sad, come to mind, some prompted by notes in my Production Journal. My reflection on these and the processes involved, constitute an attempt to examine my documentary practice in the context of a particular ethical approach, which I have previously termed ‘collaborative’ (see Thomas 2010). In undertaking this self-reflexive investigation, I aim to go beyond documentary scholar Bill Nichols’ important ethical question about ‘what do we do with people when we make a documentary?’ (2001, p. 5). For example, what do our participants do with us? And how do we all deal with the resulting material?

This research comes at a time when the debate about documentary ethics has begun to shift, as recent empirical research has revealed a different picture of what happens on the ground to that represented in the standard texts (eg. Aufderheide, Jaszi & Chandra 2009;

\(^2\) A long-necked, stringed instrument from Afghanistan.
Nash 2009; Sanders 2012). Past literature has tended to consider the well-worn issues of informed consent, exploitation, filmmaker responsibility, privacy and ownership as negatively affecting documentary participants, but these studies show that the latter are far from powerless, exerting both agency and resistance. At the same time, filmmakers regard consent much more as a process of consultation than has been previously acknowledged. As succinctly summarised by Kate Nash in her doctoral study of the experiences of documentary participants, who have long been regarded as victims of the process: ‘In place of rights, principles and consent I found myself focusing on issues of trust, power and meaning’ (2009, p. 9).

In her PhD thesis on the negotiation of cooperation and conflict between documentary makers and their participants, Willemien Sanders argues that the discrepancies between the normative view of scholars on what constitutes documentary practice and what actually happens on the ground necessitate ‘a paradigm shift, to include the contribution of the participant to the project’. Thus:

> ethical considerations need to take into account the participant’s co-creatorship rather than start from a presumed necessity to protect her as a vulnerable victim (Sanders 2012, p. 7).

This renewed focus on the filmmaker-participant relationship is revealing, but what’s missing are detailed, first-hand accounts by documentary makers regarding their negotiation of the day-to-day ethical terrain of their creative practice. The practical hindrances to outsiders observing filmmakers working in intimate situations, means it is vital for the latter to reflect on the process. Sanders concludes that:

> The filmmakers and producers I consulted in my project were not keen on letting a researcher get involved during the making of a film for fear of interference with their own projects. I would consider it a challenge to develop a project in which an investigation of the practice is an integral part of that practice (Sanders 2012, pp. 248–249).

Nash also laments the lack of knowledge about documentary makers’ attempts to work collaboratively:
Given the problems raised by assuming a collaborative relationship with participants, little is known about the extent to which filmmakers have attempted to work collaboratively and the extent to which this is seen as a solution to issues of power in the documentary relationship (Nash 2009, p. 73).

While an insider perspective may have its limitations, the opportunity provided through the academy to reflect on my own practice has generated insights that I contend offer new scholarship to the field, and will contribute both pedagogically and to the practice of others. As well as developing means of critical self-reflection, my practice provides a window into the contemporary nature of documentary making, with particular reference to the conduct of filmmaker-participant relationships in projects that utilise personal stories. In this context I am primarily concerned with independent, authored, longitudinal, socially engaged filmmaking that entails elements of interviewing and other forms of intervention, as well as observation. This is largely in opposition to mainstream ‘factual content’, such as TV documentaries, so-called reality TV and infotainment.3

In my prior Masters by Research (Thomas 2010) exploring collaboration as an ethical approach to documentary making, the central question concerned what collaboration might actually mean. An important question arising from that was whether, or to what degree, an attempt to be more ethical should be carried into the film product itself, so as to render the filmmaking process more transparent and therefore more ethical. In other words, should one include some ‘discussion’ of how the film was made as well as what was made? Moreover, is it possible to make a documentary which seeks to be reflexive about the mechanics of its making without diverting too much attention from the stories of the participants? Is such an articulation of practice possible?

Other questions that this thesis considers include what a collaborative approach might signify in terms of ideas about ‘sensitive engagement’ (rather than ‘informed consent’) (Nash 2009, pp. 37–39) and its ethical traction; who is really in charge and responsible for the documentary process; and what are the day to day implications of the power relations involved? It also addresses specific ethical dilemmas such as the degree to which documentary exploits others’ pain, and the seemingly inevitable tendency (even in

3 See Sanders (2012, pp. 18–19) for a discussion of what she calls ‘author documentary filmmaking’.
a collaborative approach) for participants to be only marginally involved in what is perhaps the most ethically difficult part of the process, that of editing. The links between ethical stance and aesthetic choices (or consequences) are also explored.

Because a completed documentary only partially tells the story of the ethics of its making, the decision to explore these kinds of questions has necessitated turning my filmmaking practice into a process of enquiry; an enquiry not into the content of the film I happened to be making but into the process of making it. The field of production then, is the primary field of this research. Of course it is not possible to entirely separate a film from its production because the kind of film being made—its purpose, approach, content and style, not to mention its ethical stance—all influence its making and vice versa. Ethics and aesthetics are intrinsically linked (e.g. see Donovan 2006, p. 18).

It is also the case that at the same time as reflexively examining the filmmaking process, I have experimented with reflexivity in my stylistic approach to Freedom Stories itself. Whilst I could have explored these questions in relation to any documentary I was engaged in making, I had Freedom Stories in development when I began my PhD candidature, so this project became both the context for my research and the creative practice component of this doctorate.

This written thesis is empirical in nature because it relies heavily on my own observations whilst incorporating the scholarship of others and, to some degree, the voices of my participants. It emanates from my engagement with participants in the collaborative effort of making a documentary. I began with no other hypothesis than that I would learn from this and no particular theoretical position other than my basic belief in the primacy of the filmmaker-participant relationship and the importance of trying to be ethical in dealing with other people’s lives.

I should add here that although documentary ethics is at the core of this thesis, I am not seeking to discover or impose any particular ‘ethical code’ on documentary as a film

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4 I will occasionally refer anecdotally to viewer responses as well, based on feedback at screenings etc., but I don’t intend to focus on audience here.
form. This would not be appropriate given its diversity and situation-specific nature.\(^5\) I concur with Nash that the relationship between documentary theory and practice is ‘broadly, situationist, concerned with the flexible application of moral theory within specific contexts’ (Nash 2012, p. 319). Furthermore, Aufderheide et al. point out that filmmakers argue ‘routinely for situational, case-by-case ethical decisions’ (Aufderheide, Jaszi & Chandra 2009, p. 1). Nash concludes that their research, as well as the writings of scholars such as Brian Winston (2000), suggest ‘that a situationist framework best captures filmmaker’s [sic] experience of moral deliberation’ (Nash 2012, p. 321).

In this thesis, I attempt to reflexively examine the practice of making a documentary project that itself employs strategies of reflexivity—producing a kind of reflexive double-bind. The films are reflexive, not least because I take Stella Bruzzi’s stance that there is no documentary until it is performed for the camera (2006). She argues that the ideal towards which observational documentary has traditionally aspired, that of an unmediated representation of truth, is an ‘unrealizable fantasy’, and that such documentaries:

should admit the defeat of their utopian aim and elect instead to present an alternative ‘honesty’ that does not seek to mask their inherent instability but rather to acknowledge that performance – the enactment of the documentary specifically for the cameras – will always be the heart of the non-fiction film (Bruzzi 2006, p. 187).

This position of exploring alternative honesty, or what I call transparency, was a central tenet in producing *Freedom Stories*, a documentary project that facilitates the self-advocacy of former asylum seekers in telling their stories of arrival, detention and subsequent settlement in Australia. The project further developed what John Hughes has referred to as the ‘recessed first person’ approach of my previous films (Hughes 2007) and has been inspired by, among other things, the writings of David MacDougall and the moral philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas.

\(^5\) For a discussion of related codes of conduct and their relevance or otherwise, see Thomas (2010, pp. 25–31).
I have striven to avoid objectifying Middle-Eastern, Muslim refugees as ‘the Other’, and relied on MacDougall’s belief in film’s transculturality—that through its particularity it evokes the universality of human experience (1998, p. 19). Within the Freedom Stories films I have experimented with reflexivity, both overt, as expounded by Jay Ruby (2005), and sub-textual, as articulated by MacDougall (2006). At the same time, I have sought to make work that is accessible, engages a wide audience, and, although acknowledging my involvement, avoids self-indulgence.

The outcomes of this PhD then are twofold. Firstly, there is the filmic product itself, including the completed feature documentary and its associated iterations—such as additional short films, out-takes and rough-cut sequences—that are referred to. Secondly, there is the analysis of the production process, which was documented primarily in the form of a Production Journal that I kept throughout.

**Research methodology**

As the sensory ethnographer and academic Sarah Pink points out, in creative research, methodology is often developed in parallel with the research and as the project develops, rather than articulated beforehand. The project determines methodology and methods rather than vice versa (Pink 2007, p. 5). The sociologist and ethnographer Karen O’Reilly has defined an iterative-inductive approach to research. An inductive approach ‘is one where the researcher begins with as open a mind and as few preconceptions as possible, allowing theory to emerge from the data’, while an iterative approach ‘moves back and forth between theory and analysis, data and interpretation’. Both must be applied reflexively in order to acknowledge the subjectivity involved (O'Reilly 2009, pp. 104–105).

In taking such an approach to the research for this written thesis, I have borrowed or adapted aspects of several established methodologies on a ‘needs’ basis because they seem practically useful, rather than constituting any integrated, over-arching methodology. These include elements of Reflexivity, Reflexive Ethnography, Narrative Inquiry, Grounded Theory and Reader-Response.
Reflexivity is a somewhat slippery notion, having various meanings in different contexts. In its broadest sense it refers to the process of ‘consciousness turning back on itself’ (Siska 1979, p. 285). Without dwelling on its philosophical roots, the term first took hold in the social sciences with a growing awareness of the inherent biases in research.

Importantly, reflexive thinking is more than reflective thinking. Rudolph Makkreel suggests that reflection leads consciousness outside itself, whereas the reflexive allows consciousness to relate to itself. He sees the reflective and the reflexive as equivalent to ‘centrifugal and centripetal moments of awareness’, so that:

The reflective operates on the level of judgment and compares possibilities of ever wider scope. The reflexive is not necessarily judgmental, but involves a sense of one’s own standing in terms of one’s actual place and distinctive stance. This polarity of the reflective-reflexive turns out to provide consciousness its ultimate bearings (Makkreel 2004, p. 223).

Since the ‘reflexive turn’ of the 1980s and 1990s, reflexivity is commonly presented in the literature as a circular or bi-directional relationship between cause and effect, with both the cause and the effect affecting one another in a manner in which neither can be assigned as causes or effects. In this sense, reflexivity comes to mean an act of self-reference where examination or action bends back on, refers to, and affects the instigator. This is reflexivity as a kind of ‘feedback loop’, a process of continual change and development as self questions self. It describes the methodology I have tried to apply to the development of this thesis as well as to *Freedom Stories* itself.

Reflexive Ethnography is sometimes viewed as a sub-genre of Autoethnography, a relatively new approach to research and writing that combines aspects of autobiography and ethnography (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2010, p. 4). It has developed from the desire of researchers to:

concentrate on ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2010, p. 2).
Autoethnographic and Reflexive Ethnographic approaches take account of the researcher/filmmaker’s own background and story. If I am to be reflexive then it is not a matter of simply turning the camera or attention onto myself, but of examining why I wanted to make Freedom Stories and how those reasons might have affected the project. Whilst the film’s participants are central, my own story was also relevant in determining the direction and concerns of the documentary. This is part of the autobiographical aspect. Another is how my process of self-reflexivity affected and changed the film as the project proceeded. Furthermore, as that self-reflexivity has continued during the writing of this thesis, it will also change my future filmmaking.

A reflexive ethnographic approach serves both my filmmaking and research methodologies. Karen O’Reilly succinctly summarises the way that it works:

Reflexive ethnographers think carefully about who has the power to say what about whom, and make sure that research participants (not subjects) have some influence or say over the research and how it is presented … They include some analysis of wider structures of power and control. They try to be honest about who has what influence over their work. They describe the context of the research and their place in that context, and perhaps provide some autobiographical details to help the reader understand their perspective better. They engage in conversations with research participants, rather than subjecting respondents to interviews. They learn from their own experiences, and build their analyses in interaction with the field, in an iterative-inductive way. Finally, they provide accounts that they realise are fragments, just part of a picture, fallible, and imperfect (O’Reilly 2015, N. pag.).

Grounded Theory is an iterative (i.e. evolving) approach to qualitative research that develops theories about phenomena grounded in observation. Initial research questions are generated and then refined as the research progresses, meaning that data collection and analysis proceed simultaneously. Core concepts are gradually identified, eventually leading to ‘conceptually dense theory as new observation leads to new linkages which lead to revisions in the theory and more data collection’ (Trochim 2006, N. pag.).

Grounded Theory is complex, but at its simplest, employs key analytic strategies such as memoing and coding. Memoing is a strategy for recording the thoughts and reflections of
the researcher throughout the research process. In my research, I kept a Production Journal for this purpose. Coding is a way of categorising data for analysis. In my research, I applied a simple coding method to the Journal to see what key themes were emerging. Narrative researcher Kim Etherington recommends the keeping of a research journal as an important tool in reflexive research (2004, pp. 99, 127–128).

I also utilised and adapted Reader-Response Theory, which is another reflexive means of data analysis. At the end of the production process, and with the benefit of hindsight, I re-read my Production Journal and made notes alongside the entries. Through this reflexive process, I recorded new thoughts and ideas about what I had written over a two to three-year period. As recommended by Mauthner and Doucet (2003, p. 419), I used a worksheet layout for this, pasting the Production Journal notes into one column and adding my reactions and interpretations into an adjacent column. I used a third column to code the themes of my journal entries (see sample page at Appendix D).

Narrative Inquiry is a qualitative research methodology that utilises ‘field texts’ of various kinds in order to understand how people create meaning through narratives (Clandinin & Connelly 2000). Conversational interviews are one interactive means by which filmmaker and participant interact to produce a mutually meaningful narrative. In the making of Freedom Stories, verbatim interview transcripts were made and in discussing the ethics of particular situations that arose (see Chapter Four), I have gone back to the transcripts to help understand what was going on.

Having referred to various research methodologies, aspects of which have been recruited to the development of this thesis, I now provide an overview of the thesis.

**Overview of the written thesis**

Chapters One and Two of this thesis combine what is essentially a literature review with discussion and conclusions about an appropriate model for a collaborative relationship between documentary filmmaker and participant that embodies sensitive engagement and is ethical in dealing with personal testimony. Chapters Three to Five constitute a personal

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6 In reader-response criticism the reader is usually different to the author.
account and reflexive analysis of the making of *Freedom Stories*, highlighting some of the ethical dilemmas and outcomes that occurred, and drawing conclusions that contribute to documentary theory and practice.

More specifically:

In Chapter One, I explore issues of transparency and ethics in documentary filmmaking through an examination of reflexivity in film and MacDougall’s notion of inherent or deep reflexivity. I also discuss notions of performativity and, in particular, Bruzzi’s argument that documentaries are performed for the camera. This leads to consideration of the multi-sensorial nature of filmmaking and the roles of both authorship and the dialogic ‘interview’, the latter being central to my documentary method.

In Chapter Two, I focus on the filmmaker-participant relationship and the qualities required in an ethical approach to this relationship. In particular, I draw on the ideas of Emmanuel Levinas in relating to the Other and the obligations inherent in this, as articulated by scholars such as Renov, Nash, Piotrowska and Saxton. This leads to discussion of the importance of listening and the inherent vulnerability of the filmmaker as well as participant(s). I enunciate the characteristics and implications of an ethical, collaborative relationship, including notions of sensitive engagement, commonality versus difference, the central role of trust, and the issue of a right of veto for participants over content, which has been a matter of controversy in documentary debates.

Chapter Three provides some autoethnographic context to my interest in the subject matter of *Freedom Stories* and an overview of my filmmaking method as applied during its production. I discuss the search for participants and kinds of engagement that ensued, ranging from co-operation to co-creation. I also summarise the thematic issues that came through most strongly in my Production Journal, via a simple, quantitative coding analysis. Notable in this is the ethical complexity of editing and the vulnerability of the filmmaker in a collaborative approach. This prepares the ground for the analysis of my filmmaking practice in Chapters Four and Five.

Chapter Four examines the process of filming with participants and focuses on examples of four aspects of this, each with its own ethical implications and dilemmas within a collaborative practice. These are negotiation, improvisation, reflexivity and interviewing.
In particular, I explore in hindsight four examples of differing effects of the interview process on participants when dealing with stories of pain. These cover confession, dissent, resistance and revelation.

Chapter Five examines the processes of editing and consultation during post-production, particularly in light of the ethical dilemmas raised by the relative absence of participants from the lengthy editing process. I focus on five aspects of this process and their ethical implications. These involve a range of participants and cover representation; the reality that participants’ lives continue after filming is concluded; ethics and aesthetics; approval and consent; and participant agency.

In the Conclusions, I attempt to draw together some of the epiphanies that occurred during the making of Freedom Stories and the analysis of the production process. I shall claim that this project has confirmed the efficacy of a collaborative approach in achieving more ethical and transparent outcomes and that the aesthetic sensibility that emerges as a consequence invites a deeper empathy from audiences towards the participants, who are the raison d’être of the documentary project.
Chapter One – Reflexivity, Performativity and Ethics

Reflexivity and documentary film

Reflexive works break with art as enchantment and call attention to their own factitiousness as textual constructs (Stam 1992, p. 1).

In the context of film, reflexivity has traditionally been defined as the breaking down of the ‘fourth wall’, that between screen and audience, in ways that reveal the filmmaking process, remind viewers that they are watching a film, and/or address the audience directly. By definition, this kind of reflexivity is deliberate on the part of the filmmaker because it is either planned or allowed to be included.

In categorising various modes of documentary address, Bill Nichols defines reflexivity at its most basic as a mode ‘that calls attention to the assumptions and conventions that govern documentary filmmaking’ (2010, p. 49). Expanding on this, he declares that reflexivity causes us as viewers to refocus our attention:

Rather than following the filmmaker in his or her engagement with other social actors, we now attend to the filmmaker’s engagement with us, speaking not only about the historical world but about the problems and issues of representing it as well (Nichols 2010, p. 194).

This focus on how things are represented, rather than what is represented, connects reflexivity with ethics. According to Nichols, the self-conscious and self-questioning mode of reflexivity ‘prods the viewer to a heightened form of consciousness about his or her relation to a documentary and what it represents’, shifting the viewer’s level of awareness. Thus:

Reflexive documentary sets out to readjust the assumptions and expectations of its audience, more than to add new knowledge to existing categories. “Let’s reflect on how what you see and hear gets you to believe in a particular view of the world”, these films seem to say (Nichols 2010, pp. 196–198).

My interest in reflexivity and its ethical implications in documentary making has emerged from my previous practice, culminating in the completion of a Masters by

Because I was working with one central participant who was highly motivated, this project provided an ideal opportunity to explore the notion of collaboration in the making of a socially engaged documentary.

My intent with collaboration (rather than merely cooperation or participation) was to address the power imbalance which, in the words of documentary maker and scholar Brian Winston, ‘remains the besetting ethical problem of the documentarist/participant relationship’ (2000, p. 147). By facilitating Amal’s self-advocacy, rather than speaking on her behalf, I hoped to empower her through a more considered approach to the filmmaking process. I wanted to answer the practical question of what one might do to work more (or most) ethically in a situation of longitudinal filmmaking with a participant sharing her personal story. My Masters thesis took a case study approach, reflecting on the collaborative model I developed in making *Hope*, how it worked out in practice and some of the ethical questions and dilemmas that arose.

Out of this grew my concern with the filmic product as much as the creative process. Having attempted to address issues of transparency in the filmmaker-participant relationship I was left with the uncomfortable knowledge that the filmmaking process itself is distinctly opaque, particularly given the multifarious devices of selection, editing and editorialising that are employed behind the scenes. In addressing issues of authorship and the documentary filmmaker’s voice, Nichols argues that:

> Very few seem prepared to admit through the very tissue and texture of their work that all filmmaking is a form of discourse fabricating its effects, impressions, and point of view. Yet it especially behoves the documentary filmmaker to acknowledge what she or he is actually doing. Not in order to be accepted as modernist for the sake of being modernist, but to fashion

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documentaries that may more closely correspond to a contemporary understanding of our position within the world (Nichols 2005, p. 19).

Here Nichols cites the oft-quoted examples of the work of Dziga Vertov (Man With a Movie Camera 1928), Jean Rouch (Chronicle of a Summer 1961), David and Judith MacDougall (Turkana Trilogy 1977–1990) and Trin T. Minh-ha (Surname Viet Given Name Nam 1989) as exponents among a minority of auteurs who have addressed this imperative. Usually though, the most that can be gleaned about a film’s production process is what we read in the credits, and sometimes in reviews or interviews with the filmmaker(s). Thus, the notion of including in a film some sense of the process and its authorship becomes an important ethical consideration.

In putting the case for a reflexive approach to documentary, the visual anthropologist and scholar Jay Ruby has argued that it is not sufficient for documentary makers to merely strive to be objective and refuse to explain their methods on screen for fear of being accused of self-indulgence. Nor should they simplistically subscribe to the idea that for an audience to see backstage destroys the illusion and breaks their suspension of disbelief (2005b, p. 35). According to Ruby, documentary makers need to acknowledge that neutrality is a myth and that they show us their view of the world whether they mean to or not. Thus:

assuming a reflexive stance would be to reveal all three components—to see things this way: PRODUCER-PROCESS-PRODUCT and to suggest that unless audiences have knowledge of all three, a sophisticated and critical understanding of the product is virtually impossible (Ruby 2005b, p. 35).

Moreover, a device such as seeing the filmmaker in the frame (i.e. on screen) may tell us little because one can be self-referential without being reflexive:

Being reflexive means that the producer deliberately and intentionally reveals to his audience the underlying epistemological assumptions that caused him to formulate a set of questions in a particular way, to seek answers to those questions in a particular way, and finally to present his findings in a particular way (Ruby 2005b, p. 35).
The question then, is how can the ‘product’ be revealed within itself without resorting to a distracting diatribe about the filmmaker’s intentions and methods? As overt reflexivity causes that redirection of audience focus referred to above (essentially a disruption or distraction from the narrative), is it possible to make a documentary which employs reflexivity as a means of being more ethical without deserting the imperative in a socially engaged (rather than autobiographical or filmmaker driven) project to primarily engage the audience with the stories of the participants? What might be the limits of reflexivity?

This brings me to the ideas of David MacDougall.

Deep reflexivity

MacDougall, one of Australia’s foremost ethnographic filmmakers and writer on visual anthropology, also took up discussion of reflexivity during the various ‘turns’ (visual, reflexive, sensorial) that anthropology took from the 1970s onwards, when the primacy of writing as a means of reporting fieldwork began to be questioned and the observational documentary took hold (Grimshaw & Ravetz 2009, p. 4). For MacDougall, film is ‘a commensal’ engagement with the world that implicates subject, spectator and filmmaker alike. As such, it offers ‘the possibility of creating a shared field of consciousness’ between all three (1998, p. 12). He frames documentary making as:

a form of extension of the self towards others rather than a form of reception or appropriation … We reach out to others with our senses as a sort of probe (through the extension of the camera) and make sense of them through what we contain in ourselves (MacDougall 1998, p. 29).

The ultimate purpose of this reaching out is to communicate with our subjects (MacDougall 1998, p. 56). MacDougall discusses the filmmaking process further in his more recent book, The Corporeal Image, declaring that: ‘We see with our bodies, and

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8 Ethnography is generally defined in the literature as a broader cultural category than visual anthropology (MacDougall 1998, pp. 97–98), embracing techniques, for example, of observational cinema. Sarah Pink defines any film which is of ethnographic interest, whether made specifically for that purpose or not, as ethnographic (2007, pp. 22–23,169).

9 i.e. symbiotic.
any image we make carries the imprint of our bodies; that is to say, of our being as well as the meanings we intend to convey’. In this sense, images of other bodies are ‘also images of the body behind the camera and its relations with the world’ (2006, p. 3). Thus the notion of seeing through the camera as a form of touching (the consciousness of others) means that filmmaking is inherently reflexive because the images produced refer back to the maker (see Grimshaw & Ravetz 2015, p. 261; Pink 2009, p. 107).

In noting that a handheld camera (and therefore the image produced) moves with the body and breath of the operator, 10 MacDougall argues that it is necessary:

to take reflexivity to a further stage—to see it at a more deeper and more integral level. The author is no longer to be sought outside the work, for the work must be understood as including the author. Subject and object define one another through the work, and the “author” is in fact in many ways an artifact of the work (MacDougall 1998, pp. 88–89).

For MacDougall, this ‘concept of “deep” reflexivity requires us to read the position of the author in the very construction of the work, whatever the external explanations may be’ (1998, p. 89).

**Ruby vs MacDougall**

Ruby’s ethical concerns with the rubbery nature of artistic licence and the question of ‘should the documentary artist remind the audience of the interpretive and constructed nature of the documentary form—that is, demystify the construction?’ led him to declare that ‘an intelligently used reflexivity is an essential part of all ethically produced documentaries’ (Ruby 2005a, p. 215). MacDougall, however, has objected to what he describes as Ruby’s ‘veritable mantra of self-reflexivity’ (2006, pp. 266–267), and has long argued that expecting an ethnographic film to exhaustively reveal any biases of the filmmaker that might intervene in the representation of reality is futile. For MacDougall, a reliance on this kind of *external* reflexivity is like ‘placing a review of police

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10 Note: MacDougall shoots his own films, whereas I usually work with a cinematographer—in which case the cinematographer-plus-camera is effectively an extension of me.
procedures in the hands of the police’, particularly as ‘the things that matter most are likely to be those in which the author is most deeply implicated.’ Because filmmakers ‘are involved in an embodied analysis of the world that reveals itself in objects, framings, movements, and nuances of detail’ then ‘it is the intention that the work be “read” on this level of meaning and subtlety that constitutes its deeper reflexivity’ (MacDougall 1998, pp. 89–90).

During a personal discussion with MacDougall at the Australian National University, he showed me a sequence from his film, Gandhi’s Children (2008), in which several boys are talking to him on camera. Off-screen there is the sound of a door opening as someone enters the room. The boys turn towards the sound and one of them says: ‘Get out… go away’.

For MacDougall this is an indirect signal to the audience that his participants are not only happy to talk to him but that the process is important to them and takes priority. Moreover, as the filmmaker, he is a trusted confidante (MacDougall, D 2014, pers. comm., 25 March). This is an example of deep reflexivity, arising through happenstance and included in the edited film without comment. MacDougall does not regard the external scaffolding of reflexivity around a film as either necessary or helpful.

Reflexivity in film then, goes far beyond the deliberate drawing of an audience’s attention to the filmmaking process. As MacDougall concludes:

> In the eyes of my subjects, my film will not be judged by how it makes the obvious points. They will set a much higher standard … My work will be judged by its good faith toward them and its understanding of their perceptions of the world, without pretending to be their view of it (MacDougall 1998, p. 91).

Reflection on my own experience leads me to concur with his position. After all, a commitment, for example, to acknowledging the filmmaking process through narration may arise from my desire for transparency and a reflexive approach but all it really serves to do is underline that a documentary is being made and ‘perform’ a view of me that I favour. The ethical decisions taken during the filmmaking process are no more right or wrong for being acknowledged. Furthermore, as Sanders points out, when things

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11 The sequence begins at 02:25:45.
go wrong ethically it is usually during the making of a film. The film text which results is another matter:

The film does not necessarily serve as a fair representation of the ethics of its making. Hence we should not just look at what’s left after editing. We should look beyond the images on the screen and the accompanying sounds and turn to the production process as object of investigation (Sanders 2012, p. 20).

Investigating my own production practice is what I propose to do in this thesis. However, if reflexivity is to do with ‘thinking about thinking’, about consciousness becoming aware that it is aware, given that we cannot step outside of ourselves, how can we step outside of our own practice? However this is attempted, it is a catalyst for change. Because reflexivity causes shifts in awareness, reflexive practice creates feedback loops resulting in iterative change, as ongoing self-reflection causes the practice to change. This has implications for ethics and, as Pink points out, in order to have a truly ethical approach to research, debating ethics must itself be part of that research (2007, p. 50). In terms of filmmaking, the process becomes more than simply about self-awareness. It is about the reflexive strategies I might adopt, their purpose and their efficacy in creating a more equitable ‘triangulation’ between filmmaker, participants and audience (Grimshaw & Ravetz 2009, p. 81).

**Beyond the visual**

MacDougall’s notion of seeing with our bodies and of film carrying the imprint of the bodies involved, coincides with the rise of the ‘sensory turn’ in anthropology and humanities research in recent years, in which the visible becomes but one inherently reflexive means of communication and data collection (see Grimshaw & Ravetz 2015; MacDougall 2006; Pink 2009). In her book *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, Sarah Pink agrees that the camera should be seen ‘as an integral part of the identity of the researcher and of the inter-subjective relationship between her or him and the people participating in the research’ (2009, p. 101). Furthermore, although cameras ‘do not record touch, taste, smell or emotion in the same way that they record images and sounds’:
an understanding of the senses as essentially interconnected suggests how (audio)visual images and recordings can evoke, or invite memories of the multi-sensoriality of the research encounter (Pink 2009, p. 101).

In their paper *Drawing with a camera?*, Grimshaw and Ravetz discuss the innovative work of Rouch, MacDougall and others in first employing ‘a mobile, embodied camera’ in their filmmaking:

Rather than conceptualizing the camera as marked by an inert structure (akin to a pastry cutter) … we interpret the embodied camera as part of a continual framing and reframing process that produces a particular kind of heightened consciousness. This mode of consciousness or attunement – the attention to something rather than everything – involves a dynamic mode of focusing which retains the relationship between what lies within and beyond the frame (Grimshaw & Ravetz 2015, p. 270).

Such attunement must embrace place as much as people. Pink refers to notions of the construction of place and the ‘embodied emplacement’ of the filmmaker and goes on to use Tim Ingold’s idea of places as ‘zones of entanglement’ (Pink 2009, p. 32):

The idea of place as lived but open invokes the inevitable question of how researchers themselves are entangled in, participate in the production of, and are co-present in the ethnographic places they share with research participants, their materialities and power relations (Pink 2009, p. 33).

In this respect, the camera can be seen ‘as another aspect of the ethnographer’s emplacement and as such, as part of the entanglement’ (Pink 2009, p. 100). The notion of entanglement implies dynamic relationships with participants that are more than merely one-way. This resonates with Kate Nash’s observation that:

power circulates throughout the documentary relationship. The filmmaker has the power to represent, to give the participant a voice or constrain that voice in light of his or her documentary vision. The participant has the power to resist and, ultimately, to refuse (Nash 2009, p. 297).
Such circulating power is also referred to in Kim Etherington’s view that a reflexive approach recognises ‘a circulating energy between researcher and researched and that both have agency’ (Etherington 2004, p. 36). This notion of circulating power or energy is key to both a collaborative approach and to the arguments and discussion in this thesis.

**Interviewing**

With regard to mutual agency, I view interviewing as a two-way encounter—as conversation rather than interrogation. However, being primarily interested in discovering my participants’ points of view, such guided conversations could be said to remain essentially ‘interviews’. In this respect, *Freedom Stories* is an interview-based project.

In her online guide to qualitative interviewing in humanities research, Ping-Chun Hsiung follows the literature in defining reflexivity as the continuous process of examining both oneself as researcher (including one’s ‘conceptual baggage’) and the dynamics of the research relationship with participants. This is necessary because:

> Qualitative interviewers … have no expectation that the "truth" is simply "out there" waiting to be discovered by asking the right questions. They do not assume that their questions are "objective" nor do they assume that respondents' answers have straightforward, definitive meanings that mirror a singular "reality" (Hsiung 2010, N. pag.).

In such a context of ‘interactive meaning-making’:

> interpreting qualitative data requires reflection on the entire research context. Reflexivity involves making the research process itself a focus of inquiry, laying open pre-conceptions and becoming aware of situational dynamics in which the interviewer and respondent are jointly involved in knowledge production (Hsiung 2010, N. pag.).

This leads to the emergent feedback loop that I have referred to, because:
Findings do not emerge only at the last stage of the research, but there is a deepening of insight throughout the research process. Emergent findings from intermediate stages inform subsequent interviews and analyses. Reflexive practices provide opportunity for revising questions and even re-framing the research topic as the project unfolds (Hsiung 2010, N. pag.).

However, there is a lot more to interviewing than simply talk. Sarah Pink posits the interview as ‘a social encounter – an event – that is inevitably both emplaced and productive of place’, and quotes the sociologist Anne Oakley, who suggests that ‘interviews imitate conversations; they hold out the promise of mutual listening’ (cited in Pink 2009, p. 82). For Pink, the interview is also a ‘sensorial and emotive encounter’ of a ‘performative nature’, requiring the researcher to be reflexive about her/his own emotions (2009, pp. 82–83).

Pink suggests that: ‘interview encounters should be understood as instances in which interviewer and interviewee together create a shared place’ (2009, p. 82). They are not simply a more intense interaction than that of the everyday, but also ‘contexts where interviewees might arrive at new levels of awareness about their own lives and experiences’ (2009, pp. 86–87).

Furthermore, sensory techniques can enhance emplaced and active participation, for example, by physically walking and talking with a participant or sharing a meal or drink. Pink quotes sociologist Amanda Coffey in summing up the centrality of the body in ethnographic research, as follows:

> Our bodies and the bodies of others are central to the practical accomplishment of fieldwork. We locate our physical being alongside those of others as we negotiate the spatial context of the field. We concern ourselves with the positioning, visibility and performance of our own embodied self as we undertake participant observation (Coffey cited in Pink 2009, p. 25).

This location alongside others can embrace what Pink calls ‘elicitation interviews’ which, for example, may involve actively showing a participant photographs or other objects or returning to the sites of past events, as ways of eliciting ‘heightened reflection’
These are strategies I have used in my previous filmmaking. Pink also introduces the idea of becoming a ‘sensory apprentice’ to participants (2009, pp. 69–70), by sharing in or observing their work or activities. I decided to experiment with this in the making of Freedom Stories, as a way of exploring commonalities with participants, rather than focussing on differences.¹²

Etherington also speaks of this kind of mutual alignment as the ‘co-construction of meaning’ in a reflexive approach to research (2004, p. 109), which is a means to:

- close the illusory gap between researcher and researched and between the knower and what is known. By viewing our relationship with participants as one of consultancy and collaboration we encourage a sense of power, involvement and agency … the use of reflexivity exposes and makes explicit many of the moral dilemmas that are there but go unnoticed in non-reflexive research (Etherington 2004, p. 32).

This is where, as Steinar Kvale points out in his book Doing Interviews, we come to the crucial issue of the ethics of interviewing, in the context of ‘researching private lives and placing accounts in the public arena’ (Mauthner, M et al. 2002, p. 1):

An interview inquiry is a moral enterprise. Moral issues concern the means as well as the ends of an interview inquiry. The human interaction in the interview affects the interviewees and the knowledge produced by an interview inquiry affects our understanding of the human condition. Consequently, interview research is saturated with moral and ethical issues (Kvale 2007, p. 23).

In applying a reflexive and self-critical approach to interviewing, it is important to bear in mind the warnings issued by Kvale in a conference paper entitled Dialogue as Oppression and Interview Research:

One reason for the current popularity of the interview as a research method is that it provides liberal humanistic researchers with an illusion of equality and

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¹² As Pink has noted, the presence of a camera encourages participants to engage physically and show the filmmaker their experiences (e.g. by pointing at things, getting out old photos etc.) (2009, p. 104).
common interests with their interview subjects, while at the same time they retain sovereign control of the interview situation and the later use of the interview produced knowledge (Kvale 2002, p. 9).

Furthermore:

A research interview pursues often a more or less hidden agenda. The interviewer may want to obtain information without the interviewee knowing what the interviewer is after (Kvale 2002, p. 12).

Kvale points out that we live in an ‘interview culture’ dominated by notions of ‘confession’ and ‘the private made public’ (2002, p. 15). It is crucial for researchers to examine their own motives and position within this milieu so they don’t merely reproduce ‘general social forms of domination and the trends of the consumer society they live in’ (2002, p. 17). However, the integrity of the researcher is more important than any ethical protocols:

Being familiar with value issues, ethical guidelines and ethical theories may help in choices that weigh ethical versus scientific concerns in a study. In the end, however, the integrity of the researcher – his or her knowledge, experience, honesty and fairness – is the decisive factor (Kvale 2007, p. 29).

There are obvious parallels between interviewing for humanities research and in documentary making. Furthermore, what applies in a reflexive approach to interviewing participants in the making of Freedom Stories also applies to the reflexive process (if I can put it this way) of ‘interviewing myself’ about that making. Hence, the entangled layers of reflexivity that permeate this enquiry, from the filmmaking to deconstructing the filmmaking. I will be focussing on examples of interviewing in Chapter Four.

**The performative documentary**

Documentary’s abiding aim to represent reality has produced something of a self-contradiction. In order to give a sense of unmediated reality, filmmakers, particularly in the television industry, have traditionally tended to conceal the means of production. As in fiction filmmaking, cameras, microphones and crew are kept out of the frame. Yet the
actual situation is that all those people and things are present, and part of the reality being filmed. This imperative to conceal the filmmaking process has been most prominent in the direct cinema or ‘fly on the wall’ observational mode of documentary making and one of its consequences has been an implicit understanding that generally documentary participants should ignore, or pretend to ignore, the camera.

There have of course been exceptions to this even within direct cinema. In the classic Maysles brothers’ Grey Gardens (1975), for example, the Beale women continually and openly address the filmmakers behind the camera, although Ruby labels such reflexivity as accidental (i.e. unavoidable) rather than strategic (2005b, p. 43). There have also been other schools of documentary making, such as the cinéma vérité of Rouch and his contemporaries, the self-reflexive Kino Eye movement of Vertov and others, and the ‘interrotron’ mode of direct-to-camera address in Errol Morris’s films, such as The Thin Blue Line (1988) and Fog of War (2003), which acknowledge the presence of the camera and its effect on reality. Despite these, the observational documentary mode has been dominant in the writing of documentary history. In her book New Documentary: A Critical Introduction (2000) and more recent writing, the British academic Stella Bruzzi has questioned the validity of this hierarchical hegemony and points to a new generation of filmmakers who accept, as others have before them, the performative nature of documentary filmmaking.

Bruzzi argues that the realist assumption that the production process must be disguised in order to convey an unmediated representation of truth (2006, p. 186), should be replaced by an acceptance that:

a documentary can never be the real world, that the camera can never capture life as it would have unravelled had it not interfered, and the results of this collision between apparatus and subject are what constitutes a documentary – not the utopian vision of what might have transpired if only the camera had not been there (Bruzzi 2006, p. 10).

For Bruzzi, there is no documentary until the subject or situation is ‘performed’ for the camera and a documentary comes into being. Thus:
the new performative documentaries herald a different notion of documentary ‘truth’ that acknowledges the construction and artificiality of even the non-fiction film … the films of [Nick] Broomfield, Michael Moore and others have sought to accentuate, not mask, the means of production because they realise that such a masquerade is impossibly utopian (Bruzzi 2006, p. 187).

In terms of reflexivity, this argument is important because it places my own practice in the context of a developmental trend:

many more documentaries are emerging that take for granted the existence and inevitable presence of their film-makers, directly demonstrating the inherent performativity of the non-fiction film. The overt intervention of the film-maker definitively signals the death of documentary theory’s idealisation of the unbiased film by asking, categorically and from within the documentary itself: what else is a documentary but a dialogue between a film-maker, a crew and a situation that, although in existence prior to their arrival, has irrevocably been changed by that arrival (Bruzzi 2013, p. 50)?

That ‘overt intervention of the film-maker’ has an interesting resonance with the Ruby versus MacDougall debate about reflexivity. But it does not require on-screen intervention to demonstrate an awareness of performance. Unlike Broomfield and Moore, for example, Joshua Oppenheimer—whose films include The Act of Killing (2013) and The Look of Silence (2015)—does not appear on-screen or via narration. Speaking at the Based On True Stories Conference at the University of Missouri, Oppenheimer similarly denounced what the cinephile Luke Moody describes in the online journal 11Polaroids as ‘the suspended illusion of unobtrusive filmmaking [that] still prevails amongst many filmmakers and, more dangerously, amongst audiences’ (Moody 2015, N. Pag.):

what really is happening is that the director and the film crew and the subjects are collaborating to simulate a reality in which they pretend the camera is not present. It's a kind of dishonest story about how the film was made that performs a useful function – namely it helps us to suspend our disbelief and perceive that simulation as reality … All documentaries are performance. They are performance precisely where people are playing themselves (Oppenheimer cited in Adams 2015, N. pag.).
This notion of documentary as performance equates to a more reflexive documentary style that remains a minority strand in Australian practice, as it does internationally, where ‘creative documentary’ is the term used for explicitly authored work as distinct from ‘factual television’ (FitzSimons, Laughren & Williamson 2011). In academic circles, it has led to a renewed appreciation of the cinéma-vérité approach that Jean Rouch and others pioneered in the 1960s (eg. see ten Brink 2007). This was opposed to direct cinema and regarded the camera as both catalyst and agent provocateur. In the sense of making things happen, it is an approach that is fundamentally improvisatory.

According to Grimshaw and Ravetz, Rouch’s later films, which embraced collaboration, performance and improvisation—three key concepts in my own approach, although applied differently—can be seen as ‘no longer about a process but are the process itself’ (i.e. a kind of ‘transformative space’). The characteristics of this space include open-ended exploration, continuous engagement, knowing with rather than about, and emergent rather than extant conclusions (Grimshaw & Ravetz 2015, pp. 264–271).

**Authorship and my own position**

What is being discussed here is a reflexive view of authorship. Nick Broomfield, the British ‘star director’ whose trademark is ‘the tortuous chase after elusive subjects’ (Bruzzi 2013, p. 50), defines documentary as a reflection of the encounter between filmmaker and participant(s), and for viewers to understand that interplay he believes they need to know something about the filmmaker: 13

There’s no point in pretending the camera’s not there. I think what’s important is the interaction between the film-makers and those being filmed, and that the audience is aware of the interaction so they can make decisions of their own … the problem with cinéma vérité is that you don’t know the film-makers behind the camera. The audience doesn’t have that information so they don’t know what the interaction is. That’s the variable that’s most influential – it’s not the presence of the camera that changes people’s

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behaviour, it’s the relationship they have with the people behind it (Wood 2005, p. 231).

Bruzzi argues that this redefining of documentary has had consequences in both form and style:

What has occurred within the last decade or so … is a shift towards more self-consciously ‘arty’ and expressive modes of documentary filmmaking. Reflexive documentaries, as they challenge the notion of film’s ‘transparency’ and highlight the performative quality of documentary, will emphasise issues of authorship and construction (Bruzzi 2013, p. 49).

My own filmmaking philosophy has emerged partly, as did Broomfield’s, from dissatisfaction with the documentary climate (e.g. see Thomas 2012a, pp. 332–333). As he has acknowledged:

I’d always wanted to examine the documentary form and I’d become sort of disenchanted with the narrow parameters of this style of filmmaking. All too often what you look at on TV is very cleaned up and dishonest (Broomfield cited in Bruzzi 2006, p. 210).

While my concerns were largely about the increasingly interventionist tactics of TV commissioning editors and their formulaic requirements (see later, Chapter Three), Bruzzi argues that documentary makers such as Broomfield, Molly Dineen14 and others, who actively participate in their films, do so:

because they are interested in discovering alternative and less formally restrictive ways of getting to what they perceive to be the essence of their subjects. The means by which they achieve this are not those conventionally associated with truth-finding post-Direct Cinema as they entail breaking the illusion of film, thereby interrupting the privileged relationship between the filmed subjects and the spectator (Bruzzi 2013, p. 50).

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14 Dineen’s documentaries include The Ark (1993) and In the Company of Men (1995).
How this authorial interest impinges on ethics and works out in my own practice constitute a major concern of this thesis. Unlike Broomfield and Moore—whose films employ the tropes of ‘gullible innocent’ and are as much about their attempts to get the story or achieve the interview as they are about their participants—I don’t see myself as an on-camera celebrity leading proceedings by force of personality, or going into places where I’m not welcome. Nevertheless, with *Freedom Stories* I have more consciously than in previous projects explored the possibilities of employing the performative mode as a means of reflexive practice. In the process, I have come to realise the importance of improvisation, in the best sense of the word, as a means of stepping outside habitual patterns or ways of thinking, *not* as merely ‘winging it’ and hoping for the best.

A danger in all this is that, as Bruzzi has pointed out concerning Broomfield's more recent films, the work may become a film about the filmmaker, rather than the participants or subject (2013, pp. 53–54). As we shall see, making *Freedom Stories* has taught me that this is a fine line to negotiate.

Having explored notions of reflexivity in relation to both creative practice and research methodology, I now turn to my central concern, that of the filmmaker-participant relationship. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to deal fully with the many profound questions surrounding representation, the philosophical meaning of personal relationships, and the history of thought in this area. However, it is important to establish a position from which, in my practice, I can approach the filmic encounter with my participants in a way that encourages and assists a more ethical process.
Chapter Two – Representation, Collaboration and Ethics

The Self and the Other – Levinas, representation and the filmmaker-participant relationship

Ethics is ‘a reflective discipline; it evaluates human action and poses the question how to decide what the right thing to do is’ (Sanders 2012, p. 2). In that sense, it is different to morals, which are the accepted norms and values of a community. Ethics is an active concept in which one tries to work out what is right, rather than simply apply a pre-determined rule.

Documentary making is essentially about representation and the ever present, ethical danger in representation is that of objectifying the Other. As Kate Nash puts it: ‘To represent is to run the risk of presenting the other as “something” to be “experienced”’ (2011, p. 231). Historically, the features of colonialism have included western ethnocentrism and the appropriation of ‘other’ cultures. The documentary scholar Michael Renov points to the ‘violence inherent in the acquisitive, totalizing quest for knowledge’ of rational enquiry. For Renov, documentary is too often ‘an aesthetic practice … in which (documentary) “subjects” are transformed into “objects” (of knowledge)’ (2004, p. 148).

In exploring the problems of representation in documentary, Renov, Nash and other scholars have turned to the moral philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (Cooper 2014; Nash 2011; Piotrowska 2014; Renov 2004; Rughani 2013; Saxton 2007). Levinas (1906–1995) was a naturalised French citizen of Jewish Lithuanian origin who survived the Nazi occupation of France as a prisoner of war. Although he did not write specifically about filmmaking, Levinas was sceptical about representation of the Other. According to Nash:

Western philosophy, Levinas argues, has most often been violent towards the Other, neutralizing difference and subsuming the other under its own categories. It is a philosophy of power (Nash 2011, pp. 230–231).

This subsuming process carried over into visual anthropology and ethnographic filmmaking. Renov makes the point that, in his earliest writings, David MacDougall condemned ‘the “distinctively Western parochialism” of the observational film in which
the maker, pretending invisibility, translates and reshapes cultural otherness’ (Renov 2004, p. 152). MacDougall wrote that:

No ethnographic film is merely a record of another society; it is always a record of the meeting between a filmmaker and that society. If ethnographic films are to break through the limitations inherent in their present idealism, they must propose to deal with that encounter. Until now they have rarely acknowledged that an encounter has taken place (MacDougall 1975, pp. 118–119).

Today it is the ‘embodied encounter’ that takes centre stage in discussion of ethnographic and documentary ethics. Nash observes that for Levinas, ‘the ethical relation is established in the encounter with the face of the Other’ (2011, p. 235). In this instance, the face, or ‘the visage’, is not literal, but can be ‘perceived as a metaphor, or perhaps the metaphor, for the human’ (Piotrowska 2014, pp. 149–150):

In the encounter between Self and Other, the face signifies the call, a single command, “you shall not commit murder” … The face of the other calls for responsibility while refusing to be contained or comprehended (Nash 2011, p. 231, citing Levinas).

The philosopher Anthony F. Beavers succinctly summarises Levinas’s reasoning in this regard:

Totalization is a denial of the other's difference, the denial of the otherness of the other. That is, it is the inscription of the other in the same. If ethics presupposes the real other person, then such totalization will, in itself, be unethical … Thus responsibility is the link between the subject and the other person, or, in more general terms, the source of the moral "ought" and the appearance of the other person as person and not as thing are one and the same … The very meaning of being an other person is "the one to whom I am responsible" (Beavers 1990, pp. 3, 8).

And Renov adds:
This “non-indifference to the other” is the founding moment of selfhood. “Responsibility”, “obligation”, “sacrifice”, “indebtedness”—these are the terms of the ethical encounter, while knowledge comes to be construed as appropriative, aggressive, territorializing, even violent (Renov 2004, p. 160).

Levinas’s moral philosophy is complex, and scholars have come to different conclusions about the practical implications of his arguments about ethics for documentary. For Nash there is a hopeful message:

Levinas calls into question our desire to know the Other, reconfiguring ethics as a kind of deep reflexivity in which assumptions about the Other and the possibility of knowing are constantly challenged. Because observational documentary making is an encounter between a filmmaker, participant and viewer … Levinas can be read as calling for a focus on the nature of its relationships. His work calls for filmmaking practices that respect difference, a “letting be” that eschews the totalizing urge in order for truth to emerge (Nash 2011, p. 231).

Nash argues that despite Levinas’s strong stance on the prohibition against representation, his contribution lies in his notion that the Other resists appropriation by the Self. An acknowledgement of this and openness to the alterity (i.e. difference) and unpredictability of the Other means that:

it is possible to engage in representation without subsuming the other under the filmmaker’s totalizing vision. Where the fact of close observation prevents the spectator from adopting an all-seeing position, where the images speak of doubt, uncertainty, and plurality of meaning the alterity of the other can persist. When filmmakers acknowledge the contribution of the other and the limits of their own understanding, when they become vulnerable in the relationship and admit the limits of their own power and knowledge, the ethical encounter becomes possible (Nash 2011, pp. 237–238).
On the other hand, the documentary maker and academic Agnieszka Piotrowska concludes that Levinas’s philosophy contains a solemn warning,\(^\text{15}\)

the ethics of Lévinas [sic], whilst highly relevant to documentary, will put extraordinary pressures on the encounter. For the startling conclusion of the Lévinasian ethical paradigm … is that the documentary filmmaker should be in constant fear of being unethical, as her epistemological pursuit will almost automatically, inevitably and perhaps unconsciously put the Other in danger (Piotrowska 2014, p. 152).

In the context of this inherent risk in the documentary endeavour, Piotrowska has sought to determine the ethicality or otherwise of the famous instance in *Shoah* (1985) of the director Claude Lanzmann’s unrelenting pursuit of the barber Abraham Bomba, in order to secure his account of life in the Treblinka concentration camp—something the latter finds painful in the extreme to recount and doesn’t wish to provide, even for his friend Lanzmann. The question for Piotrowska is how far can one push a participant to speak about past trauma before it becomes unethical because of the pain that this causes? Indeed, is it at all ethical to invite, coax, persuade, cajole, push or insist (as Lanzmann does) for the sake of bearing public witness to the truth?

Piotrowska’s investigation is inconclusive, but in the process she contrasts Lanzmann’s approach of unrelenting pursuit of his eyewitness to that of the Portuguese filmmaker and academic, Susana de Sousa Dias:

> The witnesses feel the duty themselves, she maintains, there is no need to prevail upon them, ‘If they can, they will speak. But if they can’t, you just have to let them be’ (Piotrowska 2014, p. 166).

Both Nash and Piotrowska have referred to the notion of ‘letting be’ and this seems to me to be a central tenet of an ethical approach to the filmmaker-participant relationship. Several instances of this question of the pursuit of ‘narratives of pain’ (e.g. see Tuck &

\(^\text{15}\) Piotrowska undertakes a fairly detailed comparative analysis of ethics according to Kant, Buber, Levinas, Lacan and Badiou in her book *Psychoanalysis and Ethics in Documentary Film* (2014).
Yang 2014) occurred during the production of Freedom Stories and I shall explore these in detail later on.

**The importance of listening**

There is a further implication of Levinas’s moral philosophy that, in the context of my own creative practice, is important and reinforces the idea that one of the main attributes a documentary maker must cultivate is the ability to listen. That implication arises from the importance Levinas attaches to language and listening in the context of the encounter between self and other. As Renov recounts, Levinas argues that:

> persons who speak to one another confirm one another, unique and irreplaceable … The problems of knowledge and truth must thus be put in relation to the event of meeting and dialogue (Levinas cited in Renov 2004, p. 151).

For Nash, listening to the Other is a central feature of Levinas’s ethical encounter, because: 'If the documentary maker is to preserve the alterity of the Other, he or she must first attend to his or her own experience’ (2011, p. 236). Moreover:

> For Levinas, the ethical encounter is fundamentally a communicative act, a conversation, albeit one that involves much more than an exchange of information … ‘the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, \textit{the one-for-the-other}’ (Nash 2011, p. 234, citing Levinas, my italics).

The film studies scholar Libby Saxton applies this notion to her own analysis of Shoah, noting that Lanzmann’s filmmaking methodology is famous for his refusal to use any archive footage, photographs or devices of reconstruction in his exploration of the holocaust. The nine-hour film consists solely of interviews and conversations with survivors, either in a domestic context or through revisiting sites of trauma.

Saxton observes that:
In Shoah ethical relations are accorded precedence over questions of being and knowledge. The film consistently frustrates our desire to see, know and understand by refusing to allow the other and his or her history to take shape as objects under our gaze. By holding us at a distance the images and voices afford a more intimate encounter with traumatic experience, opening up the possibility of proximity while preserving separation (Saxton 2007, p. 12).

Saxton points out the difficulty for an audience to visually read much at all into either the remnants of the historical sites visited or the faces of some of the eyewitnesses, for the latter often remain impassive despite the traumas they are recalling. The result of this is to direct the spectator to the aural content of the film:

In line with Levinas’s concerns, Shoah addresses its audience and evokes the alterity of the traumatic past primarily through discourse. The film interpellates us not only as spectators but also, and perhaps most significantly, as listeners. The witnesses appear first and foremost as sources of language, and it is as speaking faces, talking heads, that they resist reduction to objects of our perception. *It is through the singularity and unpredictability of their spoken depositions that they confront us with new and unexpected meanings and realities, calling our preconceived ideas into question and probing the limits of knowledge in the face of their experiences* (Saxton 2007, p. 10, my italics).

In my own filmmaking, I have always remained alert to moments of testimony that challenge audience preconceptions and defy conventional ideas. There are examples in Freedom Stories, which I will note in due course. They emerge in the context of my documentary project, like Shoah, being primarily a vehicle of discourse, a series of conversational interviews interspersed with visual material and sewn together by my narration.

**Responsibility and vulnerability**

To summarise this discussion of Levinas: ethics *precedes* the relationship with the Other and the command ‘thou shalt not murder’, to which we must respond, is an obligation
that indicates the profound responsibility the Self has for the safety of the Other. More than that, the terms of the ethical encounter with the Other include sacrifice and indebtedness, with no expectation of reciprocity. This implies a great deal more than the traditional, documentary imperative ‘to do minimal harm’ to participants (Aufderheide, Jaszi & Chandra 2009, pp. 1, 6).

Furthermore, the alterity of the Other must be maintained. Ways in which this can be done include maintaining openness and uncertainty, encouraging the agency of the Other, acknowledging doubt and uncertainty, and cultivating a sense of contingency about knowledge and understanding (i.e. the refusal to subsume). Neither the filmmaker nor the viewer can be allowed to assume mastery over the participants in a documentary. The relationship between Self and Other is then essentially one of respect, of ‘letting be’, of being ‘one for the other’. And the medium of the relationship lies in communication—in mutual listening.

In any practice that involves reaching out to others and forming productive relationships, there is an element of risk and vulnerability. However, there is more than just an inherent vulnerability here. In Levinasian terms, it is only if filmmakers actively allow themselves to ‘become vulnerable in the relationship and admit the limits of their own power and knowledge, [that] the ethical encounter becomes possible’ (Nash 2011, p. 238).

Another analysis of Levinas in the context of ‘selfless cinema’, leads the film studies scholar Sarah Cooper to state:

to emphasize the discomfort and suffering that lies at the heart of responsibility for the Other, who becomes my neighbour, my prochain,\textsuperscript{16}…

This discomfort has been at the centre of the ethical relation from the outset. In fact, it is the fundamental starting point for the rupture of totalizing thinking that takes us beyond ourselves, by opening to the infinite and, therefore, to others (Cooper 2014, p. 58).

This openness to discomfort doesn’t only apply to documentary makers, but to all social researchers. In writing about reflexive research, Kim Etherington refers to the notion of

\textsuperscript{16}French, meaning ‘fellow man’.
‘the vulnerable researcher’, one that: ‘requires a shift from using the objective voice of the researcher to the subjective “I”’. This means that: ‘researchers have to emerge from behind the secure barrier of anonymity and own up to their involvement’ (Etherington 2007, p. 611). Furthermore:

the researcher is always speaking partially naked and is genuinely open to legitimate criticism from participants and from audience. Some researchers are silenced by the invitation to criticism contained in the expression of voice (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, cited in Etherington 2007, p. 612).

Such personal exposure means that one will always be subject to a degree of trepidation. This is something that every documentary maker has to cope with in sustaining a state of what Etherington, borrowing from Tim Bond in relation to counselling, calls ‘ethical mindfulness’ (see Bond 2000). This contributes to ‘an ethic of trust’ in our relationships with participants (Etherington 2007, p. 600).

**Sensitive engagement**

In discussing the quality of the relationship between documentary maker and participant, the notions of its embodied, emplaced and entangled nature, referred to above, has resonance with Nash’s notion of ‘sensitive engagement’, which she compares to Iris Murdoch’s concept of ‘loving attention’ (Nash 2009, pp. 37–39); to Ingold’s idea of ‘attentive engagement’ taken up by Pink (2009, p. 35); to Etherington’s mindful ‘ethic of trust’ in reflexive research (Etherington 2007, p. 600); and to Grimshaw and Ravetz’s ‘heightened attentiveness’ (2015, p. 270).

According to Nash:

sensitive engagement involves a genuine attempt on the part of the filmmaker to understand the participant and their needs in relation to the documentary project or, to put it slightly differently, how their interests can be met in terms of their documentary participation. Murdoch’s loving attention would also imply that the filmmaker avoid confusing their own needs with those of the participant (Nash 2009, p. 39).
This is a very different approach to thinking about documentary ethics as simply a matter of informed consent, but as Nash concludes: ‘Nevertheless it could reasonably be suggested that it is in fact what successful filmmakers routinely do’ (2009, p. 39).

Building on this view, MacDougall declares that: ‘Filmmaking acts like a lens, concentrating the emotions of everyday experience. Many films are in fact declarations of love, if we could but see it’ (1998, p. 54). Such declarations may be located in an attachment to a situation, a group or an individual. Moreover:

Filmmakers’ attitudes towards their subjects contain the attributes of other relationships ranging from indifference to dislike to the protectiveness of a parent to the attentiveness of a lover. Such feelings are registered in the selection of images and in the nuances of their treatment (MacDougall 1998, pp. 54–55).

However, this does not mean that filmmaking is merely narcissistic:

We do not claim another’s consciousness unconditionally … or derive our sense of consciousness from it. Rather, filming others celebrates the common experience of consciousness, including the very differences between us. We do not see others as vessels or mirrors, capable of receiving or reflecting our feelings, but as points of reference. We do not expect others to experience the world exactly as we do; and indeed there would be little fascination in them if they did (MacDougall 1998, p. 55).

In analysing the ethics of Michael Moore’s Sicko (2007), Sandra Borden employs ‘virtue theory, which calls our attention to the way that traditions inspire us to perform our various roles with moral integrity’ (2010, p. 177). Virtue theory draws attention to the documentary tradition that has been passed down by previous generations of filmmakers, and which functions as a source of moral authority and continuity, as well as change:

Like any role, that of documentary filmmaker involves commitments to certain shared goods, such as knowledge and justice. To achieve these goods, documentary filmmakers must cultivate and exercise certain moral and intellectual virtues, such as fairness and intellectual honesty. These virtues
have special significance in the context of their work, but also inform their individual lives and the larger tradition to which they belong. The documentary film tradition provides Moore and other documentary filmmakers with a common purpose and bonds them to *a certain way of living a good life – a life lived as documentary filmmakers* (Borden 2010, p. 177, my italics).

It strikes me that in striving to develop and articulate a properly ethical approach to my documentary practice—one that is rooted in the documentary tradition in which I have been trained and which continues to evolve—what I am actually articulating is a kind of heightened ethics of ‘living a good life – a life lived as a documentary maker’. In that sense, my working ethics are really an extension of everyday ethics, but applied with particular focus because of the responsibilities inherent in the documentary relationship to work for the benefit of one’s participants. This is what sensitive engagement (concurring with a Levinas-influenced approach) inevitably means, and as Nash argues:

>A full account of sensitive engagement will emerge only with sustained empirical study of the ways in which documentary makers actually cultivate and sustain successful relationships in the course of their documentary practice. In examining the virtue of sensitive engagement, ethical documentary practice is likely to be further sustained within the community of practice (Nash 2009, p. 38).

As I seek to provide such an account I am also aware of Nash’s related assertion that ‘trust is an under-researched facet of documentary production’ (2012, p. 329).

**Trust and betrayal**

Of all the conflicting ethical responsibilities facing a documentary maker working in the terrain of personal stories—responsibilities to self, profession, sponsors, audience and participants—my duty of care to the latter has always felt of prime importance. It can be argued that one’s ultimate responsibility must be to the audience, for whom the documentary is being made, but without participants there will be no film, and it is their lives that are being publicly exposed. The tension between what might be best for one’s
participants and what might be best for the product (the film) is central to documentary ethics.

Furthermore, it is often we alone (i.e. directors as opposed to producers, commissioning editors, etc.) who stand between our participants and the rest of the world. It is we who develop personal relationships with them. We take a chance on participants and they put their trust in us, as the ‘face’ of the filmmaking team.

Trust lies at the heart of any personal relationship and means we have confidence that the other will ‘do the right thing’ by us. This confidence, or faith, is usually founded on our experience of the other person, that they are trustworthy, but can also be based on the recommendation of someone else we trust who knows that person. However, trust always involves an element of risk. It requires action as well as feeling, because we place our trust in the other person. If s/he doesn’t live up to that trust then we feel betrayed, exploited and probably angry.

Nash identifies how trust works in the filmmaker-participant relationship:

trust is a response to the inherent vulnerability invited in observational filmmaking. For the filmmaker, establishing trust is central to the documentary project. His or her filmmaking performance aims at communicating their trustworthiness to the participant. For the participant, trust is essential to overcome the risk entailed in giving the filmmaker access, that of betrayal (Nash 2009, p. 193).

As Nash points out, the breaking of trust is the biggest single fear that both filmmaker and participant experience. As filmmakers we constantly worry that participants might change their minds and opt out, while participants worry that we will misrepresent them.

Nash’s assertion that the documentary maker’s ‘filmmaking performance’ is aimed at winning over their participants’ trust flags a long-standing debate about the process of collecting personal stories. In doing so, are we predators, ‘playing up’ to participants for our own gain? Are we feeding off of the hardships of others, for example? This accusation has regularly erupted in relation to journalists and writers (e.g. see Malcolm 1990), but has also recently been aimed at social researchers and the academy.
Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang refer to the ‘fetish for pain’ exhibited by social science researchers engaged with post-colonial analysis, which often ‘works to collect stories of pain and humiliation in the lives of those being researched for commodification’. This is done in the belief that voice has authenticity and ‘what counts as voice and makes voice count is pain’. Such has been the tendency or desire of such research ‘to pose as voicebox, ventriloquist, interpreter of subaltern voice’ that communities are beginning to refuse to be researched, guessing that the researchers are looking for ‘narratives of pain’ to confirm the disempowered, victim status of participants who don’t necessarily feel defined by either of those stereotypes (Tuck & Yang 2014, pp. 223–230).

This warning about the disposition to seek out suffering applies as much to documentary making as any other form of social research, underlining the need for self-reflexive consideration of one’s own motives. Moreover, the consequences for participants of revisiting trauma need to be considered. I am reminded here of a line from Jody Picoult’s novel, The Storyteller (2013). When Minka is pushed by a Nazi hunter to identify her SS persecutor from an old photograph, she tells him:

You are not just asking me to point to a photograph. You are asking me to poke a hole in a dam, because you are thirsty, even though I will end up drowning in the process (Picoult 2013, p. 590).

Participating in a documentary inevitably entails being a means to an end—usually the making of some point. In Freedom Stories the point is to change attitudes towards ‘boat people’, but to what degree participants are a means to an end in a consciously collaborative process is a question for debate. Certainly, ‘pain stories’ emerged during the making of Freedom Stories, and I will reflexively analyse several of these in the second half of this thesis.

Paula Bilbrough takes up the question of trust in a book chapter drawn from her doctoral research on the ethics of the auto/biographical documentary (2015). Emphasising the link between our sense of self and identity with the notion of narrative (i.e. stories we tell about ourselves), Bilbrough asks ‘what are the implications when someone else takes control of our story and constructs and/or frames us?’ (2013, pp. 62–63). She then discusses several celebrated cases where the trusting relationship between filmmakers
and participants crumbled into dispute, acrimony and mutual accusations of betrayal.\textsuperscript{17} Bilbrough argues that in such cases, participants felt that their stories had been taken from them and the selves they saw framed in the resultant films were not the selves they recognised (2013, p. 65).

In Australia, this non-recognition of self occurred in the controversial case of \textit{Sylvania Waters} (1993), producer Paul Watson’s ‘docusoap’ about a nouveau riche Sydney family and its outspoken matriarch, Noeline Donaher, who later accused the producers of misrepresenting her family life, editing months of ‘fly-on-the-wall’ footage into a grotesque representation of her behaviour (Maddox 2009). Furthermore:

He [Watson] messed around with my family … and made us out to be worse than we are … What he did to me was character assassination. He made me a monster. We were never told the sort of film he was going to make and we trusted him (Rampton 1995).

\textit{Sylvania Waters} was a forerunner to the ‘Reality TV’ formats that are prevalent today in mainstream broadcasting. These often draw on the competitive genre of the game show and incorporate elements of reflexivity whereby contestants or participants confide to the camera (or a producer) their feelings about what is happening. However, the lack of control that participants have over the way they are portrayed—for example, they usually have no rights of review during editing and don’t see the series until it goes to air—renders this kind of reflexive rhetoric completely hollow.

Gena Riess’s graduating documentary from the Victorian College of the Arts School of Film and Television, \textit{Creating a Monster} (2016), demonstrates this. After describing her excitement at sitting down with her family to watch the opening episode of \textit{The Bachelor – Australia Season 3} (2015), one of the participants, Sandra, recounts her growing horror at a depiction of herself that neither she nor her family recognised:

\begin{quote}
After the show finished it was extremely awkward and the tension – my family just couldn’t believe, you know, what just happened. So it was really
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} These include: Nicolas Philibert’s \textit{Etre et Avoir} (2002); Errol Morris’s \textit{The Thin Blue Line} (1988); and Violeta Ayala and Dan Fallshaw’s \textit{Stolen} (2009).
emotional because I was like, laughing it off like, you know, everything was fine. But then I realised that wow, if this is the start ... of what the public is going to think of me, it’s bad.18

Riess interviews four reality show participants, who each describe their experiences of public exposure. For Sandra, the realisation was ‘wow, people think I’m crazy!’, while David, from *The Bachelorette – Australia Season 1* (2015), laments: ‘I just think people kind of actually thought that I was one hundred percent every day, every second of my life, just a dick’.19 Sandra succinctly summarises this sense of non-recognition of one’s fundamental self:

> I’m not upset by the fact that they, you know, edited bits and pieces. I’m upset because you guys don’t know who I really am, like the public don’t know my personality, they only see, you know, the bad bits or the over the top bits.20

This kind of bad faith operative in the world of ‘factual’ television—the manipulation of narratives, typecasting of participants, and lack of consultation—constitutes a betrayal of trust, however naïve that trust might be. But there are further dangers to participants. Bilbrough describes the notion of documentary representation as an ‘identity narrative’.

> Whatever the motives of the filmmaker, that narrative is inherently threatened by the need to compress the rushes and conform to a story with a throughline.21 The rounded human beings of the rushes all too easily become cardboard cut-outs in the final edit, representing a skewed and simplistic version of complex people. As Bilbrough points out:

> In viewing a documentary we are restricted to the particular aspects of a person’s life the documentary‐artist has chosen to frame. This story is the

18 Occurs at 00:14:42.

19 Occurs at 00:17:35.

20 Occurs at 00:17:06.

21 ‘Rushes’ refers to the raw, unedited video footage created during filming. A ‘throughline’ is the spine or driving force of a film’s story, to which each sequence and participant is supposed to relate.
only one that the majority of viewers will ever know about the person on screen and as such there is a danger it may become the defining ‘truth’ about that person (Bilbrough 2013, p. 71).

These issues of narratives of pain, representation and recognition of self will be discussed through specific examples from the making of *Freedom Stories* in the second half of this thesis.

**Collaboration and the filmmaker’s role**

It is self-evident that mutual trust is a requirement for a successful collaborative relationship. The notion of collaboration in humanities research is nothing new and in ethnography and visual anthropology the turn from an ‘observer’ towards a ‘participant-observer’ approach has been a stimulus to collaboration between researcher and researched. In considering the outsider/insider relationship in research, visual anthropologists such as Calvin Pryluck have embraced collaboration since the 1970s:

> The logic of complete collaboration is the logic of direct cinema. If one is serious about using direct cinema to make valid statements about people, then collaboration should be welcome. The subjects know more than any outsider can about what is on the screen. Without the insider’s understanding, the material could be distorted in the editing process by the outsider … Collaboration fulfils the basic ethical requirement for control of one’s own personality (Pryluck 2005, p. 205).

For her part, Sara Pink stresses the benefits to both researcher and participant in a collaborative approach to ethnographic research:

> If ethnography is seen as a process of negotiation and collaboration with informants, through which they too stand to achieve their own objectives, rather than as an act of taking information away from them, the ethical agenda also shifts. By focusing on collaboration and the idea of ‘creating something together’, agency becomes shared between the researcher and informant. Rather than the researcher being the active party who both extracts
data and gives something else back, in this model both researcher and participant invest in, and are rewarded by, the project (Pink 2007, p. 57).

Collaboration then, relies greatly on participant motivation and can potentially range from close consultation to joint authorship, the latter involving high levels of participant agency. Interestingly, the new possibilities of online connections between people and communities seem to be provoking a renewed interest in filmic collaboration. In the article quoted earlier in relation to Joshua Oppenheimer (see Chapter One – The performative documentary), Luke Moody writes:

Recently I’ve seen an increasing interest and willingness from filmmakers to play with forms of subject collaboration: crowd-sourced footage, handing over the camera, or facilitating a record of self-fictionalisation. Making documentaries together seems to be in a moment of creative development (Moody 2015, N. pag.).

An example Moody quotes is Life in a Day (2011), Kevin McDonald’s mammoth project in which material was selected and edited from 80,000 crowd-sourced video clips, shot around the world on the same day and submitted via YouTube. However, Moody points out that collaborative experiments are nothing new and go back at least as far as Jean Rouch, who, in the 1950s, took his filmmaking with real participants into the area of improvisation in a process of ‘shared anthropology’ that blurred the lines between fiction and documentary and became known as ‘ethno-fiction’ (ten Brink 2007, p. 3).

What seems to be provoking this new wave of collaborative documentaries is the rapid emergence of converging, digital technologies of connectivity. But as Moody also points out:

The majority of post-millennial collaborative documentaries, both long-form cinematic and ‘interactive’ web-based works, have assumed this model by creating depository funnels: open calls to submit material to an ultimately singular filtering, curating, editing, directing body (Moody 2015, N. pag., my italics).

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22 For a critical analysis of the Life in a Day project, see Jovanovic (2016).
Thus, suggests Moody, ‘negotiating the multiple voices, ideas, movements and lives of others’ still appears to require ‘the confidence of a master storyteller’—but while the need for the filmmaker remains, ‘documentary “direction” could become more of an act of initiation, negotiation, and facilitation’ (2015, N. pag.).

Although the methods may be novel, however, this idea of what ‘direction’ means is hardly new either. From the 1970s onwards, ethnographic and documentary filmmakers began to experiment with notions of collaboration and joint authorship, with varying degrees of success. In an article for Visual Anthropology Review, Sarah Elder discusses the ‘community collaborative filmmaking’ model that she and Leonard Kamerling developed in the 1970s at the Alaska Native Heritage Film Center. Acknowledging the filmmaking limitation that ‘we see what we know how to see, what we’ve learned how to see’ (1995, p. 96), Elder writes:

I understood that most documentaries contradict themselves by reflecting the concerns of the director while claiming to represent those who are filmed. Like anyone, filmmakers can attempt to answer only those questions they know how to raise (Elder 1995, p. 98).

This provoked Elder to try ‘to position myself in an equal place of power where the subject and I could provide certain knowledge, skills, and access that the other wanted’ (1995, p. 96). The aim was to develop a method they first called ‘Community Determined Filmmaking’ in which:

We wanted to participate in a new kind of filmmaking where we did not determine the representation of minority people, but at the same time, we did not want to relinquish our aesthetic and technical control or our ethnographic concerns. We believed it was possible to have shared authorship, and—even more idealistically—that the villages we worked with would determine their own representation (Elder 1995, p. 97).

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23 Examples include the National Film Board of Canada’s Challenge for Change (1967–80), in Australia Two Laws (1982), and the British Broadcasting Corporation’s Video Diaries (1990–96).
After a while, however, Elder and Kamerling began to realise that, despite all the power-sharing mechanisms they had put in place:

the films were indeed authored by us, and by our vision, and that the communities were not so much ‘determining’ the films but collaborating with us. Villagers and filmmakers were dialogically contributing to the real process of making films. This dialogic process is at the heart of all collaboration. In the mid-eighties we changed the name of our approach … to ‘community collaborative’ filming to reflect the real process we were experiencing (Elder 1995, p. 98).

There is no room here to do justice to the development of 20th century visual anthropology but, for example, at the same time as Elder and Kamerling were developing their filmmaking model with Eskimo communities in Alaska, David and Judith MacDougall were filming Wedding Camels (1979), the first of their Turkana Conversations Trilogy in Northern Kenya, and developing their ‘participative camera’ approach. This reflexively foregrounded the interaction or encounter between filmmaker and participant rather than suggesting that customs and behaviour were being merely observed as they occurred ‘naturally’ (Nichols 2010, p. 200).

Later, when relatively cheap and easy to use video camcorders were developed, a participative approach saw the handing over of the means of recording to participants themselves (the ‘video diaries’ phase of the late 1980s) and nowadays participative visual research generally refers to participants being provided with the means of production to make their own work, for example in ‘native image-making’ techniques such as ‘reflexive photography’ and ‘photo-voice’ (see Packard 2008, p. 64).

However, this kind of approach is no panacea for the ethical problem of asymmetric power. In an analysis of his research with homeless people in Tennessee, Josh Packard discusses to what degree participatory visual research methods help researchers to form a more equitable partnership with participants. Whilst acknowledging that cheap and accessible technology has helped considerably to even things up, he concludes that the aim of achieving equal power is unrealistic. For example, using a ‘power-levelling methodology’ such as ‘photo-elicitation’ (i.e. giving participants their own cameras to take photos that they want to take), requires that:
In order to equalize power relationships in a project, technical competencies must be similar. An unequal power dynamic is immediately and irrevocably established the moment the researcher must instruct a participant on how to operate a piece of equipment (Packard 2008, pp. 64–65).

Furthermore, in the area of filmmaking, the editing process has generally been retained as the province of the filmmaker/researcher, if only because of the specialised skills required. In collaborative situations where participants have no experience or training in editing there remains that need for a ‘master storyteller’. This is the fine ethical line that I seek to walk—Elder’s line referred to earlier of seeking ‘to position myself in an equal place of power where the subject and I could provide certain knowledge, skills, and access that the other wanted’, and in a way where ‘each is accountable to the other’ (1995, p. 97).

**Consent, the right of veto, and ownership**

Accountability in a collaborative filmmaking approach based on mutual trust implies or compels a substantial right of consultation to the participants over the final product. In their landmark survey, *Honest Truths: Documentary filmmakers on ethical challenges in their work*, Aufderheide, Jaszi and Chandra found that whilst not all do so, American documentary makers commonly offer rough cut consultation to participants (2009, pp. 10–12). Moreover, Nash’s Australian research found that all three of the prominent documentary makers on whose work she focussed offered an *informal* right of veto. They did this despite the contradictory legal requirements of the standard industry release form they were required to use and which gives total control over the documentary rushes and completed film to the producers.

Nash found that the use of such forms ‘cuts across the documentary relationship because it undermines the trust between filmmaker and participant’ (2009, p. 304). Thus:

the right of veto recognises the participant’s power and the filmmaker’s vulnerability within the documentary relationship. The right of veto, therefore, can be interpreted as playing an important role in fostering the trust
between filmmaker and participant that makes observational documentary possible (Nash 2009, p. 302).

The work of Nash, Sanders and myself constitutes a re-examination of the notion of ‘informed consent’ in documentary making (Nash 2009; Sanders 2007, 2012; Thomas 2010). This is a borrowed concept from scientific research that is not particularly useful. For example, it is impossible to fully inform a participant in advance of the potential consequences of appearing in a documentary. Indeed, the filmmaker her/himself may not know exactly how the documentary will turn out or how audiences will respond to it. Sanders posits a model of ongoing negotiation as a more appropriate, practical and effective process than signing a carte blanche form in advance.

I have previously drawn attention to potential legal conflicts between the use of standard, industry release forms and the actual, pragmatic behaviour of filmmakers on the ground (Thomas 2012a, p. 342; 2012b, pp. 81–82). Because my current practice operates largely outside of industry constraints, employing a philanthropic rather than television funding strategy, I have changed my own practice accordingly (this will be fully discussed in Chapter Five).

To me, ‘collaboration’ means that control is shared, rather than anyone in particular being ‘in charge’. The model I propose, and used in making Freedom Stories, is more harmonious and assumes that the aims of filmmaker and participant essentially coincide. It presupposes a healthy dialogue about process because collaboration also implies the recognition of appropriate division of labour. Participants are the experts on their own stories and filmmakers on filmmaking. Just as I assume participants will take responsibility for telling their own stories as honestly and well as they can, so I accept the responsibility to do the filmmaking in a similar manner. I suspect that one reason why some filmmakers don’t like the idea of allowing their participants into the edit suite is a fear of ceding control.

The consent model that I posit reflects Nash’s notion of ‘negotiated collaboration’ (2009, p. 234) and Sanders’s ‘agreement through dialogue’ (2007, p. 13). I operate on the basis that consent is a continuous process of negotiation and that, at least up until publication,
a right of veto is part of that.\textsuperscript{24} Such is the centrality of this tenet for me, that in an early edit of the feature, when the editor included part of a conversation about veto as an introduction to one of our participants, I decided to keep it in as a reflexive, ethical ‘marker’. The conversation occurred on the first day of filming with Reyhana and the edited version runs as follows:\textsuperscript{25}

Steve: \textit{I will show you the bits that we would like to use. I wouldn’t finish the film without showing you.}
Reyhana: \textit{Okay, yes.}
Steve: \textit{So that you can see that you’re happy.}
Reyhana: \textit{Okay then.}

Having declared this position, there are pertinent criticisms about offering participants veto over their own material that require consideration. These primarily concern questions about self-promotion or censorship by participants, and abdication of directorial responsibility by the filmmaker.

There is an understandable tendency in any relationship, particularly if the other person appears sympathetic, to try and win them over to your own point of view, to get them on your side in matters of conflict. Any experienced filmmaker becomes aware of the way in which participants can seek to recruit them and the resultant film as judge and jury on their behalf. This is a tendency to be resisted and can cause ethical dilemmas.

A more subtle ethical risk in a collaborative approach is that of self-censorship by participants. In particular, as noted by Hannah Hoechner in her description of a participatory research project with Qur’anic students in Nigeria, with whom she made a film, there can be a tendency for participants to ‘de-emphasise’ aspects of their lives, perhaps because of associations of shame—in that case concerning the role of poverty (Hoechner 2014, pp. 19–22). If the filmmaker sees her/his role as giving priority to the subjectivity of participants over notions of ‘balance’ or ‘objectivity’ then s/he needs to be

\textsuperscript{24} Should a participant withdraw permission for their inclusion \textit{after} release of the documentary, then this would, of course, be problematic.

\textsuperscript{25} The sequence occurs at 00:16:39, in the DVD chapter: \textit{Reyhana (Part1).}
alert to such possibilities and how they might be resolved within that kind of editorial stance.

As for the accusation that offering a right of veto to participants amounts to an abdication of directorial responsibility (e.g. see Nash 2009, pp. 72–73), it seems to me that this fails to take into account either the nature of collaboration or what ‘directing’ a documentary means in practice.

Firstly, offering a right of veto to participants does not mean giving them free rein to decide what’s ‘in’ and what’s ‘out’ of the resultant film. Any relationship of trust and collaboration is a two-way interaction involving mutual respect. Where there is disagreement then there will be negotiation and debate. If there is stalemate, then a trusted third person might be brought in to mediate. After all that, if a participant remains insistent, then the filmmaker may concede, even though s/he might remain ambivalent. My point is that there is a dialogic process here, as in any healthy relationship, which is rooted in mutual trust, respect and the agreed aims for the film.

Secondly, the notion of ‘directing’ a documentary has always seemed to me to be something of a misnomer. In fiction filmmaking the director has full control of the action, the artistry and (with the producer) the product (‘final cut’). In a documentary, a director may choose to take editorial control in post-production but how can s/he ‘control’ real events involving real people? Making a fiction film generally requires total mastery of the *mise en scène* and little is left to chance—the intervention of which usually equates to catastrophe. In non-fiction filmmaking, a different relationship is cultivated with chance, as we learn to put our trust in it.

Although good organisation is important, it is often happenstance (or serendipity, or synchronicity) that appears to deliver great documentary moments, not planning. This relationship to chance positions the documentary filmmaker more as a ‘facilitator’ than a ‘director’. Consequently, it seems to me that an important skill documentary makers

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26 *Mise en scène* means the setting-up of what happens in front of the camera, including the placement of actors, scenery, props etc.

27 I shall discuss the relationship of improvisation to chance later on, e.g. see Chapter Four – the performative and the reflexive.
need to cultivate is that of knowing when to relinquish control rather than exert it. This does not mean however, that one is not ‘the filmmaker’ or that we have no responsibility for the vision, purpose or conduct of our practice. Responsibility is a different matter.

Having dealt with consent and consultation there remains the question of ownership. If a documentary is collaboratively created, what are the implications for its ownership, not just in terms of encouraging a proprietorial sense among participants, but in legal and financial terms? Generally, a standard release form renders ownership of, and power over, the ‘rushes’ to the production company. As Brian Winston points out, the purpose of copyright is to allow filmmakers to do business and earn a living (Winston 1995, pp. 224–225). However, because Freedom Stories doesn’t fall within that kind of business model, it was possible to negotiate a different sense of dual ownership—one in which financially (as is usual in documentaries) participants did not get paid, but in which it was agreed that any profits would be invested back into the assistance and support of refugees.

As in the case of Hope (see Thomas 2010, p. 43), the basic agreement for Freedom Stories was that the filmmaking resources and expertise required to facilitate the sharing of their personal stories by participants in a documentary format would be supplied. In return for consultation at every stage, my production company (Flying Carpet Films) would have copyright of the completed film, so that as an entity it could undertake the onerous ‘business’ of distributing the documentary. Experience has taught me that the latter is something which participants generally have little interest in anyway.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the methodological underpinnings of my representational, collaborative and ethical responsibilities as a documentary maker concerned with personal stories. Having initiated a project (such as Freedom Stories), I provide my specialist filmmaking skills in exchange for participants providing theirs, as the best equipped persons to tell their own stories. I provide those skills in the context of a collaborative framework, and an ethic of sensitive engagement concerned primarily with the welfare of the ‘other’. Thus participants become co-creators or ‘partial co-creators’ (Sanders 2012, p. 245), in that they contribute what they are able (or choose) to, while I
and the production team remain artistically responsible for the final product. This creative tension between being both filmmaker and collaborator, and the ethical problems inherent in the delineation of responsibilities, were ongoing during the production of *Freedom Stories* and specific examples will be discussed in the chapters that follow.
Chapter Three – Freedom Stories and my Filmmaking Method

Acknowledging my own story

Before describing the development of Freedom Stories and the production methods employed, I should acknowledge my own story, my motivation for making Freedom Stories and undertaking this research, and my understanding of the 'personal baggage' I might have brought to both. A reflexive self-awareness is important because my own predilections will have influenced the direction of the films, the process of making them, and how I have conducted my research. Personal baggage concerns the preconceived ideas and prejudices that I bring with me, my previous experience, and my own preoccupations and 'unfinished business of life' (Rabiger 2004, pp. 119–123), all of which contribute not just to my approach but to its outcomes.

How is it then, that I have a particular interest in the refugee experience? What are the personal connections that predispose me to empathy towards people who have sought asylum in Australia? What has driven me to spend more than four years working on Freedom Stories, and how might such connections have influenced the project and its direction?

I have always had an interest in social equality and have come to articulate this as rooted in a sense of personal injustice (real or imagined) that I carried with me from my childhood and family life. Essentially, growing up in the 1950s and 60s in a lower middle class, upwardly aspiring English family with a tight-lipped motto of ‘least said soonest mended’28 was a repressive experience. This was the era when children were 'seen but not heard'. Nothing was ever explained to us and looking back, my childhood feels like a kind of limbo from which I escaped at seventeen to attend university 300 miles away. I never returned to live in the (then) conservative city of Bath. It strikes me that, although incomparable in obvious ways, there is a sense in which my childhood was reminiscent of a kind of ‘indefinite mandatory detention’.

28 Defined in Brewers Dictionary of Phrases and Fables as ‘explanations and apologies are quite useless and only make bad worse’.
Following my graduation in science, I worked in detached youth work and school teaching (including in the Caribbean), and then race relations in the UK. My strong identification with disenfranchised groups in my work with youth and at the Commission for Racial Equality can probably be linked to my feeling of being both an outsider and a conciliator in my own family (one of three siblings, I was often caught in the middle between my brother and sister). Eventually I took the opportunity to come to Australia ‘on spec’ and found myself staying here.

Something I brought out of my upbringing was an abhorrence of secrets being kept from me. As kids we were left in ignorance and, for example, as described in my documentary Least Said, Soonest Mended (1999), seminal moments in our family life were kept from me by my parents. The final straw in this regard was when my father was dying and I was away at university. He had been given two years to live, but the first I knew of this was when I received a phone call telling me he had died.

I have written and spoken about this elsewhere (Rosenthal 2007, pp. 342–345; Thomas 2010, pp. 10–12), but such withholding was always done for my own good, or so thought my parents, who wanted to protect me from unpleasant truths that might cause anxiety (I was said to be a worrier). This experience has led in my documentary practice to an abiding interest in concealment and social engineering, and here there is resonance with asylum seeker policy in Australia, around which hangs a shroud of government secrecy.

It is perhaps no surprise that I empathise with the situation of people seeking asylum, who escape from their homelands and find themselves in the limbo of mandatory detention, with no idea how long it will last or what the future will bring. They have (as Jamila says in the Freedom Stories feature) committed no crime other than asking for help, but are nevertheless punished by a system aimed at deterring others from getting on ‘leaky boats’ to Australia. Maybe I also empathise as someone who grew up in an era

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29 The central narrative of the film concerns my sister’s pregnancy as an ‘unmarried mother’ in the 1960s, and how she was sent away in secret to have the baby and then coerced to give her up for adoption.

30 Welcome to Woomera is one example, being about a secret town originally built to house scientists testing secret weapons.

31 See the feature at 00:55:46, in the DVD chapter: Jamila – in my own little way make a difference, or Clip No. 05 (Jamila) supplied in the UoM digital depository.
when arbitrary punishment was common, particularly at school, where it was normal practice to make an example of any individual who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, whether guilty or not.

The areas of secrecy, of ‘not knowing’, of social justice, and arbitrary punishment are still triggers for me. But it also occurred to me recently, in a moment of epiphany, that my preoccupation with secrecy has now migrated from the subject matter of my films to the process of making them. Clearly my concern with ethics and transparency, and identification with the experiences of asylum seekers, goes some way to explaining my motivations in making Freedom Stories and undertaking this research. I am also a first generation migrant, so I understand something about the abandonment of one’s roots, whatever the reasons for doing so.

**The concept of Freedom Stories**

The idea of Freedom Stories arose from my previous documentaries, Welcome to Woomera (2004) and Hope (2008). Each was a stimulus for the next, both in terms of content and approach, so it is pertinent to say something about that here. Again, I have written about this elsewhere (e.g. Thomas 2010, pp. 12–17; 2015b), but Welcome to Woomera was a frustrating experience. The aim was to tell the story of the Woomera township, from its construction as a weapons testing centre after World War II, to its then incarnation as an immigration detention centre. Some asylum seekers were living in the community but the Immigration Department prevented us from identifying anyone we filmed or conversing with them on camera. This prohibition was said to be ‘for their own protection’, a justification that rang bells from my own childhood.

Furthermore, although I conceived, proposed and directed the project, as a program commissioned for ABC TV through Film Australia, my editorial independence was constrained. For example, I was not allowed to narrate the documentary myself, despite this being a signature of my filmmaking approach. Nor was consultation with participants over the edit permitted. In the end, I felt that I had not only failed the asylum seekers I met, but that both my voice and ethical sensibility had been suppressed.

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32 Since folded into Screen Australia.
That dissatisfaction led directly to *Hope*, a collaboration with the SIEV X survivor Amal Basry. I met Amal by chance in 2005 and was deeply impressed by her insistence on speaking out about the events surrounding the disaster, in which more than 350 people drowned. It was through working with her that I re-found my own creative voice. This time there was no television interest, and the documentary was funded largely through donations and philanthropic support. Consequently, I had an unusual and liberating degree of creative freedom.

In a book chapter entitled *No Going Back: Continuity and Change in Australian Documentary*, Deane Williams and John Hughes (2015) ask whether the prominent role played by television since the 1980s in commissioning documentaries in Australia has resulted in a reduction of filmmakers’ creative and editorial independence. They discuss various documentary projects, including *Hope*, noting that:

> For Thomas, a high level of collaboration and accountability is essential for ethical engagement between filmmaker and subject. Writing on making *Hope* (Thomas 2010) … He argues that the values and working practices now commonplace in factual production militate against this ethical practice with regard to relations between filmmakers and their subjects (Williams & Hughes 2015, p. 44).

Interestingly, the writers conclude that: ‘Among the films discussed here, only *Hope* could claim entirely uncompromised editorial and creative independence’ (Williams & Hughes 2015, pp. 49–50).

Emma Cox at the University of London has also written about *Hope*, along with Clara Law’s *Letters to Ali* (2004), in a comparative study of ‘the challenging question of how belonging and inhabiting are to be reconfigured in the face of the person who seeks asylum’. She notes that both films perform ‘dual cultural work: offering certain kinds of representation, of voice, to newcomers, and reformulating or remaking an Australian identity that is seen to have been hijacked by militarized, exclusionary sovereign power in the post-2001 era’ (Cox 2015, pp. 85, 88).

Cox summarises my filmic approach, which I have since developed further:
The exploratory, non-expert model is a familiar device in contemporary hosted-narrator documentary filmmaking; oftentimes the host-narrator is inserted so comprehensively into a film that he or she is effectively its protagonist, the experiencing self through which spectatorial identification is mediated … Thomas’s role in Hope represents a hybrid of the hosted-narrator and the voiceover narrator; he appears on screen, but only intermittently, and never looks directly into the camera lens. Most of the time his voice is heard as a non-diegetic insert (Cox 2015, p. 90).

Furthermore, Cox asks a pertinent question that I wanted to address with Freedom Stories:

The epistolary fragments of an unseen Ali and Basry’s own brave testimony are figured into a larger ongoing project, made to stand for a flawed asylum policy. Whether asylum seekers or refugees can make themselves recognizable to Australians on their own terms within the parameters of this project and whether, indeed, they can represent themselves outside the familiar keys of trauma, violation, and redemption are questions that trouble, to a greater or lesser extent, all accounts of noncitizenship that are presented, across the borderlines, to citizens in secure and prosperous host nations (Cox 2015, p. 107).

This statement encapsulates my task of ensuring that participants in Freedom Stories would be depicted as more than ‘former asylum seekers’ or victim-subjects. The tension created by the imperative to give a view of them as fully rounded people will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Sadly, my collaboration with Amal ended upon her premature death before the editing of Hope had begun, and I was left to make some difficult ethical decisions during post-production (Thomas 2010, pp. 49–71). This experience helps explain my particular focus in this current research on the ethics of the editing stage in the making of Freedom Stories.

Also, despite her inspiring ability to transcend everything that happened to her, Amal’s story was deeply tragic. Consequently, I was keen to consider a further collaboration
with former asylum seekers but from a more positive angle, that of their successful integration into Australian society. I was also influenced by unfinished business from the Woomera project. During production in 2002, we were allowed to film inside the (by then) closed detention centre. To my surprise, we found beautiful murals, symbols of freedom painted on the walls of buildings by the inmates. In the ensuing years those images had stayed with me and I often wondered what had become of the people that painted them.\footnote{See the feature at 00:14:01, in the DVD chapter: \textit{Shafiq (Part 1)}.}

So I decided to develop a film with participants who had been in immigration detention around that time—a watershed period for asylum seeker policy, 2001 being the year of the Tampa, the Howard Government’s Pacific solution and the ‘children overboard’ affair.\footnote{For an account of this period, see David Marr and Marian Wilkinson’s \textit{Dark Victory} (2004).} Given that most of the people detained at that time were eventually found to be genuine refugees, these would be participants who, a decade later, were living among us as Australian citizens.

My objective was to facilitate the telling of their own stories as former asylum seekers who had been in detention as adults or children, some for years, and then (as was the practice at the time) placed on Temporary Protection Visas on their release, before eventually gaining permanent residence and becoming Australian citizens.\footnote{For an explanation of the Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) and its conditions, see the Introduction to this thesis.} My purpose was to influence public opinion away from an overwhelmingly negative view of so-called ‘boat people’ by bringing their own voices into a debate where everyone else’s prevails. After a period of research and consultation during which I met many former asylum seekers, mainly from the Middle-East, around 20 people volunteered to participate in a documentary about their lives.

Looking back, it is clear from the start that my desire to counter negative societal attitudes towards ‘boat people’ with a positive film about what they had achieved, was in friction with the knowledge I had accumulated about the negative impact of indefinite detention and the damage it does. Reflexively considered, \textit{Freedom Stories} embodies the
contradiction of simultaneously representing positive outcomes and negative effects. Keeping a balance between the success stories of people’s lives now and the enduring damage of detention, particularly for those who were incarcerated for long periods, was a constant tension. Whilst the ‘selling point’ for the film was people’s achievements, it was prefigured early on—in an unsuccessful application for production funding to Screen Australia—that *Freedom Stories* would intersect with trauma:

> It will constitute an authored and narrated essay reflecting a collaborative approach between filmmaker and participants on the question of how people survive trauma and get on with their lives … and the ways in which they are changed by that experience (Thomas & Horler 2011, p. 6).

**Sameness and difference**

By highlighting individual stories rather than generalities, statistics and opinion, I hoped to generate audience empathy for our participants, and, by extension, others in similar situations. Herein lies the paradox of identification with the Other. As Lucien Taylor says in his introduction to David MacDougall’s *Transcultural Cinema*:

> Other people’s subjectivities are their own, to be sure, but they also inhabit the same world as we do, and this cohabitation is a source of commonalities—between individuals and by extension, says MacDougall, between groups—as much as it is of differences … the “shock” of film’s transculturality, MacDougall suggests, is that *through* its particularity it evokes the *universality* of human experience (MacDougall 1998, pp. 13, 19).

Herein lies the connection between MacDougall’s view and my aim with *Freedom Stories*, which was to focus on the commonalities between ‘ordinary Australians’ and ‘boat people’ rather than the differences, which are what usually dominate media coverage (e.g. their supposed otherness, threat, non-adherence to Australian values, queue jumping, illegality, and so on).
An important semantic point about this representational interest in commonality over difference as a way of avoiding ‘othering the Other’,\(^{36}\) is that I am not mounting an assimilationist argument or saying that people seeking asylum are just the same as ‘the rest of us’ (i.e. Anglo-Australians). Indeed, each has their own story and is unique and because they have things in common with everyone else does not mean they are indistinguishable. I use the term commonality, as does MacDougall, in the sense of universality rather than similarity. We are all human beings. To see it any other way would be to replace one set of stereotypes of asylum seekers with another.\(^{37}\)

It strikes me that, with *Freedom Stories*, my determination to align myself with participants and their interests (akin to Pink’s ‘sensory apprenticeship’), rather than just learn about the suffering they have been through, aided in avoiding the kinds of traps outlined above. In the editing of participants’ stories, I was intent to present them as rounded human beings, with lives and interests beyond those of the ‘refugee’ narrative. I was given a clue about the importance of this early on, when several potential participants declined to be involved because they no longer wished to be defined by their refugee background. This kind of resistance to ‘selves’ that they had moved on from was not uncommon among former asylum seekers I spoke to in my research.

**My filmmaking method**

In making *Freedom Stories*, I sought to build on the approach that I began to develop with my first major documentary, *Black Man’s Houses* (1992), and to which I returned with *Hope* (2008) after the digressions of *Welcome to Woomera* (2004). My filming method incorporates elements of observation, conversational interviewing, and interventions of various kinds, which can be categorised as improvisational. I regard the

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36 I employ this term in its common usage despite lacking the scope here to explore its philosophical roots in the writings of philosophers such as Edward Said and Michael Foucault. In terms of race, the novels of Toni Morrison are recommended as acclaimed explorations of the phenomenon.

37 This point has been taken up by Rodan and Lange in *Going Overboard? Representing Hazara Afghan Refugees as Just Like Us*, which argues that by representing members of this group as ‘just like us’ in well-meaning attempts to reassure society and secure their acceptance, important needs that they may have (e.g. for government support in learning English or overcoming disadvantage), can then be too easily ignored (Rodan & Lange 2008).
camera as a catalyst, having never espoused a distanced ‘fly-on-the-wall’ approach, and generally employ a personal narration. This ‘recessed first person’ methodology (Hughes 2007) is aligned more to the filmmaking styles of well-known exponents such as Molly Dineen (UK) and Michael Rubbo (Australia)\(^{38}\) than the predominantly observational approaches of direct cinema or visual anthropology.\(^{39}\)

During shooting, I took a collaborative, negotiated approach that encouraged participants to use their own initiative and suggest activities they wanted to do, such as return to a particular location or catch up with people from the past. I had no script, but always had ideas about what we could do, based on my knowledge of participants and discussions with them. My own mode of involvement was as a co-participant in filming, rather than just doing the filming. However, I did not want to lead the film in an ‘on-camera celebrity’ style.

Although I occasionally shoot footage of my own, my approach has generally been to employ a cinematographer and sound recordist because I like to stand back and get a wider, ‘director’s view’ of what is happening. With Hope, I experimented with doubling as the sound recordist, primarily to save money, and found that this worked quite well, as it brought me closer to the action but still off camera, and also provided a role for me other than watching. I continued this arrangement with Freedom Stories.

In an attempt to clarify my stylistic approach and given that the geographically spread and longitudinal nature of the project required the use of several cinematographers—all of whom earn most of their keep shooting formulaic television (which I wanted to get away from)—I drafted a Shooting Manifesto to give them. Although I never resolved this into a final, coherent statement, it did attempt to articulate guidelines, for example, on when to start or stop recording given my desire to be as spontaneous as possible. My interviewing style tends to be spontaneous and curiosity-based, so I am likely to ask a question to a participant at any time, not just during sit-down interviews. I also wanted to adhere as much as possible to an ‘unprivileged camera style’, referred to by MacDougall as ‘based on the assumption that the appearance of a film should be an artefact of the

\(^{38}\) Rubbo’s documentaries include Waiting for Fidel (1974) and Diary of a Facelift (1982).

\(^{39}\) A detailed account of the development of my filmmaking approach and style is provided in my Masters thesis (Thomas 2010, pp. 7–17).
social and physical encounter between the film-maker and the subject’ (1982, p. 9). In such an approach, preserving the integrity of the encounter in order to capture a sense of being present is favoured over concerns with perfect camera angles or innovative coverage (Donovan 2012, pp. 348–349).

The Shooting Manifesto is attached as Appendix C.

As referred to in Chapter One (see Interviewing), after reading Pink I was keen to develop the use of elicitation interviews and, by aligning my focus and awareness to what participants were doing, apply the notion of sensory apprenticeship. The latter would involve taking an interest in the things that participants were doing at work, school or home, and looking for connections between their interests and mine. All of the means employed in shooting were to be aimed at fulfilling my wish to speak ‘with or alongside’ participants rather than about or for them (MacDougall 1998, p. 77, citing Trinh T. Minh-ha).

The project timeline provided in Appendix B shows that I commenced my doctoral research just as the principle shooting of Freedom Stories began. The feature documentary was completed almost three years later. In total, about 50 days of shooting occurred over a period of 18 months and some 100 hours of video rushes were collected. The transcripts of recorded conversations with around 20 participants (12 of whom were eventually included in the feature documentary) amounted to approximately 200,000 words. Editing was the only stage of the process that proceeded on a full-time basis because the editor, Uri Mizrahi, was employed full-time. However, there was a two-month break because of a lack of funds, and in all, the feature documentary took about nine months to edit.

The amount of shooting per participant (or family) averaged between two and four days. Bouts of filming of between one and two days with each were spread longitudinally, with gaps of up to six months in between, so as to allow for developments in their lives. Some participants were involved in filming on a couple of occasions, and others on up to half a dozen. Most of the participants came from Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran, which were the main sources of asylum seekers arriving by boat around 2001.
The search for participants

When I commenced my PhD, the development of *Freedom Stories* was well underway. We already had about eight potential participants and had shot and edited a 16-minute showreel (or ‘teaser’) for use in raising production funds. It was at this stage that I began keeping a Production Journal as a reflexive means of data collection for my doctoral research. Examined in hindsight, the Journal is primarily a catalogue of doubt, and entries over the first six months centre on my anxieties about the withdrawal of several prospective participants, all of whom were women.

The effects of a participant's withdrawal or refusal to participate varies depending on the emotional investment, time and effort one has put into cultivating a filmic relationship, its centrality to the project, and at what stage the refusal occurs. This was relatively early days and because *Freedom Stories* was a multi-participant project no-one was indispensable. However, I had always wanted a mix of cultural backgrounds, gender and age, and I already had emotional investments in some of those who withdrew. My disappointment in these instances reflects the core anxiety experienced by filmmakers—that participants might withdraw and leave them without a film.

With respect to gender, it was much harder to get women involved than men. Of the seven participants featured in the showreel only one was female, and she subsequently withdrew from the production because of other priorities. However, I had high hopes for another potential female participant I had met when making *Welcome to Woomera*, and with whom I managed to re-establish contact. A single mother with a young child at the time, when I caught up with her again she had been working professionally in the health sector for a decade and her son was commencing university. Our reunion was a happy one, and we discussed various ideas about filming together. A fortnight later she wrote to tell me that on reflection, she had decided not to participate. In hindsight I believe this was primarily because she could see no advantage for herself in doing so.

Both of these losses caused me considerable anxiety, and although by this time we had a dozen men happy to participate, when a third young woman decided not to join in (despite her brother committing to the idea) I began to wonder if there were gender issues at play, perhaps related to Islam. So I took some advice and from then on offered women the alternatives of working with a female member of the production team, or of having a
female colleague of mine with a Middle-Eastern background along as a kind of 'chaperone'. I also made sure that I always had a female cinematographer working with me when filming with women. In practice however, nobody took up the alternatives offered. From my own perspective I felt perfectly comfortable working with the female participants in Freedom Stories and experienced nothing to suggest that those feelings were not mutual.

On the other hand, there were obviously cultural and religious norms at play that may help explain the general difficulty in finding women prepared to be involved. Aoham's anecdote in the feature, in which she recalls how difficult it was to persuade her husband to allow her to appear in a theatrical performance and his condition that she not be physically seen, is a pertinent example.\(^\text{40}\) It reflects a taboo in some Muslim communities against women being seen in public forums, particularly in a performing role. Reflecting on this in the reader-response to my Journal, I hypothesised different kinds of anxiety between the sexes in this case—that perhaps ‘the men are concerned about how they are represented, while the women are concerned about being represented’ (Thomas 2015a, p. 29).

In the end, five women participated and through the subsequent involvement of family members, we gained several more. What is visible in the completed film(s), perhaps, is a sort of woman, indeed, a type of person who would volunteer to participate in a documentary project like Freedom Stories. It has been noted by some viewers that the women in the feature seem to be busy shedding traditional norms, such as the wearing of the scarf. The determination of participants to take advantage of new choices now open to them (including educational, entrepreneurial, etc.) is a strong theme, reflecting the focus of the project on participant agency.

Furthermore, the results of employing a reflexive filmmaking approach are not always visible in the final product. I felt it was important to explore potential participants' motives with them, and discuss the possible effects of participating, including what it might bring up psychologically. I was never trying to talk people out of participating, quite the reverse, but by exploring those potential effects it is possible that some talked themselves out of it. I felt this particularly in the case of my friend from Woomera, that

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\(^{40}\) See the feature at 00:49:30, in the DVD chapter: Aoham (Part 1).
talking in greater depth about the film and what she had been through made her consider that participation might reawaken the past too vividly. The possibility of re-traumatisation needs to be seriously considered. In this case, my approach was a catalyst for a result (i.e. an absence) unobserved by the audience and which reflects the central tension between the needs of the researcher (in this instance, to attain my filmmaking goals) and the needs of the people researched.41

In Levinasian terms, approaching potential participants is about approaching the Other, from the side that usually has the power to determine who the Other is. It triggers the dance of circulating power to which Nash refers (e.g. 2009, p. 297). And although my approach is from the dominant culture, the power of the Other to reject that approach—to say: ‘no thanks’—is substantial, rendering me vulnerable. Even once they are no longer strangers, and have become participants with whom I have a personal relationship, when the moment comes to contact them again, I am invariably assailed by the feeling that I am asking things of them. There remains the fear that they might say: ‘no’.

This approach to practice requires persistence and determination as well as trustworthiness—core qualities required by any filmmaker working in the collaborative terrain of personal stories.

Levels of engagement and agency

As collaboration involves people working together to achieve similar goals, shared motivation encourages success. In my Masters thesis, I observed that:

In practice, a collaborative approach is unlikely to succeed where there is a feeling of reluctance or coercion among participants about appearing in a documentary. However, if there are strong reasons to participate then collaboration becomes a possibility (Thomas 2010, p. 42).

With Hope, for example, Amal wanted to tell the world about the SIEV X disaster, so that those who drowned would never be forgotten. Participating in a documentary with

41 Also unseen are those who immediately declined to participate but remained supportive of the project and, in some cases, recommended other people who were willing to do so.
similar aims was one way of achieving this. Amal was highly motivated and often took
the initiative in determining what we might film or do (see Thomas 2010, pp. 46–47).
Although I initially hoped that the participants in Freedom Stories would be similarly
driven, I soon realised that Amal was unusual in that regard. This time there were
varying degrees of motivation, and therefore commitment. Surprisingly, it was
persevering with some of those whose motivations were more ambivalent that actually
turned out to be particularly rewarding, as we shall see.

People gave various reasons for wanting to participate. For example: Amir told me he
didn’t want what happened to him ‘to be repeated anywhere else around the world’;
Reyhana wanted ‘Australians to hear our stories’; Aamer felt ‘compelled to speak’ on
behalf of other detainees he had met in Villawood; Jamila wanted people to know ‘we
are Aussies too’; and Mustapha was afraid he might ‘forget all the things that happened
on Nauru’. These are all statements made in the course of the rushes. Because my aim
was to facilitate participants telling their own stories as the missing voices in the asylum
seeker debate, there was a productive meshing of motivations here.

In practice, participants chose for themselves how involved they wanted to be. The
degree of commitment of individuals ranged from what I would call willing cooperation
to proactive collaboration. The primary indicator of the former was satisfaction with me
in the role of filmmaker/director, and thus a general reliance on me to take the lead. The
latter however, was marked by the welcome demonstration of a significant degree of
agency, such as people taking initiatives in determining the development of their stories
or the content that would be filmed. I was always looking for new and interesting
avenues that filming might take, and some participants were particularly active in
offering suggestions, as reflected in the completed films.

One of the most obvious was Mohsen’s request, included in his short film, that I assist
him in making a video clip of his poem Dream of Freedom, which I gladly did. But that
was only one of various initiatives that Mohsen took. He provided access for us not just
to his band, family and friends but also, in an act of courageous vulnerability, to a session
with his therapist. In Amir’s case, he and Parviz wanted to revisit the Curtin Detention
Centre. Although this proved impossible, out of that suggestion came the idea, included
in the feature, of getting together to look at old photos taken in detention, which I shall
discuss later. Sometimes agency also arose from participants’ own agendas of self-promotion and, where those tied-in with the agreed aims of the project, that was mutually acceptable.

Participant agency was not only restricted to making suggestions or helping with organisation. Sometimes it was exerted through and in the action of the film. For example, when I returned to Adelaide to film Reyhana working at the Migrant Resource Centre, I found that she had stopped wearing a headscarf. This was a new departure for her that I was unaware of and, had she been wearing one, I would have thought nothing of it. But Reyhana knew that she was going to be filmed that day, so coming to work without a scarf seems to reflect a considered decision to ‘go public’ with her new practice—a personal choice that she was not free to exercise in Afghanistan.

The other kind of agency exerted was that of resistance or refusal, which was also welcome, although challenging at times. As discussed above, sometimes the opportunity for agency resulted in people declining to participate. In the case of Reyhana’s daughter Mariam, she refused to do more after one round of filming. While Shaifiq never objected to participating, he did resist certain lines of questioning from me. Some participants also objected to aspects of the rough edits I showed them. These examples will be enlarged upon later.

I also exerted agency of my own of course, sometimes aimed at drawing participants’ families and friends into the filming process. This had mixed results because some didn’t want to be filmed and this had to be respected. However, several did get involved, and particularly with regard to friends or colleagues, this was pleasing because it was a desire of mine to film people mixing with other Australians, not just their own ethnic communities.

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42 This occurs in the feature at 01:09:34, in the DVD chapter: Amir (Part 2).

43 See the feature at 01:05:36, in the DVD chapter: Reyhana (Part 2).

44 In filmmaking, ‘rough edit’ (or ‘rough cut’) and ‘fine edit’ (or ‘fine cut’) refer to preliminary and final edited versions of a film, the latter preceding picture grading and sound mixing etc.
The Production Journal

As already noted, I kept a digital Production Journal throughout the production and post-production of Freedom Stories, over a period of two and a half years. The journal amounted to around 50,000 words. Its purpose was to record and diarise events or issues that came up from day to day that concerned or engaged me. In particular, I noted dilemmas and difficulties that had to be dealt with or that raised questions about process. After completion of the feature documentary, I undertook a reflexive analysis of the Journal, using a simple coding method borrowed from Grounded and Reader-Response Theories (a sample page of the Journal, with reader-response notes and thematic coding added, is attached as Appendix D).

In this section I will briefly summarise the main conclusions drawn from this analysis that are pertinent to the discussion of collaboration and ethics in the filmmaking process. I will not go into the details of the coding process, quantitative tables and results here because that would break up the narrative flow of the written thesis. Instead, a supplementary account of the coding and analysis is attached as Appendix E for readers who are interested.

Journal Coding

It must be acknowledged, of course, that the Production Journal reflects my concerns, and cannot be taken as an impartial or objective account of issues arising in the filmmaking process. Nevertheless, some interesting trends emerged when I counted up the mentions of particular issues and categorised them into themes.

Over half of all mentions fell into the categories of Ethics, the Filmmaker-Participant Relationship and Vulnerability, but interestingly, the theme of Consent (or Veto) hardly came up at all. This is surprising, given the prominence of the topic in the literature. It indicates that either issues around consent were not a significant factor, or I did not regard them as important. I don't accept that the latter is the case, because I am extremely conscious of the importance of consent. Rather, the fact that consent cropped up as an issue so infrequently indicates to me that it was successfully taken care of by the
filmmaking process (i.e. through my methodology). I shall examine this further in Chapter Five.

Furthermore, whilst ethical issues arose throughout the filmmaking process, over 80% of mentions occurred during editing rather than filming. Whilst this was also a surprising result, on reflection it is apparent that, during post-production, the array of ethical issues is compounded with new ones specific to editing. Some occur in the context of the relative absence of participants during that stage, compared to filming. As we shall see, for example, representation becomes a big issue when selections are being made from the rushes and on-screen ‘personas’ are being constructed. Again, this will be discussed, with examples, in Chapter Five.

In contrast, by far the majority of mentions of issues concerning the Filmmaker-Participant relationship (related to collaboration, negotiation, trust etc.) occurred during filming rather than editing. This is to be expected because filming involves intensive, face-to-face interaction. However, a significant factor during editing was the relatively high frequency of mentions of Trust. This reinforces the importance of mutual trust, or, to put it another way, the need for participants to trust me, over a lengthy period when they have little involvement with the process. It is crucial then, that sufficient trust be established during the production stage to see all parties through post-production.

The third highest thematic category of Journal mentions after Ethics and the Filmmaker-Participant relationship was Vulnerability, including Anxiety/Stress. A notable difference here was that issues of Vulnerability applied relatively evenly to the filmmaker and participants, while Anxiety/Stress was predominantly ascribed to the filmmaker. Obviously, as the keeper of the Journal, I was much closer to my own feelings than to those of the participants, so, while this result cannot be read as saying anything meaningful about them, it does indicate a significant degree of ongoing anxiety/stress felt on my part. This result indicates the high level of demands made by a collaborative filmmaking process on 'the director', as the one person in the filmmaking team who is completely immersed, face-to-face with participants.

While I do not propose to deal in this thesis with the issue of the effect of the filmmaking process on the filmmaker (as opposed to participants), a related category of mentions in my Journal coding was the Role of the Filmmaker. Most of the issues that came up here
concerned the practical skills and sensitivities required to achieve a transparent, collaborative filmmaking approach. They included: persistence, patience, perseverance, resilience, flexibility, understanding, sensitivity, determination, openness and attention.

Clearly, in the kind of filmmaking I am describing, in which sensitive engagement is central, it is as important to have such personal attributes as it is to have artistic or creative skills. The question then is whether or not the production arrangements allow those attributes to be exercised. I have already suggested that a television environment, for example, discourages such.

The above summarises some of the pertinent trends that emerged from a coding analysis of my Production Journal (others are discussed in Appendix E). This analysis highlights recurring themes and issues that can be seen ‘ticking away’ throughout this thesis, sometimes in the foreground and sometimes under the surface. They constitute, if you like, the texture of the terrain that I am exploring and, in that sense, inform the reflexive investigation of my research.

As importantly, however, the detailed attention to, and careful reconsideration of, my Production Journal—required by the coding process—also had other benefits. It reinforced, for example, my memory of instances and occasions that then came to mind when deciding on what to include in this thesis. Furthermore, as we shall see in Chapters Four and Five, it helped in reflecting on, and forming conclusions about, events that happened and their significance.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have discussed my own motivation, my aims, and the concept of *Freedom Stories*. I have also described my filmmaking approach, the beginnings of the project and how I utilised my Production Journal.

In tandem with the theoretical and literature discussion that went beforehand, the scene is now set to give a detailed account and analysis of selected moments in the making of *Freedom Stories*, in the context of collaboration, reflexivity, performativity and ethics, and in light of the methodological framework and ideas explored thus far.
Chapter Four – The Ethics of Filming

The filmmaker-participant relationship in action

Like everyone, documentary participants have all kinds of conflicting pressures on them in their lives. Unless they have particular ambitions in that direction, participating in a film (even one whose aims they support) may take varying priority depending what else is going on with their families, jobs, etc. While filmmakers are greatly invested in their participants, for this is their job (and a means of creative expression), for the participants, such involvement is just one of many competing concerns, and they may underestimate their own importance.

My experience is that, as with any relationship, one must learn how to deal with each individual participant and her/his own proclivities and personality. With *Freedom Stories*, I was juggling up to twenty such relationships over an extended period. Some proceeded quite smoothly, and some were challenging. Most threw up practical difficulties at one stage or another, often regarding availability and access, the latter particularly applying to places of work and study. Such practical hindrances to shooting are inevitable but a different matter to dealing with personal idiosyncrasies.

For example, one participant agreed to arrangements for a first round of filming and then disappeared on the day, causing some inconvenience on our part. After several similar occurrences it got to the point where colleagues were of the opinion that I would be better occupied putting my time into other, ‘more reliable’ participants. However, I knew that this person still suffers the legacy of psychological damage from years spent in detention, so I wanted to make allowances, and intuitively I felt he was a participant worth persevering with. So I rang his spouse, explained that I was puzzled by this repetitive ‘forgetting’ of arrangements and asked whether I should keep trying. Her reply was to the effect of ‘yes definitely, because he has never got it all out before about what happened to him’. This was reassuring and so I did persist—and in the end it was certainly worthwhile.

Another participant collaborated in a whole day’s shooting, which I thought was of good value, but later requested that we do the shoot again because he felt that he had not done himself justice. I responded by suggesting that he wait until I sent him a rough cut of the
footage before making any final decision. I did this but received no response. I was still keen to use the material for one of the short documentaries but eventually had to concede that here was a participant who, for whatever reason, was exercising his right of veto. Consequently that short film remains unreleased.

Having referred to a couple of non-identifying examples of relationships with participants, I will now go into more detail concerning one participant, Reyhana, because discussing the central role of the filmmaker-participant relationship requires more than just passing anecdotes, and the story of our relationship is emblematic of the filmmaking practice under discussion.

**Reyhana**

There are other reasons for considering potential participants than simply their relevance to the subject matter or degree of articulateness. Reyhana was someone who, from the beginning, I intuitively felt would make a great contribution. Having an air of vulnerability, she presented an intriguing combination of shyness and openness, along with a firmly stated willingness to participate. It was some time before I began to appreciate how much Reyhana is still affected by psychological issues stemming from her escape from Afghanistan and detention in Australia. My faith in her was ultimately rewarded but not without anxious moments along the way. These are documented in my Production Journal.

Having met Reyhana and discussed her involvement, the first sign that her participation might not be straightforward occurred when I emailed her about arrangements for our first filming session. She replied, saying that due to ‘personal issues’ she would not be able to participate.45 This apparent notice of withdrawal came as an unexpected blow during the very period when other female participants were dropping out, as recounted earlier. However, on talking to Reyhana it transpired that her ‘personal issues’ were a polite way of saying that her husband and son did not want to be involved in filming. This was a misunderstanding that probably arose because in our initial talks I had mentioned that other family members would be welcome to participate. Once I clarified

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45 All correspondence with Reyhana referred to occurred between October 2012 and October 2013.
that there was no pressure in this regard she happily reaffirmed her participation, which was a great relief.

Some weeks later I emailed Reyhana to confirm our first shooting date. I received an apologetic reply saying that she was away from Adelaide and not sure that she would be back in time. Although I felt a twang of anxiety, such snags in availability are not uncommon, so I did some rescheduling and suggested a slightly later, alternative date. Reyhana responded, saying she was still unsure and until she could ‘fix the problem’ she would not be back in Adelaide. At this stage my own insecurities inclined me to panic, but although I did not understand what the problem was, any more than on the previous occasion, I was beginning to wonder if the issue was a more generalised one of anxiety on Reyhana’s part, triggered by the prospect of filming. So I tried to stay calm and simply suggested that we keep in contact and wait to see what happened. A couple of days later, Reyhana texted to say that she would be available.

This, however, was not the end of the story. The account of my first filming experience with Reyhana will follow, but after that initial session, which was very successful and in which Reyhana’s daughter Mariam also participated, I was keen to do more filming with both of them. In September 2013 there was a Federal Election, and I had the idea of asking our participants, all of whom are now Australian citizens, to take ‘selfie’ photos at their local polling booths. I thought this might make a pointed montage in the feature. 46 Reyhana was agreeable to this suggestion, and we also discussed some possibilities for further filming.

Then, on election day, a text arrived from Reyhana saying that she and Mariam had not taken any photos and did not wish to do any more filming. Although this felt like déjá vu, rather than worry, I reminded myself that the very mention of filming seemed to trigger anxiety in Reyhana. So, instead of firing off an immediate reply, I let the matter sit with a view to contacting her the next day. However, early the next morning an apologetic text arrived, explaining that Mariam did not want to do any more filming and that Reyhana had been unwell due to depression. She then indicated that she would be happy to do some further filming at the Migrant Resource Centre (MRC), where she works.

46 The future Abbott Government was campaigning on a platform of ‘stop the boats’ and proposing regressive policies towards asylum seekers.
Whilst disappointed about Mariam’s decision, this response was a great relief and, I believe, confirmation of my feeling about Reyhana’s situation. The filming at the MRC duly went ahead, to good effect as is apparent in the feature.\textsuperscript{47} Despite these frequent ‘wobbles’, what preserved my faith in Reyhana was the fact that she always made the effort to communicate, whatever was happening. Along the way, I learned to make allowances for her struggle with anxiety and depression—in Levinasian terms, to let her be, as I had also learned to do with our disappearing male participant.

Indeed, it felt appropriate to acknowledge Reyhana’s mental struggle in the film, which I did, and for which she courageously gave approval.\textsuperscript{48} Reyhana is one of the \textit{Freedom Stories} participants for whom audiences frequently express great admiration, but it strikes me now that the conclusions I drew from my experience with her apply to most of the \textit{Freedom Stories} participants, as the following quote from my Production Journal affirms. Equally, it provides a kind of ethical ‘baseline’:

This is yet another lesson to me to remember that, despite their seeming resilience, the participants in this film are vulnerable in various ways and many are subject to anxiety etc. as a result of their experiences, and that a) I mustn’t push them and b) I must make allowances for that.

In many ways these people’s behaviour is circumscribed by the post-traumatic stress effects on them of various kinds arising from their histories. It can make their behaviour unpredictable in ways which affect the filming process. (Some) have had major emotional impacts on me over the course of the film... I guess what I have to remember is that they and their welfare are more important than the film (Thomas 2015a, pp. 92–93).

\textsuperscript{47} See 01:03:59, in the DVD chapter: \textit{Reyhana (Part 2)}.

\textsuperscript{48} See 00:17:05, in the DVD chapter: \textit{Reyhana (Part 1)}, or the accompanying Clip No. 01 (Reyhana) in the University of Melbourne (UoM) digital repository.
**Ethics and interviewing**

I have already noted my preference for the term ‘conversation’ or ‘conversational interview’ rather than ‘interview’, as I don’t regard the process as one of interrogation. I have referred to Pink’s idea of the interview as a ‘sensorial and emotive encounter’ that offers the potential of mutual listening, and requires the researcher to be reflexive about her/his own emotions (2009, p. 83). Pink suggests that: ‘interview encounters should be understood as instances in which interviewer and interviewee together create a shared place’ (2009, p. 82).

The discussion in Chapter Two on the nature of the filmmaker-participant relationship, informed by Levinas, has emphasised the importance of openness, attentive engagement and active listening. The sole pursuit of one’s own agenda or preconceived questions will put the Other at risk of being subsumed.

On the other hand, in the cinéma vérité tradition, the camera is a catalyst and should be used to provoke. One is not making a film to engage in superficial chat, but rather there is a point, a theme to be pursued or a central question being asked, and the purpose must be to get to the nub of that, to the heart of the matter, to the core of human experience. One way of doing this is through storytelling, and essentially that is how I see the interview process, as eliciting stories. The role of emotion here is that through the expression (and sometimes suppression) of emotion, the viewer feels as well as hears what the narrative is saying, because people everywhere identify with the universal language of feelings. The question for the filmmaker-interviewer then is, how far does one go in this ‘provocation’?

None of the recorded conversations I was involved in during the making of *Freedom Stories* exist in isolation, but rather in the dynamic and changing context of my developing relationships with participants over time. Moreover, the way we feel about life shifts from day to day. I might be a better (more attuned) conversationalist or interviewer on one day than another, and participants may be more or less ready or willing to participate. Thus my filmic approach is one of developing a dialogue over time. This kind of conversing is an intuitive, feeling-the-way method. It is at heart
improvisational, and how (or even whether) one proceeds with a participant the next time is dependent on how things went last time.

In developing his initial question about documentary ethics of ‘What do we do with people when we make a documentary?’, Bill Nichols states:

> This is the encounter between one who wields a movie camera and one who does not. How much can the filmmaker insist on testimony when it is painful to provide it? What responsibility does the filmmaker have for the emotional aftermath of appearing on camera (Nichols 2001, p. 116)?

There are few attempts by practitioners to interrogate such questions from within their own work. While such an exercise may be inherently subjective, it does have the advantage of insider knowledge. I will discuss four examples related to conversations recorded during the making of *Freedom Stories*. They involve Reyhana (with Mariam), Amir (with Parviz), Arif and Shafiq. I will apply some narrative inquiry to each (by going back to original transcripts when necessary), and have selected these examples because of the ethical questions they raise, the differing responses of the participants and the inherent reflexivity involved.

It is important to note that, in each case, the participants and I sat down collaboratively and voluntarily to explore their life stories in the agreed context of their identities as former asylum seekers. Is the responsibility then shared, or is it mine as the person with the power to ask the questions? In each case, the resulting emotional upset of the participants caused upset to me as well. It is not only participants who are affected in such situations, but the filmmaker(s) and, to a lesser degree, ultimately the viewers.

So should one include moments of distress in a documentary? If so, how does one treat them? A key decider in this must be the participant’s own feelings as well as the adjudged degree of personal invasiveness involved. While it is a matter for the personal ethics of all concerned, as the filmmaker and ‘wielder of the camera’, I have particular responsibilities.

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49 Some exceptions are Piotrowska (2014) and Bilbrough (2015), both of whom take a psychoanalytic approach, and Connolly (2005), writing for a general audience.
Reyhana and Mariam

The reader should view the following chapter from the feature Chapters menu of the Freedom Stories DVD: Reyhana (Part 1) - Five star hotel.

OR

Clip No. 01 (Reyhana) if accessing this thesis through the University of Melbourne online Digital Repository.

I have already discussed the challenges that filming held for Reyhana. I was comforted then, when my female cinematographer and I arrived at her home, to find that she had asked her 21-year old daughter Mariam to be present for support. I had not met Mariam before and, as she did not wish to actually participate, she sat out of frame while I recorded my first conversation with her mother.

We started with the Woomera detention centre\(^5\) and Reyhana began to talk about the positive aspects of arriving there from Afghanistan. At the time, it was a welcome haven because, for the first time, her family’s lives were not under threat. Reyhana continued to list the advantages of Woomera and, as I was focussing on her, I was unaware of Mariam’s growing impatience with her mum’s description. Eventually, she could contain herself no longer and interjected in the conversation. With Mariam still off camera, there ensued a lively debate between mother and daughter about the pros and cons of life in detention, with Mariam declaring that Reyhana was making Woomera sound like a ‘five-star hotel’. This debate is included in the feature, as is the moment that followed.

As the conversation moved on to life in Australia, Reyhana became visibly upset at the thought of her continuing separation from her mother and sister, who still live in danger in Pakistan, and this is the point in the film that Mariam actually enters the frame in order to comfort her mum. Suddenly, the person belonging to the disembodied voice heard

\(^5\) The official title of this facility was the Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre, more commonly known as the Woomera detention centre, which is how I will refer to it. The same applies to other immigration detention centres, differentiated by their locations.
earlier is revealed, as she voluntarily moves into camera range rather than the camera panning to her.\footnote{51} From that point on, Mariam participates in the conversation \textit{on screen}, speaking freely about her own memories as a small child in detention.

I will discuss the matter of Reyhana’s distress below, but first I wish to point out the multiple reflexivities inherent in this section of the film. As mentioned earlier, our conversation is preceded with a discussion about consent, during which I offer a right of veto. This not only reminds the audience that a film is being made but establishes its collaborative ethical stance. My narration refers to Reyhana’s difficulty with anxiety and notes Mariam’s desire to support her mum but remain unseen. The imagery used, and commentary written in post, combine to form a rhetorical, reflexive device.

At a deeper level, the sequence demonstrates how ethical decisions determine aesthetic choices, which in turn affect the way the scene plays out. The limits of the frame as excluding Mariam are agreed and defined at the beginning and, as a result, the cinematographer does not shift the frame to include her, even when Mariam intervenes in the profilmic event.\footnote{52} Her injection into the frame is part of the deep reflexivity at play here and a moment of serendipitous revelation. Serendipitous because it wasn’t planned but unfolds ‘perfectly’ for the screen and for the purpose of the film, as Mariam’s entry also establishes her right to tell her own story.

The way that the sequence unfolds aligns with a Levinas influenced approach—in that there is no attempt to present a single, authoritative truth about the Woomera detention centre and individuals’ experience of it. The contradictory versions of the same experience, argued good-naturedly between mother and daughter, creates openness. Mariam’s interjection also demonstrates how the Other resists appropriation. Both voices are acknowledged and accepted, so that each has their say and each is, as it were, allowed to be.

In a review of the \textit{Freedom Stories} feature, written for \textit{Metro Magazine}, Jasmine Crittenden refers specifically to this scene and the moment where Mariam interjects, reinforcing some of the points made above:

\footnote{51} ‘Panning’ refers to the camera rotating horizontally.

\footnote{52} ‘Profilmic’ refers to what occurs in front of, or is recorded by, the camera.

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A familiar-sounding, good-natured debate between mother and teenage daughter ensues. This humanises the speakers – they are neither ‘boat people’ seeking to ‘invade’ Australia nor insipid victims, but individuals, with strong ideas and articulate voices. Simultaneously, viewers learn of the multifacetedness of their experiences – even within one family, opinions and memories differ … At first shy to speak, Mariam is motivated by the need to bear witness – to convey her own perspective – so that her mother’s doesn’t stand as her family’s only record of their time in Woomera. The camera’s presence empowers her (Crittenden 2016, p. 109).

This is an example of a confounding moment of the kind referred to in relation to Shoah by Libby Saxton earlier (see Chapter Two – The importance of listening). It embodies the plurality and doubt that is necessary for the alterity (i.e. difference) of the Other to persist in Levinas's view. Essentially, it is a moment that defies expectation because it contradicts the popular view of Woomera as merely a ‘hell-hole’. The truth is more complex than that.

There are other confounding moments in Freedom Stories, including Mariam’s admission (in the same sequence) that as an 8-year old kid she enjoyed joining in the protests at Woomera, because it was ‘so much fun to be like a criminal’. This is in sharp contrast to the images of children wailing and crying behind the wire that dominated the media coverage at the time.

Another such moment is Shafiq’s description of his journey on the people-smuggling boat from Indonesia to Christmas Island as: ‘the free-est nine days of my life… I was completely in the hand of nature, anything could happen, but I was really happy’. Such enjoyment is contrary to the dominant view, exploited by the Australian Government in justification of its harsh policies to ‘stop the boats’, that people smugglers do nothing but endanger their customers’ lives for profit.

53 Occurs in the feature at 00:12:52, in the DVD chapter: Shafiq (Part 1).
Reyhana’s tears

A notable factor in the examples I will discuss of both Reyhana and Amir, is that the onset of their distress appeared to take everyone present, including themselves, by surprise. In Reyhana’s case, she and Mariam had already had their disagreement about Woomera, and Mariam was still sitting out of frame while Reyhana and I discussed her transition to life after detention. Reyhana had told me when we first met how important it was for her to work, because if she just stayed at home she tended to get depressed. This was what I had it in mind to elicit when I asked the question that instead triggered her tears. What I didn’t know was the situation regarding her mother and sisters, who remain stranded in Pakistan and in consequent danger. The rushes transcript provides the unedited version of our conversation:

STEVE: So it was important for you to work? You wanted to work?
REYHANA: Yeah, I wanted to work to support my family in here and my mother and my sister. I need to support them. That’s why I have to work.
STEVE: Yeah. But I remember you saying that you feel if you stay at home then you will get depressed?
REYHANA: Yeah, it is. Even now is happening to me, if I stay at home I am just feeling depressed. And yeah, especially in this time, is very difficult time for me, all the time thinking about my mother and sister.
[Reyhana begins to cry].
STEVE: Yeah. It’s OK, it’s fine to be upset and we can cut, we can cut stuff out.
MARIAM: [Speaks Dari to Reyhana, from out of frame].
REYHANA: [Speaks Dari to Mariam].
STEVE: Just cut for a minute, Lara.

Applying some narrative analysis to this passage, it is clear in hindsight that Reyhana’s first mention of her mother and sister (i.e. the need to support them) was both a clue and a cue which I failed to pick up, pursuing instead the idea that was already in my mind. I

54 This sequence is included in the DVD chapter already referred to: Reyhana (Part 1), or the accompanying UoM Clip No. 01 (Reyhana).
didn’t feel I was pushing or leading her to divulge anything other than that her anxiety and depression is helped by taking positive action. For Reyhana, however, that question was a trigger to the thought already present of her family left behind, and then the sadness flooded in. So what about responsibility?

I knew that Reyhana’s motivation for participating, despite the anxiety it caused her, was her desire for Australians to understand what she and other refugees have been through. An important aspect of that experience is separation from, or loss of, family members, of which this moment in our conversation was a poignant example. In the hope that Reyhana would see the value of its inclusion—in an early edit of the scene, I added some narration to acknowledge my difficulty in dealing with her distress, and mitigate any sense of voyeurism or gratuitous exposure. Before explaining the situation of Reyhana’s sister and mother, I commented that: ‘it is hard to witness my questions causing pain to Reyhana’.

But then I recalled MacDougall’s warning mentioned earlier (see Chapter One – Ruby vs MacDougall), that expecting filmmakers to come clean about their films is like expecting the police to police themselves (1998, p. 89). The fact is, acknowledging that it is hard to watch Reyhana’s pain does not justify the filming or inclusion of it in an ‘exhibit’ for others to watch. By definition, the latter includes a degree of voyeurism because it is a public violation of what at the time of filming was an essentially private event, despite the presence of a camera.

As it happened, Reyhana was agreeable to the inclusion of her tears because she did see the value, but nevertheless I must take ethical responsibility as the filmmaker. At the end of the day, one’s moral decisions are no more right or wrong for being acknowledged, they are simply one’s own moral decisions. That is what must be acknowledged. So I abandoned the attempted self-justification of the draft line of narration quoted above, and simply stuck to the facts.

There was then the question of how long to watch Reyhana’s distress. In this case, and that of Amir as we shall see, I decided to cut (i.e. end the sequence) at the moment when another person present intervened. In Reyhana’s case her daughter Mariam asks (in Dari) if she needs a tissue. In Amir’s case (see below), after Parviz looks appealingly at me, I am heard to ask ‘do you want to stop?’ just before the picture fades to black. In both
cases, the camera actually rolled for longer but, as a rule of thumb, that point where someone else enquires about the wellbeing of the person concerned seems like a suitable place to cut, because that’s obviously how it was feeling to them. This is an editorial decision, and although made in consultation with the editor, it is no less subjective for that. It was reassuring to get Reyhana’s approval of the final cut of her material, and I will refer to that consultation process again in Chapter Five. As far as her experience of that day’s filming goes, I felt reassured by a subsequent email from her, which read in part:

You and Lara very welcome to our house and for everything that we done …
I hope the film will be a good one because I was not in a good mood due to my family are in dangerous situation in Pakistan … You have done very hard job. I hope it is a good film.

Amir’s breakdown

The reader should view the following chapter from the feature Chapters menu of the Freedom Stories DVD: Amir (Part 2) and Parviz - What we are doing with our kids.

OR

Clip No. 02 (Amir), if accessing this thesis through the University of Melbourne online Digital Repository.

Amir’s breakdown during the reunion with his friend from the Curtin detention centre, Parviz, also seemingly came out of the blue, and not as a result of any consciously provocative questioning on my part, although this also warrants closer examination. For me, the surprising nature of Amir’s emotional response was partly due to my own expectation that if either man became upset, it would be Parviz, because it was he who was sixteen at the time, sewing his lips and going on a hunger strike, while Amir was a bystander.

Amir had demonstrated in previous conversations his ability to keep smiling while talking about his difficult past. I should have been better prepared, for Lanzmann’s
participant, Bomba, in Shoah (1985) is one example of the smiling man who eventually breaks down, a tacit acknowledgement that if he doesn’t keep smiling he will cry. Indeed, this was in my mind during an earlier conversation, also included in the feature, when I commented to Amir: ‘I don’t know how you keep smiling?’. He replied (as edited):

I cannot stop myself because of whatever happened in the past, but I take lots of good lessons out of the whole horrible circumstances. I've learnt that I should not be careless about others. By detention the Government have been really careless about us. And I've learned that we should care about each other.55

On that occasion, Amir’s positive attitude kept him smiling and I assumed that this was how he would always be. Months later, when he and I sat down with Parviz, they were heartily chuckling over the photos that Amir had brought with him from their time together in the Curtin detention centre. But the situation was different now. This was what Pink would call an elicitation interview, in which looking at images of himself at the time of the events under discussion, and being physically with Parviz, emotionally transported Amir back to that place and time.

The meeting between the two arose out of Amir’s desire, expressed in our early discussions, to return to Curtin and ‘look in from the outside’. Parviz had volunteered to go along too, but making the trip proved too difficult to achieve. Instead, their initiative morphed into the idea of shooting a scene of them looking through photos Amir had kept, and which I had not seen before.

Looking at the photos initially prompted laughter between them about the good times they had together in Curtin. As Parviz says in the feature:

In Curtin it was very bad but we had a good memory together, with our friends you know, we couldn’t do nothing in there but we were happy together, all the night played the cards, the backgammon, say jokes, have fun.

55 Occurs in the feature at 00:31:50, in the DVD chapter: Amir (Part1).
Amir then tells how he and Parviz would run together around the detention centre to keep fit, after which he condemns the detention system for what it did to Parviz. At this point emotionally he is still in control:

Amir: *But for his age it was absolutely wrong to be there. It is something that I will not forget and I will not forgive, because whatever has happened to him it is really devastating.*

Steve: *So it was copying self-harm and stuff that Parviz was...?*

Amir: *Exactly, exactly...* (Amir breaks down)

My question felt spontaneous at the time but now it reminds me of another principle in interviewing, which is that in order to get people to connect emotionally with past events, it helps to prompt them to be specific. Looking back at the sequence now, Amir is already getting emotional when he says he can’t forget or forgive. His facial expression begins to change, but as long as he can stick to generalities (‘whatever has happened to him’) he can keep control. However, my question takes him back to that specific event of Parviz’s lip sewing and hunger strike, and then the trauma of the past floods back, rendering Amir unable to continue. After he regains control and is able to speak again, he tells how he was affected at the time:

*It takes twenty-six days. Daily, every day that I used to get up and see him, night-time I couldn’t sleep at all, I used to get up and see him and I used to tell myself, what we are doing with our kids? What we are doing with our kids?*

Although unconsciously so at the time, my question was provocative and for that I must take some responsibility. Like Reyhana, Amir was perfectly agreeable to the sequence being included, despite his distress. A theme I have often noticed Amir returning to in his conversations with people, is how badly children have been treated in Australia—whether from the Stolen Generation, in religious institutions, orphanages, or refugee detention centres. Amir’s tears add a strong emotional note to his plea to stop mistreating children and this is his contribution to the message of the film.

In the rushes, Parviz is also feeling that discomfort. He puts an arm around Amir and looks at me as if asking whether we should stop, at which point I interject. In the edited
sequence, Amir’s image fades to black after I ask him if he wants to stop filming—thus implying that we did stop—but in fact his response to my question was ‘no’. His smile had finally dissolved into tears, but he was determined to continue, to get through this and say what needed to be said. Later in the editing room, we cut at that point because continuing to watch Amir’s distress was so uncomfortable (and also to save some screen time).

In the feature I then ask Parviz how he feels about all this, and he wraps up the conversation by saying:

It’s not a good memory but I’m very happy everything is finished, and me and Amir have my family together and we have a good life now.

Here Parviz is telling me that he either cannot or does not want to ‘go there’ in the way that Amir has, and his statement marks the closure of the scene. His position is thus respected and he is, in Levinasian terms, allowed to be.

I should add to this discussion that, in addition to Reyhana’s and Amir’s own purposes conflating with the documentary’s, I believe the ethical and collaborative approach taken in handling their material was also a factor in their permission for inclusion of these difficult moments. This is where ethics and editing coincide, for there are delicate issues of structure (i.e. the placement and editing of sequences), not to mention the use of narration and music, which contribute to an overall sense within the documentary of sensitive engagement, rather than exploitation. I will discuss such aspects of post-production in the next chapter.

Now, however, I will examine those examples mentioned at the beginning of this section, where I was overtly provocative with my questioning, resulting in active resistance from Shafiq, and revelation from Arif.
Shafiq’s resistance

I recorded three conversational interviews with Shafiq over a period of about eighteen months: the first for the development trailer but also used in the feature; the second with his daughter Mahdiya at the site of their future home; and the third not long after they had moved in. As evident in the feature, the first two conversations provided revealing and moving moments, particularly the one involving Mahdiya (Maddy), which covered the period when Shafiq was living on his own in Melbourne and their subsequent reunion.

However, the third occasion had a different context. Shafiq’s family had just gone on a trip to Pakistan, leaving him on his own for the first time since they arrived in Australia after ten years of separation. On reflection, this alone was probably enough to unsettle Shafiq, although I discovered later that other family issues were going on that might also have been a factor (and would subsequently raise dilemmas regarding the film—see Chapter Five). At the time, however, I thought this would be a good opportunity to film him in the new house and record a further discussion, without the distractions and noise of family around the place. He agreed to my suggestion readily enough, and when we arrived had generously prepared lunch for us.

One of the topics I had in mind to discuss with Shafiq was his experience of imprisonment by the Taliban and subsequent escape from Afghanistan, partly because I knew bits of the story (for example, that he had been shot in the foot at some point), but also because there was a school of thought among the production team that we should include some of these backstories so that audiences would understand why our participants fled their home countries. Personally, I was less interested in that topic because I wanted to focus on what happened once they got here, but I didn’t see any harm in having the conversation, so decided to give it a try.

At first, Shafiq went along with me and began to tell his story, but it was a complicated one and required my frequent intervention to gain clarification. Because I was engaged in

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56 See 00:10:36, in the DVD chapter: Shafiq (Part 1).

57 See the feature at 01:15:29, in the DVD chapter: Shafiq (Part 2), or the accompanying UoM Clip No. 07 (Shafiq).

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trying to grasp the complexities, I didn’t realise that he was getting frustrated by my line of questioning—until he abruptly looked at me and asked: ‘Can we just not talk about this?’.

Taken aback by this rebuttal, I immediately apologised and agreed to discontinue the topic. Shafiq explained that going back to that time in his life brings back bad memories and triggers depression. Although he has made efforts in the past to write his story down, he has never managed to complete the task. He graciously forgave me for pressing him about this aspect of his life, and reassured me that he had no problem with his participation in the film and trusted me completely. So we changed tack to discussing his paintings, and the rest of the day’s filming was enjoyable.

I have felt somewhat guilty about this incident ever since, although, in the first rough cut of the feature, we included it as part of the sequence where Shafiq shows me around the new house and we discuss his paintings on the walls.58 However, because of limitations on screen time and my own discomfort, only the house tour and paintings survived in the eventual cut that he was shown for comment/approval.

Perhaps Shafiq’s response would have been different if he hadn’t been experiencing the temporary absence of his family that day. But, on reflection, I feel I was insensitive to the effect of this on him, and rather relentless in my questioning, taking as my cue the desires of others to know about things, rather than sticking with my own intuition, and maintaining the sensitivity and openness to the Other that is so crucial. Had I been more attentive to Shafiq, then I may well have noticed his increasing discomfort, which is obvious looking back at the rushes, before it became too distressing for him.

The redemption in this story, however, in terms of the debate about asymmetrical power and consent in the filmmaker-participant relationship, is that it is an example of participant agency. Shafiq’s resistance to my agenda was expressed in a forthright manner, and mutually accepted as part of the ‘hurly burly’ of the filmmaking process. This confirms the two-way nature of the filmmaking relationship, and the circulating

58 This sequence occurs in the feature at 01:35:27, in the DVD chapter: Shafiq (Part 3). The interview footage under discussion is not available.
power and shared agency that characterise decision-making in a genuinely collaborative approach.

Furthermore, his resistance emerged in the context of mutual trust, as acknowledged at the time. Shared agency means that every participant’s response is to be respected in a relationship of ‘letting be’. In Shafiq’s case, my pressing him to talk about his experiences in Afghanistan led to a refusal to ‘go there’ because of the pain it brought back. As we shall see in Arif’s case, however, despite the pain involved, he took on my hard question—albeit in a way that defined his own personal boundaries.

**Arif’s revelation**

The reader should view the following chapter from the feature *Chapters* menu of the *Freedom Stories* DVD: *Arif (Part 2) - If you gain something, you lose something.*

OR

Clip No. 03 (Arif), if accessing this thesis through the University of Melbourne online Digital Repository.

From the beginning of my relationship with Arif, he made it clear that his personal attitude towards past trauma was to forget it and get on with life. The way he puts it when we first meet him in the feature is: ‘You have to let it go, you cannot hang on to something. That will hold you back and if it affects you it will affect your family’. In contrast to this, Shafiq always seemed open to discussing his past experience and acknowledging its effect on his life. And yet, when I pressed Shafiq he resisted, whereas Arif, who I expected to resist, did not.

This philosophy of ‘it’s better to forget’ was why I was reticent about asking Arif to talk about past events. I knew from a mutual friend that he had lost two small daughters to disease while his family was stranded in Iran, and he was in Melbourne on a Temporary

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59 Occurs in the feature at 00:42:12, in the DVD chapter: *Arif (Part 1).*
Protection Visa (TPV), unable to do anything for them. It was during this period that Arif collapsed with chronic back problems that rendered him unable to work. When we first met, Arif told me about his breakdown and how he eventually overcame it with the realisation that he would be no use to his family if he was either dead or left Australia. But he never mentioned the deaths of his children at that time.

Would it be fair then for me to ask him about this on camera? And did I have it in me to broach the subject? Up until the moment I opened my mouth, I wasn’t sure, but as Arif and I had got to know each other through our early filmic encounters, our relationship had grown. At first he had seemed politely sceptical, and I always felt I was imposing on his busy life. We were, perhaps, taking each other’s measure, and I think a turning point in the relationship came with the filming of his reunion with Ian ‘Molly’ Meldrum, which I organised.\(^{60}\) Out of that filming session, which Arif clearly enjoyed and which is included in the feature,\(^{61}\) came his invitation for me to visit the headquarters of his new business venture. It was on that occasion that the conversation about the loss of his children occurred.

But why would I even want to ask him about that? The reasoned answer is that Arif’s eventual breakdown during seven years of enforced limbo on a TPV, as well as the events that befell his wife and children in the meantime, constitute a crucial part of his personal story that I believe is important for audiences to appreciate so that they grasp the damage such visas do to families. More than that, a recurring theme in *Freedom Stories* is that of ‘forgetting’—whether you can forget, whether it is better to forget and if so how to forget.

The participants have different approaches to this. For example, while Arif thinks the past is best forgotten, young Mustafa never wants to forget ‘so that I can tell my kids everything I’ve been through, so they won’t take it easy on life’.\(^{62}\) For Aoham, it is less about forgetting what happened and more about forgetting her old self (she changed her

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\(^{60}\) The Australian TV/pop icon was responsible for offering Arif his first, self-employed tiling job in Australia.

\(^{61}\) See 00:42:40, in the DVD chapter: *Arif (Part1)*.

\(^{62}\) Occurs in the feature at 01:03:16, in the DVD chapter: *Mustafa (Part 2)*.
name). Hamid will ‘forever remember the things that I saw’⁶³ and Amir has learned important lessons ‘from the whole horrible circumstances’ of the past.⁶⁴

Of course, I have a long personal history of dealing with the idea that the past should be left undisturbed. While my earlier film Least Said, Soonest Mended (1999) was intended as a repudiation of the logical conclusion of this kind of thinking—which is to simply keep everyone in the dark and suppress the past—the film also aggravated some of the wounds in my own family, rather than healing them. Nowadays, I might more readily acknowledge that there are advantages in putting things behind us and getting on with life, rather than dwelling on them, but to what degree one should or can ignore one’s history, and the personal consequences of doing so, is a dilemma of the human condition. In this regard, I am always curious to know how others deal with such issues. However, in asking myself why I might have felt capable of asking Arif about this, I think the answer is that basically I felt our relationship could withstand it.

As a way of interrogating this event, it is again useful to go back to the original transcripts of our conversation and apply some narrative analysis. As Arif and his business partners were all ‘graduates of the Woomera detention centre’ (my narration), we began the conversation discussing his time there, and then moved on to the seemingly never-ending uncertainty of his Temporary Protection Visa. Here, Arif said, as included in the feature:

\[
\text{I have enough, seven years I have not seen my family, seven years I couldn’t do anything with my life because I didn’t know what’s gonna happen the next hour, the next day or the next minute, the next month...}
\]

According to the transcript of the rushes, my response to this was to ask: ‘And how did you cope with that?’. Arif then described his breakdown and eventual recovery with the help of friends. In the film, his edited answer finishes with:

\[
\text{And the doctor says I’m not going to be able to work at all at that time. One doctor told me I recommend you to go back and see your family, staying here}
\]

⁶³ Occurs in the feature at 00:35:19, in the DVD chapter: Sheri and family (Part 1).

⁶⁴ Occurs in the feature at 00:31:51, in the DVD chapter: Amir (Part 1).
is no option for you. And all of those things happened to me, but somehow I decided to fight against everything and stay.

In the interview transcript, I next ask: ‘Can you talk about what was happening to your family during that time?’ Here Arif responds by talking about how hard it was for his family living in Iran when he got sick and was unable to send them money. He explains the emphasis in Afghan culture on the male as provider for the family, and his feelings of failure in this regard. This is more of a statement about how hard it was for Arif, not being able to fulfil the obligation to provide for his wife and children. It implies a sense of guilt at having left them, which he acknowledges later in the conversation.

My response to this is a leading question that attempts to get back to what was going on for Arif’s family (rather than for him): ‘But those years where you were on a temporary protection visa your family weren’t safe?’ Arif replies by explaining the general difficulty for Afghans living in Iran: that they have no legal rights, can’t access schooling and may not get paid for work etc. Arif is still not telling me what the specific consequences of all this were for his own family, so finally I ask the direct question that I have been inviting him to answer in a roundabout way, but which he has avoided: ‘During that time, did you lose any members of your family?’.

Without hesitation, Arif begins answering, but then hesitates, before qualifying his first partial statement with the whole story:

Yeah. My daughter. Yeah she was a teenager, but she’s gone because of disease. And... actually, two of them, one after another.

While Arif’s inclination is to answer, it is as if at first he cannot tell the whole truth. Then he gathers himself to complete the bare facts. But that is all he volunteers about what actually happened. He doesn’t go on to explain that these were twin daughters, or what exactly the disease was, or the circumstances of their deaths (which I assume were related to sub-standard living conditions and the disadvantage of being non-residents in Iran). He simply says ‘one after another’. Instead of going into more detail, he turns the conversation back to the discussion of how one forgets such things and moves on, but he also refers to his sense of guilt and powerlessness at the time:
Well, I didn’t talk about it much, because it makes me sad and it takes me back to a lot of trouble. Yeah, I think once I remember at my house you asking me how you did it, how you forgot, how you restart it, and I explained. It’s better the worst thing to be forgotten. I cannot go back and make a different way. The reason for those things, my sickness, was all of those things at that time, because I always feel guilty for everything you know. I couldn’t do anything about it, and that’s why I got very sick.

Arif then explains why he has never mentioned the loss of his daughters to me before. It is because of the pain it causes him to remember:

The reason I didn’t mention it was because it makes me very emotional. Yeah. Always, you know? If you gain something you lose something. Nothing for free. I paid a very high price for everything I got here, you know.

So, did I put Arif on the spot? Clearly the answer is ‘yes’. Whether or not I had consciously decided to do so beforehand, when it came to the ‘moment’ it seems I was not to be put off, eventually asking the direct question after Arif had circled round my indirect ones. Was that ethically justified? It is hard to say. It was a moment when I operated on intuition. All I can look to in hindsight is the fact that not only did Arif agree to the inclusion of the sequence in the feature, but he proclaimed that it was important to include it, as we shall see in Chapter Five. At first sight, this might seem like a reversal of Arif’s philosophy of forgetting, but I see it more as a way of him putting the story ‘on the record’, as it were. Now that he has publicly acknowledged what happened, there is a sense in which he doesn’t need to speak about it any more.

At the same time, it is noteworthy that Arif made it clear how far he was prepared to go in answering me. His reply was both frank and disarming. It was enough to make an emotionally powerful moment in the film, but also to deter me from asking any further questions, which I have not done since. In that sense, he exerted agency by both delivering and resisting. The circulating power of our relationship can be seen to shift one way and the other, even within that single exchange. At the end of the day, I (and by implication, the audience) know enough, and the rest of the story is none of our business.
This exchange with Arif, and the one with Shafiq, are of the same ilk as that between Lanzmann and Bomba, referred to earlier, except that Lanzmann’s pursuit of Bomba’s ‘confession’ is much more dogged, determined and agonising in the way it unfolds. Lanzmann coaxes, cajoles, and finally demands that Bomba answer his questions, for the higher purpose of the film and to honour their friendship. I don’t think I could ever go that far, but the question for every filmmaker is where to draw the line. And sometimes we don’t or won’t know, until we reach that line. In her examination of the ethics of Lanzmann’s behaviour, Piotrowska comes at the problem from a number of philosophical and moral angles (including Levinas), and the end result is inconclusive (Piotrowska 2014, p. 166). If only ethical lines in the sand were easy to draw, but it isn’t so. As documentary makers, we live with such uncertainty.

In general my ‘line in the sand’ lies somewhere between film as catalyst (and the filmmaker as agent provocateur) and de Sousa Dias’s position that: ‘If they can, they will speak. But if they can’t, you just have to let them be’ (Piotrowska 2014, p. 166). This probably suits my personality as a generally mild-mannered, ex-Englishman who was brought up to be polite and not upset the neighbours. Having said that, I have a persistent streak and, in reflexively examining the conversational moments discussed above, it has been surprising to discover just how determined I can be.

**The performative and the reflexive**

As already mentioned, in reflexively analysing my practice, one epiphany has been the realisation of the increasing extent to which I improvise when filming. In working with participants, decisions often have to be taken on the spot as events unfold in the real and unpredictable world. Improvisation is also about being open to the accidental and willing to take risks. I will now discuss some examples of how the notion of performativity, with its particular relationship to chance, worked out in reflexive ways during the filming for *Freedom Stories*. 
Mustafa’s chicken coop

The reader should view the following chapter from the feature Chapters menu of the Freedom Stories DVD: Mustafa (Part 1) - It could have been me.

OR

Clip No. 04 (Mustafa), if accessing this thesis through the University of Melbourne online Digital Repository.

On this occasion, my planned full day shoot with our mechanic, Mustafa, was severely disrupted when, after a couple of aborted attempts to land, our flight to Canberra was diverted to the Gold Coast because of fog. Instead of arriving at 9.30am, the cameraman and I didn’t arrive until 4.00pm and, as he was due to depart again at 7.30pm, our shooting ‘day’ was reduced to a couple of hours. Not only did my preconceived plans go out of the window, but the frustration of this lengthy diversion left me in a rather ‘devil may care’ state of mind, one in which I had given up trying to control a world which was clearly beyond control. The effect of this was to loosen the shackles of the conventional, formulaic filmmaking approach (i.e. wide shot, interview, cutaways) in which I am thoroughly schooled.65

Mustafa’s younger brother Amir was accompanying us while his mother, who I had planned to interview, was not feeling up to such an ordeal. I felt sorry for Amir, having a parent with ongoing health issues, and wanted to give him a bit of fun and involvement. So, for no better reason than that I’ve always had a hankering to keep chickens myself, we headed for Mustafa’s chicken pen, where I found myself handing Amir the shotgun microphone and instructing him that ‘whoever speaks, just point the microphone at them’. This was a technically risky thing to do, but it didn’t seem to overly compromise the resultant sound quality.

This improvisational gesture arose from events outside of the camera frame, of which the audience is unaware. I could have expunged that moment from the completed film, but

65 A ‘wide shot’ establishes the entire set-up in front of the camera. A ‘cutaway’ is an incidental, visual shot of something else, often used to conceal edits in an interview
decided to retain it because I felt it provides a reflexive touch that brings the sequence alive as a performative and participatory encounter, rather than some removed version of a planned event. The sequence has no direct relationship to the storyline, which at this point is about Mustafa’s time in detention on Nauru, but it adds that element of sensory apprenticeship that Pink speaks about, that alignment of bodies and interests, as both sides of the relationship learn from one another (2009, pp. 69–70).

Furthermore, as often happens when chance is allowed to take a hand, a moment of synchronicity occurred inside the chicken coop when a reference in our conversation to Amir being born in detention created a strong visual metaphor—the image of Amir shot through the chicken wire resonating with his own ‘hatching’ behind the wire on Nauru.

In the end, the three sequences we managed to shoot on that disrupted day—the chicken coop, Mustafa and his brother looking at photos from Nauru, and Mustafa visiting the SIEV X Memorial—all found their way into the completed feature. This perhaps says something about the value of loosening one’s attachment to schedules and pre-conceived ideas and ‘going with the flow’ sometimes. As well as trying a different approach, improvisation involves attention to intuition.

**Jamila and Confucius**

The reader should view the following chapter from the feature *Chapters* menu of the *Freedom Stories* DVD: Jamila - In my own little way make a difference.

OR

Clip No. 05 (Jamila), if accessing this thesis through the University of Melbourne online Digital Repository.

This attitude of ‘let’s shake things up and try something different’ came upon me more than once during the filming of *Freedom Stories*. As this is not something I recall happening with previous films, I conclude that it was due to the self-reflexive process I was going through. Filming with Jamila at her university provided a further example.
This sequence arose out of a different frustration that crept into my conventional location shooting. The first thing I had asked Jamila to do was repeatedly walk past the statue of Confucius at Adelaide University to get a good establishing shot of her. Next, I set up a standard interview, with the camera pointing at Jamila over my shoulder. In an exception to my usual approach, circumstances had dictated that the first time I actually met Jamila in person (we had talked by phone a lot), was on our first day of shooting and it struck me how presumptuous it was to be directing her in this way, as well as the formulaic nature of what I was doing. So on the spur of the moment, I asked the camera operator to reset our subsequent conversation as a two-shot (i.e. including both of us) from side-on, and pan from one to the other as she saw fit.

I then asked Jamila how she felt about being subjected to the filmmaking process and required to do things again. Her first response (not included in the final edit) was that she felt fine because ‘of course, you are the director’. Although this indicates a level of trust, or at least a familiarity with conventional filmmaking (with which she had already had some experience), Jamila then acknowledged that the process and the presence of the camera affected her behaviour—that she was usually more outgoing and that normally ‘my walking style would be different and I'd say “hi” to friends and stuff’.

When it came to editing, I decided to include some of this exchange. Furthermore, I combined it with several (rather than just ‘the best’) of the ‘takes’ of Jamila walking past Confucius, and acknowledged via narration that I had done these because ‘I thought it would be a nice way of introducing her’. Again, using this material does nothing to advance Jamila’s storyline, but it is an example, as it was put in one review of the feature, of ‘pulling back the curtain on the filmmaking process’ (Armstrong 2015), and making some attempt to discuss the methods of production (plus adding some lightness of touch).

In regard to MacDougall’s ‘deep reflexivity’, the sub-text of the sequence lies in its ability to undermine any sense of me as some kind of authority, and to assist with what, in dramatic screenwriting terms, is ‘character development’. Perhaps my somewhat rhetorical question to Jamila, about whether I was capturing the ‘real you or someone

66 A ‘take’ refers to each filmed version of a particular shot or setup. These are usually numbered 1, 2, 3 etc. and the best is selected for use.
I’ve invented’, says as much about me as her, but the sequence has been commented on at screenings by audience members as a refreshing touch—redolent, I hope, of that alternative honesty I am trying to cultivate.

There is, however, a fine line here. In an early rough edit, this sequence was longer and more detailed, but feedback from colleagues indicated that I was teetering towards the self-indulgent, so I pulled it back. At that stage, there were other sequences that received a similar response. One, for example, involved Amir when he was at work inspecting an apartment. The cameraman and I got into a tangle with the equipment and I bumped the boom mic on the ceiling and asked for another take, which was then included in the rough edit. I also pulled that sequence back, so that all that remains in the completed feature is a shot in which the cameraman and I are seen reflected in the bathroom mirror, a metaphorical image that reinforces my own narrated ‘reflection’ on Amir’s attitude to life.67

The interaction with Jim

The reader should view the following chapter from the feature Chapters menu of the Freedom Stories DVD: Introduction - with Mustafa.

OR

Clip No. 06 (Introduction), if accessing this thesis through the University of Melbourne online Digital Repository.

Being conscious of the aim to show participants interacting with other Australians (who often don’t realise that these are former asylum seekers), I asked Mustafa if we could film him dealing with some clients at the garage. He agreed to line up a couple of co-operative customers in advance. However, these were people that Mustafa approached because he knew them and thought they would be sympathetic to the film. This meant that they already knew about his background and were keen to please, which rather negated the purpose of their contribution.

67 Occurs in the feature at 00:31:29, in the DVD chapter: Amir (Part1).
Then, serendipitously, as the last customer was leaving, Jim turned up. He knew almost nothing about Mustafa or that a film was being made, and so the ensuing scene was spontaneous. Early in the editing, we cut this footage as the opening sequence of the documentary, and such was its pertinence in establishing the film’s terrain that it remained there, pretty much untouched, until completion.

In the edited sequence, the camera is still rolling as Jim enters and Mustafa turns to me and says: ‘Do you want to cut for a bit, I’ll just ask for permission’, to which Jim responds by asking whether we are making a commercial. ‘No’ I reply, ‘We’re doing a little doco about Mustafa and his life since coming to Australia’. ‘Mate, you’re a star!’ exclaims Jim, and he happily agrees to being filmed.\(^{68}\) And so the scene unfolds in which Jim, who knows nothing of Mustafa’s background except that he's from Afghanistan, learns from him about his incarceration on Nauru.

This is a deeply reflexive sequence that flags much about the film’s intentions and stylistic approach, which is partly why it makes such an appropriate introduction. Not least is the acknowledgement that a film is being made. When Jim arrives, Mustafa seeks his agreement to be filmed. While this is an overtly reflexive moment, it also conveys the methodology of filming and that Mustafa understands this approach. In fact he takes on himself my concern with obligations regarding consent, which in turn tells the audience something about the relationship that he and I have already developed. There are further layers of sub-text if Mustafa’s concern to treat Jim fairly is considered in contrast to the treatment he received at the hands of the Australian Government.

Not only is my voice heard off camera in this sequence, thus establishing a key stylistic attribute of the film, but also the camera fortuitously swings momentarily to me, and I am seen as well as heard, while operating the boom microphone. Thus, I am revealed not just as the filmmaker and interviewer (who will soon also be identified as the narrator) but as

\(^{68}\) Of course, Freedom Stories is more than ‘a little doco about Mustafa and his life since he came to Australia’. On reflection, this off-the-cuff response may indicate a tendency documentary makers have of downplaying the significance of what they are doing for fear of scaring off participants (see Aufderheide, Jaszi & Chandra 2009, p. 9; Sanders 2007, p. 10). At the time, however, none of us knew what would come out of the filming process, and I don’t think a fuller explanation would have changed Jim’s affable response.
a participant in the film. My approach of conversing with participants and asking questions that occur to me in the moment, is established at the start of the documentary.

At the end of the interaction with Jim, after he departs from frame, the camera stays on Mustafa, who looks towards me, as if to say ‘well, how was that?’ Rather than cutting as soon as Jim exits (or using some other visual cutaway), the viewer’s gaze is allowed to linger on Mustafa, again emphasising that there is a filmic interaction going on here. This is more than Ruby’s ‘scaffold’ of exterior reflexivity (see Chapter One – Ruby vs MacDougall). At a sub-textual, non-verbal level, meaning is communicated via the editing choices that inform the audience’s experience.

The sequence implies a relationship between Mustafa and myself that includes a level of empathy, and perhaps protectiveness, on my part, and a collaborative attitude on Mustafa’s (as indicated by his desire to be ethical about gaining filming permission from Jim). This implied relationship is also an example of deep reflexivity, being both complex and subtle in its inferences.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have discussed examples of the filmmaker-participant relationship in action during the filming stage of Freedom Stories. Circulating power and shared agency can be seen in operation, in the context of sensitive engagement. As well as dealing with day-to-day challenges during filming, I have discussed instances where I experimented with reflexive practice, and have self-reflexively examined some key moments during the recording of dialogic interviews. This reveals the way reflexivity occurs (and evolves) in practice, the power of participant initiative in a collaborative approach, and the mechanics of my own methodology, of which I wasn’t necessarily fully aware at the time.

What has emerged, I hope, is a clearer picture from the inside of the dynamic, demanding and developing encounter between filmmaker and participant that lies at the heart of much documentary making, and is central to my own approach.
Chapter Five – The Ethics of Editing

Ethics and editing

It is common in documentary making to have to whittle down a large quantity of raw footage, firstly into a long rough edit (or ‘assembly’) with some kind of structure to it. In the case of the Freedom Stories feature about 98% of the rushes had to be eventually discounted. The progressive decision making required to reduce and shape the raw footage—first to a four-hour rough edit, then a two-hour rough cut, and finally a 99-minute fine cut—represents a time consuming, ethically fraught and demanding process. A process in which it must be ensured that justice is done to the participants, the content and the audience.

With any documentary, when that first, long rough edit is achieved, there is usually a brief hiatus, during which one feels satisfaction at having sifted through the material and managed to include most of the preferred content and participants. This is followed by the realisation that, in order get the film to length, radical surgery rather than tinkering around the edges, will now be required. People and content that you really like, and are emotionally bound to, will have to go.

The ethical imperative to facilitate a multi-faceted, rather than mono-dimensional, view of participants is made doubly difficult by the nature of narrative storytelling. The filmmaker Joao Moreira Salles sums up the process well:

> After a few weeks in the editing room, the director becomes hostage to the film. The theme imposes its priorities, and the structure leads the narrative along paths that allow no diversions. It is with pity that the documentarian abandons so many other hypothetical films. They are unfulfilled possibilities, defeated by the film’s own logic and structural demands … In my opinion, herein lies the true issue of documentary. Its nature is neither aesthetic nor epistemological. It is ethical (Salles 2009, p. 231).

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69 Assuming about 100 hours of rushes and 100 minutes of product.
After achieving a first, four-hour rough cut of the feature, I wrote in my Production Journal about what the editor and I now faced:

we now have to hack into the living body of the film, lopping limbs at random and hoping we don’t damage major organs. We’re pretty much destined to produce a corpse, which we’ll then have to try and revive, with a completely different pace and leaving out participants and particular contributions. My journey (especially the performative journey) will also perish in the process no doubt – I can see it coming. There just ain’t time in a 90’ film (Thomas 2015a, pp. 155–156).

MacDougall conducts a profound discussion of this process, of what he calls ‘cinema’s noeme70 of loss’, in his essay, The Fate of the Film Subject (1998, pp. 25–60, especially pp. 28 and 35). For me, that early edit that I was really fond of becomes a distant memory by the time the agonising process of reducing and shaping the final, unsatisfactory product is completed. Slowly however, one becomes acclimatised to the finished film and almost forgets the pain involved in reaching that stage. This chapter will give an account of that process from the inside.

**Editing without participants**

I have already mentioned that coding my Production Journal revealed ethical concerns occurring predominantly during editing, rather than filming, and have suggested that an important reason for this is the inevitable absence of participants from the process for long periods, despite their continual presence on the editing screen. This absence is not unusual as, in any kind of research, the hardest part of the process to get participants involved in is the data analysis.

The first question for me then, was what does collaboration really mean during post-production? During filming participants are always on the spot, and it is easy to discuss together what’s appropriate and how they are feeling, but this doesn’t generally apply during editing. Now the filmmaker is caught up in another kind of collaboration, with

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70 ‘Noeme’ refers to the essence of a photograph.
editors, post-production houses, composers, sound-mixers, etc. There is the process of the long slog in the edit room, during which there is little time or energy to be keeping in constant touch with participants and, in any case, there is little to report for long periods because progress is relatively glacial.

With Freedom Stories, there was no particular pre-agreement with participants about the editing process or expectation of their involvement, other than that we would consult and they would have a right of veto. It was made clear that everyone was welcome in the editing room at any time, but two-thirds of our participants were interstate, and all had occupations during business hours. A couple of ad hoc visits occurred, but it is unreasonable to expect people to be present during day-to-day editing, or even to be thinking about the editing process. Nor do participants generally have much idea of the size of the task or the time it takes. Editing requires particular skills and experience and, generally, I found that our participants’ expectation was that this was the filmmakers’ domain and it was our job to get on with it.

Furthermore, it did not feel ethically appropriate to expect participants to take or share editing decisions about other participants, and nor would it have been fair to ask them who they thought should be excluded from the feature. In terms of division of labour in the collaborative process, I take the view that while participants must be properly consulted, their skill lies in telling their personal stories, and the filmmaker’s skill lies in transferring these to the screen.

One way in which I tried to ameliorate the effects of that long period of ‘no news’ was by sending all of the participants their own rushes on DVD with an accompanying letter. This was about four months into the edit (roughly halfway), by which time we were working on the first four-hour rough cut. Giving participants their rushes was a reciprocal act in return for their involvement, but also concurred with personal advice from David MacDougall when we met, who sends copies of participants’ rushes to them before he edits a film, rather than as an afterthought (D MacDougall 2014, pers. comm., 25 March).

MacDougall reasons that participants need to get acclimatised to seeing themselves the way others see them before they view an edited version, otherwise the ‘shock’ may impede their approval of the film. This particularly applies to participants who haven’t
had the experience of being filmed before. Previously, I have supplied rushes to participants at the end of a project, so I now took this advice.

Allied to this, the purpose of the accompanying letter was to explain the editing and consultative process from my perspective. Knowing that although our participants spoke adequate English, some had difficulty with reading, I organised a translation in Farsi in addition to a plain English version. As well as outlining the editing process, I reiterated that not everybody could be included in the feature documentary, and so the others would have short individual films edited about them instead. It was very important to me that no participant should feel left out, and I always regarded the shorts as being just as important as the feature, although it took a further year to complete them.

The letter also described the consultation process as I saw it, and reiterated the right of veto, as follows:

I will consult you over the next few months about the footage we would like to select and how it is edited. I will show you a rough edited version for your approval before completing the film(s) and we will only include footage that you agree can be used (Thomas 2014, p. 1).

I concluded with a thank-you, in the context of the mutually agreed aims of Freedom Stories:

I know it has not been easy for some of you to share your experience when it has involved a lot of pain. I want to thank you again for sharing your lives and your time by participating in the project. I hope you feel that it is your project too (Thomas 2014, p. 2).

Having expressed the hope of a shared sense of ownership, we (that is me, the editor Uri Mizrahi, and producer Lisa Horler) went on with the business of shaping individual’s stories and deciding who we proposed should be in or out of the feature, before showing the participants our proposed edit and rough cuts of the short films. When it came to screening these, it felt important to have something reasonably polished because of the

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71 This covered the participants of Afghan and Iranian origin. The two from Syria and Iraq happened to have advanced English skills, so an Arabic translation was not required.
difficulty of expecting participants to ‘read’ (or interpret) a rough cut and imagine the finished result (which would have a significantly different look, sound and feel).

To assist in deciding which of the participants would be included in the final iteration of the feature, we showed our second rough cut, of just over two hours duration, to around a dozen trusted colleagues and associates who had a necessary distance from the project. Then we put our own and their comments together and argued over the results.

From the start, there were several participants whose stories were not considered to be in contention for the feature, mostly because either too little or too much material had been collected with them. There was a further group whose inclusion was never really in doubt and the consultative screenings confirmed this, with unanimous votes for their inclusion. This left a third group of six participants about whom opinion, including among the production team, was divided. The duration of the feature (agreed at under 100 minutes, with a view to cinema release) meant we could probably keep half of them, and this constituted the most difficult time of the edit for me, as I had loyalties to particular participants that were not shared by my colleagues.

Our main criteria favoured participants to whom the test audience related most strongly; who contributed to gender, age, and cultural diversity in the film; and whose stories had developed during filming, thus providing a sense of journey (or ‘narrative arc’). These criteria discounted a couple of strong participants that people liked, but who had less story development. However, this left something of a deadlock in selecting two of the final four participants left in the mix. At this point, other factors weighed heavily for me, such as keeping faith with those who had shown commitment and initiative, and with whom I had developed strong, collaborative relationships. These were personal feelings not collectively shared by the production team, and so it had to be acknowledged that there were other considerations at play besides whose story might be regarded as the most compelling.

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72 By this time, the feature documentary had settled into a two-part structure in which the participants were introduced in the first half of the film, and then revisited to find out what had changed or happened to them in the ensuing period.
Not surprisingly, making those final decisions required a degree of compromise. As the ‘director’, this part of the process caused me considerable loss of sleep. The only mitigating factor in the exclusion of participants to whom I felt I owed a great deal was that each would have their own short film: thus the importance to me personally of getting those completed.

Of course, it could be argued that the decision to shoot with a lot of participants made a rod for our own backs, given that we always knew we would not be able to fit everyone into a single film. But, because of the nature of the endeavour, I was reluctant to refuse anyone the opportunity of participating. Nevertheless, choosing between participants during editing is a common experience in documentary making and one that invariably involves a great deal of stress.

I will discuss the consultation process with participants over our suggested edit(s) and its outcomes later on, but firstly I will discuss some examples of the ethical dilemmas in representation that were faced during editing, and the conflation of ethics and aesthetics.

**Dilemmas of representation**

As is often the case in documentary, the editor and I remain the only people to have viewed the rushes of *Freedom Stories* in their entirety. Our initial, four-hour rough cut was the first iteration to be seen by anyone else. Having this exclusive knowledge, which over the weeks and months of editing becomes encyclopaedic, invests in one great power and great responsibility. Ethically, the primary responsibility of the editing team must be, within the context of the purpose of the film, to maintain the integrity of the material—that is, to arrange, select, and compress it without changing its intent and meaning. This reinforced my sense of obligation, as the one who had personal relationships with the participants, to best represent them and their interests in the edit suite.

I have referred earlier to the central and ongoing tension between the interests of the project and the interests of the participants, or what one believes these to be. This is probably the main source of dilemmas in editing, and deciding *between* participants was emblematic of that because, given the choice, all of them would probably have preferred to be in the feature. Nevertheless, staying true to each participant whose story is being
told is difficult when they are being whittled down to relative caricatures of what they were in the rushes, and the imperative is to serve the narrative requirements of film editing (i.e. story and structure). Here I will briefly discuss three particular examples of this, all concerning participants in the short films.

At this point, although not essential, the reader may choose to view Aamer’s, Mohsen’s and Ferial’s short documentaries, which can be found under the More Stories menu on the Freedom Stories DVD, or watched via streaming, either from Ronin Films or Kanopy.

Note: As with the feature, the short films are not provided through the University of Melbourne online Digital Repository.

Aamer

Dr. Aamer was very frank in our recorded conversations about his struggles with depression since spending three years in detention. That is one reason why he does a lot of bike riding—the activity helps counter feelings of depression. But there are lots of other reasons why he cycles, and I recall getting to a moment in the editing of his story where it seemed that countering depression was the only reason. Somehow, on the screen he was becoming just a depressed person—yet I knew from my relationship with him that this was not the case. So I re-examined our selection of material and the way we were editing it and came up with a more rounded screen version of Aamer that I felt was closer to the real-life Aamer. Cycling is as much a form of meditation as anything else, of benefit to him in multiple ways, and while Aamer did have some concerns about the rough edit I showed him (as will be discussed later), these did not include the representation of his state of mind.

Mohsen

Mohsen is a poet, musician and photographer for whom refugee advocacy is an important part of life. The first filming with him occurred at a refugee rally at the Sydney Town Hall, where he was both one of the performers on stage, and a photographer of the
event. On the same day, I recorded a conversation with Mohsen at home, as well as him playing the santur\textsuperscript{73} and reading his poems.

When we did a first rough edit of the development trailer using some of this footage, Mohsen came through primarily as an activist, because of his involvement in the rally and the political nature of his poetry. Consequently, people who viewed the edit read him as \textit{only} an activist and tended not to be particularly sympathetic towards him. So we removed the rally footage from the trailer, and suddenly Mohsen’s attributes as a poet and musician began to come through. Furthermore, as we got to know each other, he took initiatives in suggesting and helping to organise what we would film. Consequently, by the final cut of his short, he was represented as a bird photographer, a multicultural band member, an actor, a man struggling with PTSD, a friend, and a father. Now, there were many sides to Mohsen’s make-up, and he became someone with whom viewers could better identify.

\textbf{Ferial}

In Ferial’s case, I had two attempts at editing her material, with quite different results. When the editor and I first looked at her rushes it was in the context of the feature. There were two other women participants who were giving up wearing a scarf, and in one of Ferial’s interviews she made a strong argument for the place of the scarf within her cultural view. So we decided (with some idea of balance in mind) to use this, along with a sequence of her women’s sewing group and the initiative she took to demonstrate Aboriginal basket weaving techniques that she had learnt.

However, largely because Ferial’s story did not develop in a narrative sense during filming, she became a candidate for one of the short films. When I eventually got to work on her existing edit for that purpose, not only did I feel that we hadn’t done justice to Ferial, but there was no longer any particular point in having her defend the scarf. She was now a participant who happened to wear beautiful headscarves and there was nothing controversial about that. I had also got to know Ferial better in the meantime, and come to admire her personal resilience and determination. So I delved back into her

\textsuperscript{73} A hammered string instrument originating from Iran.
rushes, and what I found this time was the material for a film that demonstrates those qualities, and which became subtitled: ‘I’m fighting, I’m fighting for my children’. Now Ferial was on the offensive, rather than the defensive, and I believe this is a more accurate and active representation of her character. Ferial’s and her daughter’s positive responses to seeing the new edit indicated their approval.

**Dilemmas of life**

In the editing process, a compounding issue of representation is that life does not stand still during post-production, and events subsequent to filming can pose new ethical dilemmas. In discussing how the nature of film fixes people in time, encasing them in a story that disallows them (in the audience’s eyes) from moving on, MacDougall declares:

> Films can have untold consequences, but all spring from their initial, presumptuous act. The real ‘crime’ of representation is representation itself … By freezing life, every film to some degree offends against the complexity of people and the destiny that awaits them (MacDougall 1998, pp. 37–38).

There was one particular example, concerning Shafiq, when I felt this was strongly the case.

**Shafiq**

The reader should view the following chapter from the feature *Chapters* menu of the *Freedom Stories DVD: Shafiq (Part 2) - This is the happiest moment of my life.*

**OR**

Clip No. 07 (Shafiq), if accessing this thesis through the University of Melbourne online Digital Repository.

A year after interviewing Shafiq and his daughter at the site of their new house—when Shafiq had declared: ‘this is the happiest moment of my life’—we were deep into the process of editing when Mahdiya told me that her parents had split up. Consequently
Shafiq had left the now completed family home, into which they had all moved some months earlier, and was staying with friends. I was sad to hear this, and felt that it might be another example (Amal was the first I came across, in the making of Hope) of a rather unacknowledged problem affecting former asylum seekers: that of repairing family relationships that have been interrupted/disrupted (in Shafiq’s case for ten years) by the dislocation and separation inherent in the migration process.

However, it seemed highly unlikely that Shafiq would want ‘air’ this development in his private life and I didn’t want to ask him to do so. Meanwhile, editing continued apace and Shafiq’s happiest moment remained in situ, despite the fact that the new home he had been so excited about no longer appeared to be his. I have wondered since whether I should have reconsidered that sequence, which I do so now in hindsight.

Earlier in the conversation in question, Shafiq and Mahdiya discuss the hard times they experienced. Shafiq admits to turning to drink to get through the ten years of loneliness without his family. But then came the reunion, and they began to make up for all that lost time. The interview transcript runs as follows:

Mahdiya: The longer we live with each other, the longer we get to know each other and the longer we have the connection and stuff back again, coming, so it’s all working good. Yep.
Shafiq: Yeah, right now I think I can say that, in 43 years of my life, this is—ah, apart from work pressure—
Mahdiya: (Laughs)
Shafiq: this is the happiest moment of my life. It is, you know, like...
Mahdiya: Yeah.
Shafiq: I’ve never been as happy.

This dialogue runs continuously (i.e. unedited) in the film. In narrative terms, an alternative would be that Mahdiya’s ‘it’s all working good’ comment could end the sequence, if a little flatly, except that Shafiq is the main ‘character’ (supported by Mahdiya) and so an audience would want to know what he thinks too. Narrative structure demands that Shafiq must have the last word and he does, interjecting at the end of Mahdiya’s statement that this is the happiest moment of his life. Looked at simply as a
transcript, this ‘happiest moment’ could apply solely to the reunion between father and daughter, which is undoubtedly something that remains true in Shafiq’s life, but the visual context for the statement is the half-built house in the background, the raison d’être of the scene (as earlier I narrate that: ‘they plan to visit the site of their new home later on’). From an audience perspective then, there is no escaping the feeling that Shafiq’s ‘happiest moment’ applies to both the reunion with his family and the achievement of buying their own home (where they can all live happily ever after).

In hindsight, perhaps the mistake, if there is one, lies in the implications of my preceding narration, which goes as follows:

This growing suburb symbolises the end of a long journey for Shafiq. With the ups and downs of his escape from the Taliban, his time in detention and the restrictions of a Temporary Protection Visa, 10 years passed before he could reunite with his wife and children.

My use of the phrase ‘symbolises the end of a long journey’ implies completion or resolution and prefigures that ‘happy ending’. This is a closed and totalising statement that I now think would have been better made conditional.

Moreover, on reflection, the positioning of the scene and its juxtaposition with Arif’s confession about the loss of his daughters was an important narrative determinant. Having experienced Shafiq’s happiest moment, the dictates of narrative dramatic rhythm, i.e. the need to balance ‘highs’ with ‘lows’, require that the following sequence should counter that ‘high’. What better way, than to use the chapter heading that appears next: ‘If you gain something, you lose something”? These are Arif’s words, spoken in relation to his unfathomably sad story of the loss of his daughters. Could the compelling juxtaposition of these stories, of Shafiq’s happiness and Arif’s sadness, be another reason why I didn’t revisit the edit of Shafiq’s sequence with Mahdiya after hearing of the unfortunate break-up of his marriage? The loss of such a dramatic juxtaposition would have been very hard to countenance in the edit suite.

Whatever my responsibility in the matter, this example is illustrative of the inherent tendency of filmmaking to set things in stone. Whatever is the situation of participants when a film ends, that is the ‘resolution’. And if, as is often done, an update is added in
text after the credits, then that becomes the resolution. At the time that Shafiq said those words, it was the happiest moment of his life, but no statement is binding. By its inclusion in the film, audiences assume that this is indeed the case: a happy ending. This was confirmed in a question and answer session after a screening that Mahdiya attended. She spoke about the subsequent break-up of her parents’ marriage, and there was a palpable sense of shock in the audience. It was as if they had to readjust their view of the world.

**Sheri**

The reader should view the following chapter from the feature *Chapters* menu of the *Freedom Stories* DVD: *Sheri and family (Part 2) - I know I can.*

**OR**

Clip No. 08 (*Sheri*), if accessing this thesis through the University of Melbourne online Digital Repository.

It strikes me that a similar situation applies to Sheri. Because she is seen having a truck driving lesson with her instructor Dave, apparently making good progress and discussing her desire to train up to the level of ‘B-double and road train’, audiences assume (or imagine, or hope) that Sheri is a truck driver. Her determined mantra of ‘I know I can’ encourages this view. Audiences, without fail, admire Sheri’s resilience, and at screenings invariably ask how her truck driving career is going. I don’t want to let them down by saying that, for one reason or another, she hasn’t been able to pursue that goal. So I usually reply, truthfully (although this is still pending at the time of writing), that she has since applied to be a bus driver in Adelaide, and that I think this would be a good outcome given the demands of looking after Ali, her disabled son.

In Sheri’s case, my narration is more conditional than in Shafiq’s:

> A decade after leaving detention, Sheri and her boys are still trying to find their way. But whatever their choices, back at the truck Sheri had reminded
me that you don’t get anywhere without hard work. And once more she capped things off with her favourite phrase.

Nevertheless, although I offer that reservation about future possibilities, it seems to be Sheri’s conviction that ‘I know I can’ that stays with audiences, and indeed is emphasised by the prefiguring in my narration that this mantra will be repeated; by the narrative structure of the sequence (i.e. that Sheri has the final say); and by the use of text on screen (which accentuates the phrase). Perhaps, as the filmmaker, I have helped set up an unreal expectation which Sheri herself cannot meet.

These examples of the tendency of film to freeze participants’ lives, and the danger of the filmmaker becoming culpable in this regard, add to the other fraught ethical questions about representation and consultation discussed above. However, there is a yet further dimension to be considered, which lies in the connection between ethics and aesthetics.

**Ethics and aesthetics**

Although a completed documentary cannot be taken as proof of the ethics of its making, it does provide evidence of the filmmaker’s ethical stance through the encoding of that stance in the film text via the aesthetic choices made (Donovan 2012, pp. 345–346).

According to Pryluck, in documentary making: ‘More than morality is involved: ethical assumptions have aesthetic consequences, and aesthetic assumptions have ethical consequences’ (2005, p. 195). Similarly, Nichols states that:

> An indexical bond exists between the image and the ethics that produced it. The image provides evidence not only on behalf of an argument but also gives evidence of the politics and ethics of its maker (Nichols 1991, p. 77).

My ethical stance included paying attention to reflexivity in production, and taking a reflexive approach to the editing of *Freedom Stories*. I now turn to a discussion of some of the ways in which ethics and aesthetics interacted in practice.
Examples of visual reflexivity

During editing, the earlier iterations of the feature included far more reflexive moments from the rushes than the completed film. Many fell away under the imperatives of reducing the film’s duration and concentrating on story, but also because the film’s participants had to be its focus, not me.

There are many visual reflexive moments left, however, some as simple as participants glancing at the camera, which Bruzzi describes as ‘that transgressive look highlighting the immutable wall between the subjects and the filmmakers of observational films’ (2013, p. 52). An example in the introductory sequence is Mustafa, who momentarily looks towards the camera while working on a car.74 There are also reflections of crew in a mirror or window, such as when Amir inspects the apartment, and when Reyhana is walking around her back yard.75 In one shot of Sheri in the truck with her instructor, the camera operator can be seen as well as me (captured by a GoPro camera installed in the cab),76 and occasionally I am seen in frame holding a microphone or boom pole.77

These small, overtly reflexive instances captured in the course of filming don’t usually provoke obvious reactions from audience members, but there are others that invariably do. An example is in the sequence with Hamid coaching his soccer team, when a flying ball hits the camera tripod.78 This always provokes laughter. There are usually chuckles when Reyhana and her daughter Mariam are cooking together in the kitchen and Mariam asks me: ‘Are we supposed to talk, my mum’s not saying anything?’.79 Likewise, when Molly Meldrum’s hand reaches into frame to dislodge the cat that has jumped onto the

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74 At 00:00:41 – DVD chapter: Introduction – with Mustafa, or the accompanying UoM Clip No. 06 (Introduction).

75 At 00:31:25 – DVD chapter: Amir (part 1); and 00:25:45 – DVD chapter: Reyhana (Part 1) or the accompanying UoM Clip No. 01 (Reyhana).

76 At 01:31:50 – DVD chapter: Sheri and family (Part 2) or the accompanying UoM Clip No. 08 (Sheri).

77 E.g. 00:06:05 – DVD chapter: Mustafa (Part 1) or the accompanying UoM Clip No. 04 (Mustafa).

78 At 01:34:01 – DVD chapter: Sheri and family (Part 2) or the accompanying UoM Clip No. 08 (Sheri).

79 At 00:23:13 – DVD chapter: Reyhana (Part 1) or the accompanying UoM Clip No. 01 (Reyhana).
arm of Arif’s chair while he is talking to camera. All of these examples represent moments that could have been cut without affecting the narrative flow or storyline, but which I chose to keep in.

They seem to have a two-fold purpose, beyond simply reminding viewers that a film is being made. Firstly, some provide humorous moments of much-needed relief from the tension of serious subject matter. Secondly, they assist in the development of my relationship with the audience, encouraging a sense of informality and intimacy in a way that undercuts any idea of me as a figure of ‘authority’. This seems to be confirmed, for example, by Jasmine Crittenden’s review in Metro magazine:

what makes Freedom Stories particularly affecting is Thomas’ unusually personal filmmaking style. Steering clear of exposition or diatribe, he … creates an artifice-free, naturalistic shooting style, evoking a warm, familiar atmosphere and increasing the subjects’ accessibility. Viewers feel that, instead of watching from a distance, they are in the company of an acquaintance or friend, with questions to ask rather than judgements to make or conclusions to draw (Crittenden 2016, p. 108).

The comment on ‘an artifice-free, naturalistic shooting style’ resonates with the idea of MacDougall’s unprivileged camera style (see Chapter Three – My filmmaking method) and, through its attention to performativity perhaps creates that ‘alternative honesty’ referred to by Bruzzi (see Introduction – Setting the scene). The feeling of being in the company of a curious friend is enhanced by those moments of ‘sensory apprenticeship’ that crop up in the suite of Freedom Stories films. For example, in the feature, Shafiq and I get into a discussion while he is painting a wall, about ‘time is money’ versus ‘reputation is money’. And in Ferial’s film, she tries to teach me some basket weaving. Again, such moments are not directly relevant to any narrative throughline; they are asides and, as such, are risky to include for fear of holding up the story. Used

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80 At 00:44:04 – DVD chapter: Arif (Part 1).

81 At 00:11:26 – DVD chapter: Shafiq (Part 1).

82 At 00:10:49.
spARINGLY, however, they add a lightness of touch and say something about the relationships within the filmic process—that they are not just one-way but collaborative.

There are also more deliberate ways in which I tell the audience about ‘where I’m coming from’. My previous documentaries Welcome to Woomera (2004) and Hope (2008) are referred to in the feature, for example, and this helps to reflexively contextualise my other work relevant to Freedom Stories. These references are not made in isolation however, as both crop up through the filmic action—the former in the context of showing Shafiq footage of the Woomera detention centre murals, some of which he was involved in painting, and the latter in the context of Mustafa and I visiting the SIEV X Memorial, which he was involved in helping to erect.\(^\text{83}\) Such references share with the audience, directly or indirectly, things about me that the participants also knew when we embarked on filming together.\(^\text{84}\)

On reflection, it is not so much that reflexive moments are peppered throughout Freedom Stories, but that reflexivity is part of the grain of the films. Now this may be true of any documentary to some degree, but it seems to me that my consciousness of and attention to the concept is what really brings out that grain, giving a textural feel and flow to the films that is both sub-textual and integral to their content.

I finish this section with the example of Mohsen, who, as part of his short film asked for my help in making a video clip of a poem he wrote in detention called Dream of Freedom. I was happy to do this as a reciprocal gesture in return for his participation, but also because the idea tapped into the enjoyment and skills I had gained in my early filmmaking career working as a first assistant director on drama productions. Thus, Mohsen and I became sensory apprentices to each other, and because this undertaking involved mounting a full-blown, studio shoot, I decided to enlist some of my students to record ‘behind the scenes’ documentary footage.\(^\text{85}\) Thinking as a documentary maker, I suspected that the process of making the clip might throw up more useful material for a film about Mohsen than the clip itself. In that special documentary relationship to

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\(^{83}\) At 00:14:07 – DVD chapter: Shafiq (Part 1); and 00:04:39 – DVD chapter: Mustafa (Part 1).

\(^{84}\) I always explained my filmmaking background to participants and offered to show them prior work.

\(^{85}\) The resulting sequence occurs in Mohsen’s short at 00:14:22.
chance, it would not be a matter so much of whether his idea worked, or we got the clip made or not, but what we would learn in the process. Consequently, Mohsen’s film includes documentary footage of a drama shoot that was itself part of a documentary—a complex reflexive scenario to say the least.

**Use of on-screen text and ‘Screenflow’**

To be open to the Other and avoid the subsuming tendency of a totalising quest for knowledge implies at least two ethical principles in editing. Firstly, all participants must be respected. Each deserves their moment on the screen, the opportunity to be seen and listened to in their own right. Secondly, the filmic encounter is an embodied encounter, so if we are to fully attend to a participant then they should be seen as well as heard, for the eyes are windows to the soul and body language can convey as much or more than words. It follows that it should be a last resort to conceal participants behind cutaways or other visual overlay material. I say last resort, rather than never, because the problems created by the need to compress time, thus creating ‘jump cuts’, poses ethically related aesthetic questions. These may be judged as best solved by cutting away to another picture while a participant’s voice continues.

A further implication of the imperative to give full attention to a participant concerns the soundtrack. Can one, for example, give undivided attention to what is being said if additional non-diegetic sounds such as music are laid behind the voice track? I will deal with this question in due course, but firstly, I turn to how the issue of vision was dealt with in *Freedom Stories*.

In editing conversations, saving time and retaining (or creating) clarity of meaning invariably requires the deletion of extraneous sentences and phrases, and sometimes individual words. This process is rendered more complex when participants are speaking a second language, often with incorrect grammar or pronunciation. The ethical questions surrounding the task of accurately maintaining the meaning and intention of a speaker’s

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86 A ‘jump cut’ is an abrupt break in visual continuity created by editing out part of an interview (for example).
dialogue while editing constitute one problem, but the other pertains to this consequence of creating numerous jump cuts in the process.

Today, the retention of jump cuts, or use of brief dissolves or dips to black (or even white), have become common alternatives to using cutaways, which audiences accept without difficulty. Dips to black were my device of choice where necessary in Freedom Stories because they represent a more reflexive, and thus more transparent way of dealing with deletions than using cutaways. They indicate to audiences that dialogue has been cut out, rather than pretending that it is continuous. However, frequent dips to black (or use of jump cuts) can be aesthetically jarring, so we also came up with other devices to deal with these interruptions, which also provided a consistent aesthetic approach to a shortage of available imagery at times, such as during my narration.

I had been thinking prior to the edit about ways of using on-screen text. Uri, the editor, took this idea and developed it as a device for simultaneously covering bits of cleaned up speech and emphasising their content. He superimposed short pieces of transcribed and animated text over abstract imagery (such as sky or water). The effect was to emphasise what was being said, which is a different concept to that of using subtitles.\(^\text{87}\) We decided from the start we did not want to use the latter and, fortunately, the judicious selection and editing of speech (plus careful sound mixing to enhance clarity) rendered subtitling unnecessary.

Then Uri began experimenting with Screenflow, a software application that allows the recording of a computer desktop.\(^\text{88}\) By pulling up interview transcripts or other editing documents and layering them with the AVID editing desktop, he was able to create ‘animated’ sequences, recording the desktop while using the mouse and cursor to drag, open, close and scroll through images and documents. Such sequences soon began to be

\(^{87}\) For example, see the feature at 00:55:45 – DVD chapter: Jamila or the accompanying UoM Clip No. 05 (Jamila).

used for carrying my narration, which had no location imagery of its own.\footnote{An example is my introductory narration in the feature at 00:03:36, in the DVD chapter: \textit{Introduction with Mustafa} or the accompanying UoM Clip No. 06 (Introduction).}

I was attracted to the use of this reflexive visual device because it symbolises the mechanics of the editing process as well as helping to convey the story. Although it was criticised by some reviewers of the feature as indicating a ‘rough and ready’ approach, the stylistic use of animated text and Screenflow sequences have been generally well received by audiences. Such reviewer criticism was usually in the context of a more general complaint about scant effort being made to keep microphones and other production paraphernalia out of the frame (e.g. Armstrong 2015; Mr Movies 2015). This echoes Bruzzi’s view about the traditional imperative of concealing the means of production. Interestingly, in the same reviews, such criticism was often turned back on itself with praise that this ‘informal’ approach actually creates an intimacy with participants that benefits the film. Again, Bruzzi points out that paradoxically ‘there is an inverse relationship between style and authenticity; the less polished the film the more credible it will be found’ (2000, p. 6).

In a draft chapter on transnationalism and Australian documentary in the digital age, Deane Williams articulates a more sophisticated view of our application of the Screenflow device:

In these images, initiated in the title sequence and on into Thomas’s narration about his being “intrigued with the ordinary things they are doing now”, with the depiction of the multitude of images, logged items, calendars, data-sets and the manipulability of the items therein, this sequence and others that follow also foregrounds the constructed self-reflexive essay mode adopted by Thomas, foregrounding his own searching out for an understanding of the plight of the subjects of his film in a quiet intrigue (Williams 2017, p. 18).\footnote{In this paper Williams gives an account of the ‘unusual ongoing in-progress status’ of \textit{Freedom Stories} as a multi-platform, ‘transmedia documentary’ (2017, p. 14).}
Use of narration

The quote at the start of this chapter, from the Brazilian documentary maker Joao Moreire Salles, encapsulates the way in which the editing process in documentary is dominated by the imperatives of storytelling. It is not just reductionism that poses ethical problems, but the dictates of narrative conventions. The ability to diverge from the throughline is limited. Attempts to keep things open and contingent, rather than closed and fixed, tend to be thwarted in anything other than an essayistic or experimental approach. This is unfortunate, because communicating through stories is such an important means of sharing human experience and the human condition.

An example of this tension lies in writing narration, a device that I have long adopted as a way of supporting the stories I am sharing with audiences. As is usual in my practice, the narration script for Freedom Stories was generated during post-production, written in collaboration with the editor, and recorded in draft form as cutting proceeded. I worked on refining it right up to the sound-mix when the final draft was recorded.

Using my own voice after the fact is, by definition, a reflexive device. In an attempt to keep things open, and avoid a totalising vision, I tried to keep in mind the use of qualifiers such as ‘maybe’, ‘it seems like’, ‘it occurred to me that’ or ‘perhaps’. But when the priority rapidly becomes one of supplying missing information necessary for the audience to follow the storyline, and when you are trying to shave off screen time here and there and don’t want to sacrifice what the participants have to say, it is precisely those kinds of non-essential qualifiers that get cut. Then it starts to feel that the narration is saying that this is how things are, rather than this is how things might be.

Examples of this tendency can be found at both the beginning and end of the feature. Early drafts of my opening narration during the title sequence were more reflexive, contingent and open than the final version. An early iteration reads as follows:

*Over a decade ago I began meeting former asylum seekers through previous films I was making. For two years now I’ve been collaboratively documenting the lives of twenty people or so to see what they’ve managed to make of life in Australia. Some have come and gone through circumstance while I’ve been filming and their stories are left half told. I find myself*
fascinated by the ordinary things they are doing. Indeed a first viewing of a hundred hours of footage looks like a perfect source for a doco on occupations. I feel overwhelmed, how can I do justice to their stories with these fragments of their lives?

By the time we reached fine cut, there were no references to people coming and going, stories half told, or a hundred hours of rushes, and I was no longer feeling overwhelmed, or wondering how I would 'do justice to their stories with these fragments of their lives'. The only conditional statement remaining is that: 'Each has their own story and as we got to know each other some agreed to let me film them, to see what they’re making of life here'.  

I also struggled with the final narration because, at that point, the narrative demands some sort of conclusion, a resolution of the journey. There is pressure for this in any film, although, of course, life itself has no neat endings. I have always been wary of ‘happy-ever-after’ finales, but I did want to say something meaningful. Furthermore, the consideration of story structure suggested that because the film begins with my personal reflection it should end similarly. Looking back at early versions, I had a draft that included something like ‘but I know life isn’t as simple as a film’, and I am not sure why that comment was discarded, although I made numerous attempts over time at writing a closing narration and perhaps it just got lost along the way, rather than being actively rejected. In hindsight, I wish I had used something like that phrase rather than (or in conjunction with) the somewhat inadequate statement that is there, about my admiration for our participants’ resilience.  

Although I did incorporate Arif’s heartfelt homily that ‘if you gain something you lose something’, which does have a sense of duality about it, the piece is, when examined, rather clumsy. Having said this, while I feel that I might have done better with my

91 Occurs at 00:03:36 – DVD chapter: Introduction with Mustafa or the accompanying UoM Clip No. 06 (Introduction).

92 I did actually resurrect the use of the phrase at the end of Mohsen’s short film, when I was searching for something provisional to say and it serendipitously reoccurred to me (see 00:22:50).

93 See feature at 01:37:14, in the DVD chapter: Shafiq (Part 3).
narration in creating the kind of tentativeness and reticence required of a Levinas-influenced, non-subsuming and ethical approach, it must be remembered that the aim of *Freedom Stories* was to facilitate the self-advocacy of the film’s participants, not that of the filmmaker. Crittenden’s opinion referred to earlier—‘viewers feel that … they are in the company of an acquaintance or friend, with questions to ask rather than judgements to make or conclusions to draw’ (2016, p. 108)—does indicate that I have succeeded in part. I have at least avoided a ‘voice of God’ narration, so common in docu-soaps and ‘reality TV’ programs, with its implication that not only is this how things are but they cannot be any other way (see Dovey 2000, pp. 142–144). I may regret that there was no opportunity to be discursive or essayistic, but, had I been, then the audience might feel distracted from the focus of the film, which is the participants.

It also remains true that it is as much how things are said as what is said that influences an audience. While the narration sways from informational to personal to reflexive, perhaps overall its tone is acceptable. That tone is at least partially due to adopting a retiring rather than upfront filmmaker approach. Such a recessed style implies conditionality.

**Use of music**

Another aesthetic consideration with ethical implications is the use of music. Apart from deflecting full attention from whoever is speaking, when used behind interviews its purpose is usually to manipulate audience emotions. *Freedom Stories* introduces former asylum seekers to audiences, and viewers should be able to make that vital connection for themselves, on the strength of the ‘unprivileged’ material. Using music to steer emotions or enhance empathy is a long accepted tool of drama but, particularly now that it has infiltrated even current affairs programs as well as documentary, where it has always been accepted within John Grierson’s traditional definition of the genre as ‘the creative treatment of actuality’ (e.g. see Nichols 2010, p. 6), one must be even more cautious about its use.94

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94 Proponents of the direct cinema movement traditionally shunned music, because the idea was to use diegetic (i.e. location) sound only, and not sully ‘reality’ with artificial additions.
My ethical rule of thumb is to forbid the placing of music behind dialogue, which is in opposition to most documentaries these days. Music is a multi-sensorial aspect of a film. It is not just about hearing but experiencing and feeling. Apart from the obvious moments of the opening title and closing credits, the main areas where scoring felt like it was needed in *Freedom Stories* was behind my narrated segments, which are often accompanied by Screenflow imagery. In these, the editor often incorporated sounds to accompany that imagery, such as wind or waves. Rather than being particularly emotive, they are generally transitional passages providing some backstory, pertinent information, or link that helps the narrative to move forward.

In discussion with our composer, Brett Aplin, it was agreed to use music in a generally low-key way. In writing for the narration, he developed some thematic variations to identify particular participants. He also wrote incidental ‘stings’ used to help get through transitions between scenes and very occasionally through scenes themselves. I wanted to avoid stereotypical music that would perpetuate conventional, cultural ideas about asylum seekers, so I did not want to fall for the temptation of using a Middle-Eastern flavoured score. I had heard the soundtrack to *Charlie’s Country* (de Heer, 2013), which is mainly sparse piano, and suggested this as a reference. Fortuitously, the piano was Brett’s instrument of choice, and so the soundtrack developed from there. Because, like our cinematographers, he was so used to working on TV programs, he at first automatically wrote the music to run into or behind ‘interviews’ but soon realised my strong aversion to this.

I am not exactly sure what the resulting music does behind my narration—perhaps gives it a sense of depth and ‘body’, that extra dimension which is lacking because there is no actual body to be seen (and ethically, it seems more acceptable to tamper with my own performance than that of the participants). Maybe it also helps to give the narration a more expansive feel, so that it is sitting in the world rather than in a void.

There are, in fact, several moments where music is used with participants when they are talking (although not when talking with me). An example of the complexity of making such aesthetic decisions lies in a comparison between two scenes: one of Reyhana and her daughter Mariam preparing lunch in the kitchen; and the other of Amir inspecting a
vacated apartment. After a couple of attempts, the composer came up with essentially the same piece of incidental music for both, just timed differently. After deliberation during the sound-mix, however, I decided to remove the music from behind Reyhana and Mariam, but keep it behind Amir. Why?

Both scenes show participants just going about an everyday task, but somehow there was enough going on in the kitchen scene to make the music feel intrusive and unnecessary. I think this is because Reyhana and Mariam are engaging in banter, accompanied by the sounds of cooking, whereas Amir appears to be alone in an empty, silent space and apparently talking to himself, thus requiring the addition of something extra to provide warmth and connection, which is what the music achieves. These are subtle distinctions, and I mention them to demonstrate the difficulties of making such choices, which, like everything else, were agonised over during post-production but barely noticed, it seems, by audiences or participants alike.

There is another example of a scene where music was removed in the sound-mix, despite deciding it was needed during the edit. This is when Mustafa displays for the camera the photos of himself and his brother in detention on Nauru. Somehow the presence in the frame of both Mustafa and Amir sitting together negates the need for music to ‘add something’ to the scene. Their relationship is clearly visible and needs no further reinforcement. However, later in the feature, when Mustafa shows us photos of himself and his fiancée, Kubra, she is physically absent. While the photos are poignant in themselves, once again it is as though the music makes up for, or replaces, the physical body that is missing. I suspect this is why scoring succeeded in one case but not the other, and this seems to me to be consistent with an ethical stance on the primacy of relationships, which in turn, is reflected in the aesthetic decisions eventually taken.

95 At 00:23:10 – DVD chapter: Reyhana (Part 1) or the accompanying UoM Clip No. 01 (Reyhana); and 00:30:47 – DVD chapter: Amir (Part 1).

96 At 00:09:01– DVD chapter: Mustafa (Part 1) or the accompanying UoM Clip No. 04 (Mustafa).

97 At 01:02:42 – DVD chapter: Mustafa (Part 2).
Having discussed the interrelationship of ethics and aesthetics I now move on to the final stage of production, that of consulting with and seeking approval from participants for the editing work done on their material.

**Approval and consent**

After five weeks of ingesting, logging, and transcribing rushes, followed by 26 weeks of editing, we were ready to show most of the participants a proposed edit of the feature documentary or a suggested rough edit of their own short films. Over a two-week period, I travelled across four states and sat down with each participant, to view the material together and discuss their placement in either the feature or series of shorts. I took with me a release form to be signed by participants if they were happy to do so.

**The release form**

The legal and moral status of signed release forms is both dubious and debateable (eg. see Winston 2008, pp. 234–252) but, nevertheless, a written release provides some level of assurance for all parties. In line with the idea that consent is an ongoing process, our participants had not been asked to sign a release form in advance, as is usually the case in the film and TV industry. Instead, this was left until they could see and discuss how they were to be represented in the edited film.

In this instance, there were no particular requirements for a release form imposed by investors or commissioning bodies, therefore we amended a standard release form so that, by signing it, participants would acknowledge the following provisions:

1. They agreed with the purpose of the film.

2. They had been shown the proposed edited version of the film.

3. No financial profit would be accrued by the filmmakers (as any profits would be applied to helping asylum seekers) and therefore no payment to participants would be expected.
4. None of the material recorded of participants could be used for any other purpose than the *Freedom Stories* project without their express permission.

5. In light of the above provisions, copyright ownership and the right to distribute the documentary would belong to Flying Carpet Films (my production company).

A copy of the release form is attached as Appendix F.

It was important to me to enshrine the participants’ right of veto in the release. However, our advice was that spelling out that right was both unnecessary and could get us into legal arguments over definitions, so producer Lisa Horler and I decided on a form of wording that implies a right of veto, the argument being that if a participant has ‘been given the opportunity to view the intended edit’ and then agrees to ‘grant the producer the right to use visual and/or audio recordings of me in the documentary’, it can reasonably be assumed that they are satisfied with the resultant film and their representation in it. In practice, as discussed earlier, it was repeatedly made clear to participants that nothing would be included in the completed films without them having viewed and agreed to its inclusion.

Another potentially complicated area concerned that of copyright. While I wanted participants to have a sense of shared ownership as co-creators, the notion of legally sharing ownership throws up various issues, especially given the large number of participants involved. Paying out any royalties received would be complicated and, in reality, very few socially orientated documentaries achieve significant financial returns or go into profit. Although none of the *Freedom Stories* participants ever asked to be paid, it was felt that pecuniary interests should be dealt with in the release form and the best way to do this was to indicate that, as the producers, Lisa and I would not be seeking to reap profits from the films. Should any returns be accrued over and above retrieving the costs of production and distribution, the release makes it clear that these will be applied to helping other asylum seekers. This is an indication of goodwill, although the participants have always known that as filmmakers we were never in it to make money.

The other element of ownership involves the right to ‘exploit’ the films through avenues of distribution. This responsibility must sit with *someone* if the purpose of promoting attitudinal change is to be achieved, and the reality (as with most films) is that the
participants are unlikely to actively engage in the onerous business of distribution, other than recommending *Freedom Stories* to friends and relatives etc. Consequently, this ongoing obligation falls on the filmmakers’ shoulders, and the release makes that clear.

**Viewing the proposed edit with participants**

So what happened when I took the proposed edits around to the participants, and what were their responses to the release form? Having read and/or discussed the form’s contents with me in person, everyone who required no significant changes in their edits signed it without any difficulty. Those for whom it was agreed more work was needed were not asked to sign a release until completion. It has to be said that some gave fairly cursory attention to the form and two (see below) signed it without seeing the film(s), despite being given the opportunity to do so. While one might be critical of those individuals, or wonder if second language issues were a factor, in practice the release forms were a fairly routine aspect of the production process, because by this stage we had established relationships of trust over a long period that enabled participants to be confident they would not be betrayed or exploited.

I did consider providing a translation of the release form, as I had with the letter explaining the editing process, but the release is a comparatively short and straightforward document which, in every case, I went through in person with the participants, whereas the editing letter was lengthy and not delivered personally. So this seemed unnecessary. If we had presented participants with a release form at the beginning of filming, and without inclusion of the provisions referred to above, then it would have been asking a great deal of them to sign it, but, as things unfolded, the signing of the release felt like a natural and non-threatening part of the procedure.

Participants’ responses to the films were more complex and interesting, however. With some, the screening and approval process was straightforward, but it is worth reporting in more detail on some of the others.
Reyhana and Mariam

As noted earlier, Reyhana’s daughter Mariam declined to be further involved after the initial filming at their home. My understanding from Reyhana was that Mariam was supportive of the film, and had no problem with the footage featuring her being used. Nor did she want to see the proposed edit before signing a release. Instead, she signed a release form in advance of my visit and left it with Reyhana to give me.

I was never quite sure who would be present when I arrived at participants’ homes for screenings, and, in Reyhana’s case, rather than other family members being present, she had invited a friend to join her. Watching the film was an emotional experience for Reyhana and afterwards, over lunch, we discussed the film and she said she was very happy with it. I specifically asked if she was okay about the inclusion of the moment when she became upset about her mother and sister, and she affirmed that she was. For Reyhana, the purpose of the film was always to explain to people what asylum seekers go through (‘our stories’). Reyhana’s friend was also enthusiastic about the feature and asked me if I would be interested in filming Afghan weddings around Adelaide, which I took as a significant compliment.

Shafiq and Mahdiya

It was a more difficult experience taking the feature edit to Shafiq and his daughter Mahdiya, given the subsequent parental separation. At this time, he was still lodging with a friend, who also happens to be involved in filmmaking and who I know personally, so I asked her to facilitate the screening and be present. Mahdiya and Shafiq both agreed to watch the film there with us. Here is my brief account of the occasion as reported in my Production Journal:

R facilitated a lunchtime screening at her place but at the last minute Shafiq decided he wasn’t up to seeing the film, so he arrived afterwards. Maddy and R watched it and had no problems. Shafiq’s position was that he understands the filmmaking process and has no problem with me using any of the material we shot – that he trusts me and that’s why he did it.
Postscript: Shafiq later said he would come to the preview screening at VCA but then didn’t. However, he did come to the Nova opening and afterwards we talked and I sent him a DVD. He’s in a better space now … so wants to see the whole film (Thomas 2015a, pp. 166–167).

The fact that Shafiq could not bring himself to look at the film for some time was distressing for me as well. The effects of participating in a documentary are surely unpredictable, and can reverberate long afterwards for participants and filmmaker alike. Yet, which of us doesn’t experience grief or pangs of loss when we see images of ourselves or others taken in the past? No ‘happiest moment’ lasts forever and we are not immortal. But, as noted in the account from my Journal, some nine months after he declined to watch the proposed edit, Shafiq attended the opening screening of the feature at the Cinema Nova in Melbourne and brought along a friend.

In practical terms, I was lucky. Although at completion, Shafiq was unable to watch the film, he trusted Mahdiya to do so on his behalf, and took the position that if it was okay by her then it would be okay by him. With her approval (and that of our mutual friend, whom Shafiq also trusts) he signed a release form without question. His ability to understand my position as the filmmaker, and his generosity in this regard are qualities for which I am deeply grateful. His belief in the film and in me never wavered.

**Arif**

When I arrived at Arif’s house to show him our proposed edit of the feature, I was greeted by his entire family and the hospitality of dinner, which had to be eaten before the screening. Of all the sequences in the feature, Arif’s story of the loss of his daughters was the one I was most uncertain about gaining approval for. I would not have been surprised if he had vetoed it, and would have understood why. So I was nervous, and even more so when I realised that the whole family (Arif, his wife, older and younger sons, and a nephew) were going to watch the film together.

During the screening, Arif became animated and emotional, reacting to other participants as well as to his own ‘scenes’. Afterwards he told me how important he felt it was that such stories be told, including his own, because he and other parents who took such risks
in fleeing their homelands for the sake of their children now feel like a lost generation. Like many who have been through wars and trauma they don’t talk about what happened to them, while their children, who are reaping the benefits, never think to ask about their experiences.

I specifically asked Arif if he felt okay about his moment of upset, and he replied that this was an important part of his story and should be included. While I was appreciatively surprised at this, as noted earlier, I now surmise that by placing that story on the record, as it were, Arif has been released from the pain of suppressing it and consequently has no need to talk about it further. He signed the consent form after making a comment along the lines of ‘maybe I should read the fine print’. I haven’t thought about that comment until now, but perhaps it was a wry observation about previously being led by me into uncomfortable territory.

**Sheri and Hamid**

Each approval screening had its own flavour. In the case of Sheri and her sons, Sheri was more concerned with making lunch than watching the film. Hamid’s life too had moved on, and some time into editing he had told me that he and his girlfriend Jennifer (featured with him in the film98) had broken up. I was afraid that he might object to her inclusion, which would have created difficulties, because my main conversation with him had been with the two of them. However, again generously, Hamid said that they remained friends and he was happy for the sequences with her to be included. He was sure Jennifer would also be happy to be included, and undertook to give her a copy of the film. Both Hamid and his brother Mohammad watched the entire feature before signing release forms.

Although Sheri preferred to busy herself in the kitchen, she had no problem signing releases for herself and Ali, her disabled son. I made sure I left a DVD with her, so that she could look at the cut later on if she wished to. Maybe she was too embarrassed to watch herself, or perhaps her apparent lack of curiosity demonstrates the point that participants have their own interests and priorities. Life goes on and their involvement in a documentary may mean less to them than to the filmmaker. It should be noted however,

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98 See the feature at 00:35:35 – DVD chapter: Sheri and family (Part 1).
that Sheri (with Hamid, as Mohammad was away at the time) did attend the Adelaide premiere of the feature as a guest of honour.

I also found that when watching the edit, participants often seemed more captivated by the stories of other participants than their own. It is as if they know their own stories back to front and perhaps those of people close to them, but as with the rest of us, other ‘refugees’ constitute a rather nebulous group. They were fascinated to share other individual experiences that resonated so strongly with their own.

In general, my experience of taking the proposed edit around to all the participants confirmed that those who watched it did recognise the people on screen as themselves and were satisfied with that. One response that encapsulated this and confirmed my approach came from our young student, Jamila. We watched the proposed edit together and, at the end, like many of the participants, she had tears in her eyes. I asked her what she was feeling, and she replied that other video projects she had been involved in generally had a political agenda and didn’t introduce people on a human level. This was the first time she felt represented as a person rather than a refugee.

As it happened, none of the feature participants expressed reservations about their material or asked for changes, other than in occasional details of fact, but there were several instances of disagreement among those with their own short films—two examples of which I will turn to now.

**Mohsen**

Some participants were a bit more proprietary about their participation than others, usually because they had understandable reasons for self-promotion. In Mohsen’s case, for example, he had a band that he was keen to promote and, partly as a means of reciprocation, I had filmed some gigs for him. Mohsen was fairly pleased with his rough cut, which was a substantial piece of more than 20 minutes.\(^{99}\) I was relieved at this, as I was unsure how he would react to our attempt to dramatise his poem. He was very generous in that regard, but asked me to correct some of the facts of his life as reported in

\(^{99}\) In the feature, each participant or family has, on average, about 13 minutes of screen time.
my narration, which of course I was happy to do. In addition, Mohsen asked if I could include some footage of his band playing live, as I had only included rehearsal footage in the proposed edit.

Although I felt this suggestion contained a hint of self-interest on behalf of the band, I agreed to consider it, and, after reviewing the rushes, I added a short sequence from the final number of a performance that ended with Mohsen thanking the band members by name, followed by audience applause. This not only made a better and more appropriate (if conventional) ending to his film but also provided the space for me to narrate that Mohsen was continuing with his various creative endeavours and that: ‘I’d like to think this is a happy ending but I also know that life isn’t as simple as any film. Mohsen’s struggles continue…’.100 As discussed earlier, this is the kind of conditional ending that I wish I had come up with for the feature.

Aamer

When Dr Aamer watched his short rough cut, he expressed dissatisfaction with the second part of the film, shot in Nowra when he was doing emergency work in the hospital there. As it happened, I agreed with him, because I felt that the film rather petered out, particularly as it had not been possible to film him at work. It was not so much that it needed a resolved ending, but that it was lacking a strong statement from Aamer. We agreed that I would go away and do more work on the edit.

In revisiting the ending, I found a way of bringing the film full circle, back to a statement Aamer made when we first met, about feeling compelled to speak out for his fellow detainees in Villawood, because he believed he owed them something.101 The ending is still a little bumpy, but is a considerable improvement and thanks to Aamer’s own agency in pushing me to reconsider, as Mohsen also had.

A satisfying aspect of this was that the participants clearly felt they had permission to suggest changes. These are examples of how their contributions to the editing process led

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100 See 00:21:32.

101 See 00:12:06
to improvements in their final films. Despite the extra work involved, such enhancements are confirmation of the value of encouraging participant agency through a collaborative approach.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have explored some of the factors that, in many ways, render the post-production stage of making a documentary more challenging than its shooting. The ethics of the filmmaker-participant relationship are complicated by the relative absence of participants from the editing process, the dilemmas of representation that occur during the selection of material from the rushes, the dictates of narrative storytelling, and the fact that life continues while the film stands still. The complex inter-twining of ethics and aesthetics must also be dealt with. In all these matters, a reflexive approach to both practice and its interrogation is of value in reviewing the success or otherwise of one’s objectives and how the practice might be improved in future.

Exploring in some detail the approval procedure and participants’ responses to the editing process has underlined the importance of treating consent as ongoing negotiation and consultation. The establishment of trust between documentary filmmaker and participant(s) over time creates the foundation for negotiation of a release form (or any kind of contract, verbal or otherwise, between the parties involved). This assumes, of course, that the filmmaking environment allows for such negotiation (which, formally at least, is not generally the case in the television industry), and permits the release form to address the asymmetric power relations between participant(s) and filmmaker.

Built into the *Freedom Stories* release was the right of consultation (including veto, although not directly stated); acknowledgement of shared aims; provision for the protection of the rushes; and what ownership means (i.e. no particular financial advantage to the filmmaker). Such provisions confirm the trust already established, and makes the signing of a release form less fraught for all concerned.

While the release gives the filmmaker rights in relation to distribution, if the other elements it contains are perceived to be in balance, this does not seem to be of concern to participants, even within a collaborative model. Just as they understand and expect that it
is the filmmaker’s responsibility to ‘make’ the film, so they expect her/him to distribute it.

Finally, although most of the *Freedom Stories* participants were magnanimous about the use of their material in the proposed edit(s), circulating power in the filmmaker-participant relationship can be seen at work in the agency exerted by several participants and the negotiations that ensued. As mentioned previously (see Chapter Four – the filmmaker-participant relationship in action), one participant vetoed his film completely. Being prepared to take on such agency and ready for a right of veto to be exercised, is demanding on a filmmaker, but, in my experience, well worthwhile in the long run.
Conclusions

This written thesis constitutes a self-reflexive examination of the production of a reflexively orientated, collaborative documentary project from the filmmaker’s perspective. As a basis for reviewing practice, reflexivity as ‘consciousness turning back on itself’ creates a feedback loop, whereby new awareness changes practice and vice versa. This dynamism has permeated both the production of Freedom Stories and my analysis of that production. Whilst it is not a complete examination—focusing only on aspects that interest me—what has been learned are not simply lessons about what I did, but how the doing changed and is still changing (for future practice) as I write about it.

I have discussed instances where I experimented with reflexive practice, and have self-reflexively examined examples of dialogic interviews. Both reveal the way reflexivity works, the power of participant initiative in a collaborative approach, and the mechanics of my own methodology, of which I was not always fully aware at the time. While readers will draw their own conclusions about what is, or is not, pertinent, in this final section I turn to some key findings from my own perspective. Firstly though, I will reaffirm the essential concepts that underpin my approach to practice.

It is crucial to acknowledge the circulation of power within the documentary filmmaking relationship, and that participants have agency. This has been largely ignored in the literature until relatively recently, despite being a fact of life ‘on the ground’. Such acknowledgement is a prerequisite for any collaborative approach that tries to address the inherent power discrepancy in favour of the filmmaker. I have described how—having initiated the idea for Freedom Stories, and approached potential participants in a spirit of sensitive engagement—that circulating power swung into action with agency and resistance flowing both ways. From willing cooperation to active co-creation, participants were open to some of my ideas, resisted others, initiated their own and, in some cases, used their involvement to make their own claims of identity in the world.

This thesis is an attempt to enunciate, in practical terms, what sensitive engagement means, both ethically and within the documentary tradition. Consideration of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas emphasises that ethics is not simply about making moral decisions. The imperative in dealing with the Other is to avoid subsuming her/him
in a totalising vision, as though the filmmaker has privileged knowledge and authority, or some overarching access to the truth. Moreover, the ethical encounter with a participant requires sacrifice and indebtedness, with no expectation of reciprocity—a far more demanding requirement than the simplistic imperative ‘to do minimal harm’.

While the kind of documentary making I have discussed is clearly authored, control is shared, so that the filmmaker is no longer the auteur. Collaboration assumes mutual trust, ongoing dialogue, a concern with commonality rather than difference, and a meaningful right of veto for participants. Key to a collaborative filmmaking relationship is the successful differentiation of tasks and sharing of responsibility between participants and filmmaker(s). This must be determined by the particular expertise and experience that each brings to the project. Participants understand this and have commensurate expectations.

Working all this out demands a situational engagement with ethics in which there is, for example, no single answer to the question of how far one should go in pursuing accounts of personal pain. Every participant is unique and one must learn to relate accordingly. Intuition is a guide, but it is important to give space to, and make allowances for, people.

Furthermore, a completed film is not necessarily a measure of the ethics of its making. One must go back to the encounter between filmmaker and participant(s) to see what actually happened. That encounter includes the performance of the documentary for the camera, and the shaping of the representation of participants (and the filmmaker) during editing. For a filmmaker to analyse those processes for her/himself, self-reflexive investigation is required. The keeping of a production journal and analysis of rushes in hindsight has, for example, provided insights into my own practice of which I was unaware, and which will influence my approach in future.

What I have developed in this thesis then, is a conceptual model that integrates both ethics and making into a reflexive practice, a model of iterative-reflexive filmmaking. In effect, I have articulated an approach to documentary practice that constitutes a kind of heightened ethics of everyday living.

Of course, there is a presupposition here that the filmmaking environment in which one works is amenable to such practice. Unfortunately this cannot be taken for granted. As
has been both pointed to and implied in the course of my discussion, this model stands in opposition to the economically driven imperatives of ‘factual TV’ (both broadcast and online), in which the long traditions of documentary as an ethically oriented practice are being undermined.\(^\text{102}\) Where then does the ethical documentary maker find a home, given the difficulties of penetrating alternative means of distribution, such as the cinema? Increasingly it seems, through philanthropy and the academy, both of which are marginalised (if growing) contexts for practice. Here, there is a need for more research, which I hope others will undertake.

Having expressed that reservation, the adoption of this collaborative practice model in the context of exploring personal stories leads me to the following conclusions:

1. **It is an imperative that participants should benefit from their involvement.**

What the benefit(s) of participation may be is hard to define, but sensitive engagement requires us to work for the betterment of our participants. This does not relegate the importance of the product, but deciding between what is best for participants and what is best for the film is a challenging source of tension. Furthermore, the director, who interacts directly with participants, must take responsibility for representing their interests to others in the filmmaking team, or hierarchy, and arguing for their welfare. One cannot abrogate one’s own creative or ethical responsibilities on the grounds that this is a collaborative enterprise.

In this regard, it is important to have some idea of what one is personally and emotionally investing in each participant, so that questions or conflicts of loyalty can be understood and dealt with. In *Freedom Stories*, this was particularly pertinent when it came to deciding which participants would be included in the feature film. Ultimately, some of the material people shared with me was shared with the film’s audience, but much of it was not. However, as the filmmaker, and a witness to participants’ testimonies, I have been changed by all of it.

\(^\text{102}\) Aufderheide, Jaszi & Chandra’s survey of American documentary makers gives a clear sense of this trend (2009, p. 1–4).
2. It is incumbent on filmmakers to negotiate the filmmaking process and their intentions with participants, including how and when the latter will be consulted, and what powers of agency, review and decision-making they will have.

It is ethically pertinent that discussion of what might be involved in participation should include some assessment of participants’ own motives, what they stand to gain by participating, and whether they have the necessary emotional resilience. Sometimes this may have adverse results for the film project, and I have noted how such discussion with some participants possibly led to their withdrawal. This is part and parcel of a reflexively and ethically aware research practice.

I found that building consent into the filmmaking as an ongoing process, promising that no rushes would be used without participants’ approval, and modelling a release form with appropriate safeguards, took care of the controversial nature of ‘informed consent’ and made it a normative part of the proceedings. Consultation over editing and/or the provision of a right of veto is not merely a matter of handing over control to participants, however, but is subject to the dialogic nature of relationships of mutual trust and co-creation.

In coding and analysing my Production Journal, I found that most ethical issues occurring during editing. In maintaining an ethical approach during post-production, it is vital to behave as if the participants are present physically as well as on the screen, and recognise the tendency of the narrative imperatives of reductive storytelling to influence the editing process. There is always a risk of turning the rounded human beings of the rushes into ‘characters’ who they will not themselves recognise.

It is important to have a clear consultative protocol during editing. Reviewing the edits of some of our participants with them led me to review and revise their representation, subsequently producing what was mutually agreed to be a closer likeness. Narrative structure also tends to demand resolved (or closed) endings, while in fact life goes on in its unpredictable fashion. Participants cannot necessarily be held to prior statements, and there is a danger of setting up expectations that they cannot meet.

3. It is as important for the filmmaker to have personal integrity, self-awareness and resilience, as it is to have artistic and creative skills.
A collaborative approach increases the demands on the filmmaker, and not just in terms of time and work. In addition to the significant emotional and artistic investment made in the project, filmmakers need the self-knowledge to understand their own motives, and the ethical sensibility to avoid othering the Other. Resistance must be both allowed for and welcomed as participants make their own boundaries clear and the filmmaker adapts to each relationship. Persistence and determination are often required, as well as sensitivity, as the examples from my practice explored in this thesis affirm.

It must also be acknowledged that an approach in which the filmmaker emerges from the safety of anonymity, to take her/his chances alongside the participants, increases one’s vulnerability. Sensitively engaging with participants is a personally and ethically demanding process, requiring trustworthiness, highly developed listening skills, and a willingness, when necessary, to let participants be. This can take its toll over time, especially in subject areas involving trauma.

4. Improvisation is an important element in an iterative-reflexive approach to making.

Conducting this research has crystallised for me just how much the practice of iterative-reflexive making relies on improvisation. No doubt there has always been an element of this in my filmmaking, but it has probably been concealed by my faith in chance—in happenstance, serendipity and synchronicity—to which I have tended to attribute the best documentary moments in my work. However, we make our own luck, and it is through finding myself gripped by the desire to shake up habitual ways of doing things, prompted by a new, self-reflexive awareness, that I have realised the importance of acting in the moment.

Utilising improvisation as a skill, rather than an excuse for lack of preparation, involves risk and discomfort, both of which are conditions for successful artistic endeavour in any field. Such recognition marks a freeing-up of my practice, and I have noted occurrences of this during the making of Freedom Stories.

5. Performing the necessary reflection that constitutes the ongoing, personal review of one’s filmmaking is a mode of reflexive ethical practice.
Simultaneously conducting practice while participating in self-reflexive thinking and review changes both the thinking and the practice. *Freedom Stories* contains examples of this process in action, some of which I have discussed. In addition to participants, I am also represented in the resulting film(s) as undergoing change. As already noted, in MacDougall’s perception of the deeply reflexive nature of the documentary:

The author is no longer to be sought outside the work, for the work must be understood as including the author … the “author” is in fact in many ways an artifact of the work (MacDougall 1998, p. 89).

In the case of *Freedom Stories*, the work seems to present me as attentive, caring and supportive—a persona maintained throughout, and which is reinforced by the narration I have written and performed. Watching the films, I recognise myself as if at my best, but in reality this constitutes a model of the ‘me’ I aspire to, rather than the ‘me’ I actually am. The Steve Thomas of *Freedom Stories* is undoubtedly a more consistent and ethical figure than in real life.

However, the self-reflexive analysis of me that is readable in this written thesis, *is* more partial and conditional, revealing doubts and anxieties about some of the ethical dilemmas I found myself in, the decisions I made, and the practical difficulties of taking a collaborative approach to my practice. As indicated, in future I would like to incorporate a better sense of a provisional, evolving filmmaker/person in the product itself.

In this research, the keeping of a Production Journal, along with re-examination of the rushes and iterations of the films, was the basis for analysing my practice. Whether or not other practitioners are aiming to produce a written thesis, I recommend the keeping of a Production Journal as a useful tool in reflexively reviewing one’s evolving practice.

As a final word in this thesis then, I am not contending that my approach is unique, as it shares much in common with documentary makers, and the documentary tradition, around the world. What I hope this account has done is open a window onto contemporary documentary making, as it happens on the ground, and in opposition to what is currently referred to as ‘factual content’.
Furthermore, I contend that my research has confirmed the viability of the application of ideas developed around collaboration in delivering an ethical practice, greater transparency, and what might be called a ‘redemptive aesthetic’. The latter calls on audiences, through the performance of the Freedom Stories documentary work’s formal attributes (of self-reflexivity, transparency, etc.) to engage in a deeper empathy with what really matters, that is the life experience of the people whose ‘freedom stories’ are explored. For these are freedom stories in two senses—on the one hand, the films offer audiences a glimpse into the lives of refugees in Australia, and, on the other, offers its participants, including the filmmaker, freedom from the kind of bad faith that is too often common practice in mainstream factual television and filmmaking.

103 The term originated from John Hughes (2016, pers. comm., 4 November).
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Appendix A

Freedom Stories Participants

Below are thumbnail pictures and brief backgrounds of the main participants in the Freedom Stories feature and shorts, roughly in order of appearance. It may be helpful for readers of the thesis to refer to these descriptors as a reminder of who’s who.

Feature Participants:

MUSTAFA JAWADI is a motor mechanic in Canberra. After fleeing Afghanistan at the age of 10, he and his family were detained on Nauru for three years, where Mustafa’s younger brother AMIR was born. After their release, they spent three more years on temporary protection visas (known as TPVs).

SHAFIQ MONIS is a housepainter and visual artist living in Melbourne. He spent a year in the Woomera detention centre at the age of 31 and then four years on a TPV. He was reunited with his family after ten years apart and, at the time of filming, his daughter MAHDIYA was studying media and journalism at university.

REYHANA AKHY works as a case officer at the Migrant Resource Centre in Adelaide. She and her family escaped from Afghanistan and were detained in the Woomera detention centre and then placed on TPVs. At the time of filming, her daughter MARIAM was studying criminology at university.

AMIR JAVAN works in real estate in North Sydney. After leaving Iran at the age of 27, he spent more than four years in the Curtin and Baxter detention centres prior to his release by the High Court of Australia. While in detention, Amir befriended PARVIZ AVESTA, who was a teenager and also from Iran. Parviz now owns a tiling business in Melbourne.
SHERI SHOARI is a single mother with three sons, including ALI who has cerebral palsy. After arriving from Iran they were held in the Curtain and Baxter detention centres for three years before settling in Adelaide. Sheri’s youngest son, HAMID, was 10 at the time and joined the Australian army at 16, while the oldest, MOHAMMAD, was 14 and has studied psychology and philosophy at university.

ARIF FAYAZI runs a construction company in outer Melbourne. He spent ten months in the Woomera detention centre at the age of 31, and nearly six years on a TPV before his wife and surviving son were able to join him. They have another son, born here. Arif is a senior member of the Afghan community.

AOHAM AL-DUJAYLI is a primary school teacher and, at the time of filming, managed the IT program at her school. After fleeing Iraq in 2000, she and her family found themselves in the Port Hedland detention centre and then on TPVs for several years. She recently completed a Masters in Education.

JAMILA AHMADI was 7 years old when she and her family arrived from Afghanistan. They were detained in the Woomera detention centre and then spent three years on TPVs. At the time of filming, Jamila was doing a double degree in International and Development Studies at the University of Adelaide.
**Shorts Participants:**

**DR AAMER SULTAN** is an experienced medical practitioner based in Sydney. Trained in Iraq, he was detained for over three years in the Villawood detention centre. Aamer was awarded a Human Rights Medal for his research into the effects of long-term detention while he was himself a detainee.

**AMIN SHERZAD** owns a tow truck delivering cars for scrap to Afghan wreckers in outer Melbourne for export to the Middle East. Amin was one of some 400 asylum seekers rescued by the MV Tampa and was detained on Nauru for over two years. He has a wife and baby girl.

**FERIAL AL KHIL KHALI** is a settlement worker at the Migrant Resource Centre in Adelaide. After fleeing Iraq, she and her children were detained in the Woomera detention centre and then placed on TPVs. Ferial’s daughter **FATIN** has followed her example into social work.

**MICHAEL ABOUJUNDI** is the Residents’ Advocacy Officer on the housing commission estate where he lives in Melbourne. He is from Syria and spent five months in the Woomera detention centre and four years on a TPV. He has a strong relationship with his Australian ‘mum’ **SYLVIA**, who lives next door.

**MOHSEN ZAND** is a poet, musician and photographer who fled Iran at the age of 28, and was detained for four years in the Perth, Port Hedland and Villawood detention centres. He lives in Sydney where he plays the santur and performs with his band Ember, as well as working to help other asylum seekers.
NAJAF MAZARI is a rugmaker, and is the founder of the Masawat Development Fund. He was detained in the Woomera detention centre and spent four years on a TPV before his wife and daughter were able to join him. Najaf runs a rug shop in Melbourne, is a published author, and fundraises for community facilities in Afghanistan.
Appendix B

Freedom Stories Timeline

The table below summarises the project timeline and chronology of progress over 4.5 years:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAGE</th>
<th>CONTENT</th>
<th>FINANCE</th>
<th>TIMELINE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRE-PRODUCTION</td>
<td>Concept Research  &lt;br&gt; Find Participants  &lt;br&gt; Write treatment</td>
<td>Applic to SA Special Doc Fund for production funding</td>
<td>Sept 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Applic to SA for development funding</td>
<td>Rejected Nov 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Applic to FV for development funding</td>
<td>Successful Feb 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shoot &amp; Edit Trailer with 7 participants</td>
<td>Applic to SBS TV for production funding</td>
<td>May 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16’ Trailer &amp; new Treatment completed</td>
<td></td>
<td>Rejected June 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PhD started</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sept 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ongoing research to find more participants</td>
<td>Registered with DAF and ACF for philanthropy</td>
<td>Oct 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Established Advisory Panel</td>
<td>Feb 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1st substantial philanthropic grant received</td>
<td>Mar 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Jun 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRODUCTION</td>
<td>Shooting begins</td>
<td><strong>2 YEARS UP</strong></td>
<td>Sept 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PhD Confirmation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Feb 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shooting completed</td>
<td><strong>3 YEARS UP</strong></td>
<td>Sep 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mar 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POST-PRODUCTION</td>
<td>Ingestion/Transcribing begins</td>
<td>Jan 2014</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Editing begins</td>
<td></td>
<td>Feb 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Editing stops (no funds)</td>
<td>Post-Production grants received</td>
<td>Apr 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Editing resumes</td>
<td></td>
<td>May 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1st Rough cut completed (4hrs 15min)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jun 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2nd Rough cut completed (2hrs 15 mins)</td>
<td><strong>4 YEARS UP</strong></td>
<td>Aug 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rough Cut consultancy with Participants</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sep 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fine cut completed</td>
<td></td>
<td>Nov 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grade/Mix, etc. completed</td>
<td></td>
<td>Dec 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writing of PhD Thesis begins</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mar 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feature premieres at Sydney Film Festival</td>
<td></td>
<td>Apr 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Completion of series of 6 Shorts</td>
<td><strong>5 YEARS UP</strong></td>
<td>June 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sep 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>June 2016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

*Freedom Stories – A Shooting Manifesto*

March 2013

**MY APPROACH TO THE FILM**

*Freedom Stories* is a doco (or docos) for wide distribution that will mix observational filming, interviews (i.e. conversations), archive and collaborative ‘events’ (i.e. opportunities for participants to do things they may otherwise not do).

It is also part of my PhD (by creative project and thesis) and there are several aspects related to this.

One is that I am examining issues around transparency in filmmaking, that is to say, for example, the role of the filmmaker in relationship to participants, how the film itself is affected by those relationships and whether or how those relationships should or might be apparent in the finished film.

Secondly the ‘research’ element of the PhD involves exploring the processes of making the film, from both my perspective and that of participants. In other words, for example, looking at what kind of experience participants have, how they influence or feel able to influence the course of the filming, why they want to be involved and whether their motivation changes over time.

Thirdly, an important aim of the film is to find commonalities with ‘refugees’ rather than focusing on differences, which is what the media usually do. So I am looking for connections with people as much as wanting to hear about their struggles and what they’ve been through. Such connections might be via the work they do or other aspects of their everyday lives, things that have no direct connection with them being ‘refugees’. They will be personal connections (hopefully with universal resonances) that I will be alert to uncovering as we go along.

Fourthly, I want to develop a film style which is more observational (meaning vérité observational or interactive, rather than ‘fly on the wall’ observational) than ‘TV’ and which gets closer to the ‘lived experience’ of participants. This kind of approach will reflect more strongly my conversational style of interviewing, which has developed over the years.

So…

**SOME PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR SHOOTING**

1. When to button on and off.
Usually (this is the TV approach) a cinematographer’s natural tendency is to button on when the ‘action’ of a sequence or interview starts and button off as soon as it’s over. I would like you to be open to keeping the camera rolling because it is precisely at the beginning and end of filmed sequences that I and the participant(s) might discuss the processes of filming or have some informal interaction, which ordinarily would be of no importance but in this case might well be.

I may tend to get absorbed in this because the ‘action’ and discussing the ‘action’ are all one to me, and I may not give clear signs to you to keep rolling, although that may be what I’m hoping you’re doing! So I guess this is partly about you understanding my purposes in filming and taking the initiative to roll or keep rolling, or even ask (while you are rolling) whether you should keep rolling or not (because I also don’t want to be shooting willy nilly). Doing this may provide valuable insights and I am not at all afraid of the filmmaking process being seen in the film if it’s relevant, or used in discussing the making of the film in my written thesis.

Note: Keeping the camera rolling is nothing to do with rolling it without participants’ knowledge or if they have asked that it be switched off. I will make sure that each participant understands when we are rolling and why, and that they also have control over this.

2. A conversational approach

The above also applies to my conversational approach. I might engage someone in conversation while they are being filmed working or doing some other activity. Such chat is likely to be related to what they are doing but may (again) wander off to a discussion about process or something else completely. At times I might offer my own opinions or anecdotes. At such moments I would like you to resist the temptation to button off or reframe, change angle etc. and keep filming unless I indicate otherwise.

Of course this means that my voice needs to be heard, so that it can be used in the film or transcribed for written analysis. I am happy (in fact prefer) to sound off-camera but do want to be clearly heard – so we have to work out the best microphone arrangement for this in each situation.

This also means avoiding the TV convention that the interviewer’s voice won’t be heard and thus using my questions or contributions as an opportunity to change focus or frame size etc. I am not asking you to turn the camera on me in such instances however, but to keep filming the participant.

3. An observational approach

As I said earlier, I am looking for a shooting style that is more observational than ‘TV with
cutaways’. This may mean longer, single takes. I am not averse at all to using cutaways in editing but I would ask that you shoot situations as steadily as possible and reframe or refocus as gently as you can, rather than using crash zooms and sudden movements etc., so that there is the option of using footage relatively uncut. Again, in the interests of transparency I have no problem with using shifts of angle, or focus or frame size in the film – as long as they are not too drastic or sudden and thus feel like ‘bad’ camera work.

It would be nice sometimes to use longer single takes which are more human, natural and connected to the space and time of the event being filmed as well as more aligned with what I called before the ‘lived experience’ of participants.

I would also like to avoid using privileged camera angles as much as possible, ie. camera positions that usually wouldn’t be occupied in everyday life or experience (these are mainly used in drama).

Furthermore, I would like to shoot interviews relatively loosely, so that the surrounding context of interviewees (ie. background) is indicated. I would also prefer to avoid the use of zooms where possible, for example the slow zoom in to a close-up for dramatic effect (ie. in TV conventions, as the emotion increases the camera moves closer).

And as already indicated I would like to avoid too much cutting during editing as this will help reflect a more natural view of the world and participants’ experiences.

4. Steve in or out of frame?

There is a further question about whether or not I am to be seen in frame. Normally I would say ‘no’ although, as already discussed, it should be assumed that my voice may be used. However, if for example, a participant is showing me something such as a photograph, pointing something out, or we are walking together, eating a meal or chatting over a cup of tea, then it may be appropriate to frame me in, though not dominantly (whether as part of the action or as a cutaway might be something you will need to decide or discuss with me). On occasion you might have to use your initiative here but generally we should have a chance to discuss the options at the time.

Of course this is all a bit theoretical but I hope you get a sense of what I am trying to achieve so that you can feel a shared sense of ownership in how the film is shot and free to take informed initiatives of your own.

ST. 15/3/13
27/7/13 – Shoot with Arif at new HQ of Master Tradies Association (continued...)

We were offered lunch and the other guys were great – very welcoming and cooperative. They were all there and other guys kept dropping in during the day, including Arif’s older son who’d been at language school (but not filmed).

This is the first time I’ve worked with RP (camera) and he is old school but interesting – more of a camera purist than the others. As he commented after, some of the best moments occurred when the camera wasn’t running (of course, always the way in documentary) – eg the discussion among the partners about how long they’d been on their respective boats – one 3 days, Arif 10 days, another 35 days – all done so matter of fact, as if comparing cricket scores! Arif also commented that no risk he’s taking with this new business venture would be worse than the one he took getting on the boat. I tried to get that from him with the camera running later but of course it wasn’t as good or spontaneous.

Robin also commented that with hand held stuff he had tried not to disturb spontaneous moments - such as Atoloph picking up the tambura and playing but against a window, which was problematic for lighting. He mentioned how the Naysa brothers claimed they would never disturb or rearrange the ‘action’ for technical reasons and he tries to work with the same idea, because if you do rearrange it then it becomes a performance. The tambura playing arose from me seeing the thing propped in a corner and suggesting Robin get a cutaway of it, then Atoloph noticed and asked if we’d like him to play, explaining to camera that the guys need moments of relaxation during a working day.

Robin also commented that when Arif was giving us the tour of the building he could sense that I was ambivalent about being in the frame and that sometimes you seemed to want to be in it and other times not! so he tried to work with what he thought I was signalling by my movements. I replied that yes, I am ambivalent and perhaps should get over that and just be in it in those sorts of situations!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JOURNAL TEXT</th>
<th>READING NOTES</th>
<th>THEMES/ISSUES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>high cost to get where I am today*.</td>
<td>(but see Arif’s response at RC screening).</td>
<td>TM: ethics of pushing to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27/7/13 – Shoot with Arif at new HQ of Master Tradies Association (continued...).</td>
<td></td>
<td>TM = Theme/Issue related to me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We were offered lunch and the other guys were great – very welcoming and cooperative. They were all there and other guys kept dropping in during the day, including Arif’s older son who’d been at language school (but not filmed).</td>
<td>In fact my feeling that we hadn’t got the best moments well and fears about lighting were in hindsight unfounded. In fact the hidden gremlin was the v low sound level which caused difficulties in post and which I hadn’t twigged (as RP was controlling). Arif’s interview is among the strongest in the completed film.</td>
<td>TP = related to participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is the first time I’ve worked with RP (camera) and he is old school but interesting – more of a camera purist than the others. As he commented after, some of the best moments occurred when the camera wasn’t running (of course, always the way in documentary) – eg the discussion among the partners about how long they’d been on their respective boats – one 3 days, Arif 10 days, another 35 days – all done so matter of fact, as if comparing cricket scores! Arif also commented that no risk he’s taking with this new business venture would be worse than the one he took getting on the boat. I tried to get that from him with the camera running later but of course it wasn’t as good or spontaneous.</td>
<td>Film as catalyst. If I hadn’t spotted the instrument it wouldn’t have been played (and in the film it supplies the soundtrack which builds up to Arif’s interview).</td>
<td>TM/TP = related to both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robin also commented that with hand held stuff he had tried not to disturb spontaneous moments - such as Atoloph picking up the tambura and playing but against a window, which was problematic for lighting. He mentioned how the Naysa brothers claimed they would never disturb or rearrange the ‘action’ for technical reasons and he tries to work with the same idea, because if you do rearrange it then it becomes a performance. The tambura playing arose from me seeing the thing propped in a corner and suggesting Robin get a cutaway of it, then Atoloph noticed and asked if we’d like him to play, explaining to camera that the guys need moments of relaxation during a working day.</td>
<td>I never really resolved that ambivalence but it doesn’t come thro or seem to matter in the completed film. Good working relationship with RCP important in this regard. Interestingly, participants are always addressing me but have no idea whether I’m in the frame or not so no issue for them!</td>
<td>TM = fraught nature of f/making process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robin also commented that when Arif was giving us the tour of the building he could sense that I was ambivalent about being in the frame and that sometimes you seemed to want to be in it and other times not! so he tried to work with what he thought I was signalling by my movements. I replied that yes, I am ambivalent and perhaps should get over that and just be in it in those sorts of situations!</td>
<td></td>
<td>TM = ‘capturing reality’ vs ‘performance’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| TM/TP = f/making as catalyst |
| TM/TP = improvisation |
| TM: ambivalence re my role in/out of frame. |
Appendix E

Coding the Production Journal – A fuller account

The coding process

As referred to in Chapter Three, I kept a Production Journal to note events, issues, dilemmas and difficulties that came up from day to day during the making of Freedom Stories, and made a reflexive analysis of the Journal, using a simple methodology borrowed from Grounded and Reader-Response Theories (see Chapter One – Research Methodology).

I re-read the Journal entries and made parallel notes against them concerning any further reflections that occurred to me in hindsight. At the same time, I tagged each entry with the themes (or issues) that were apparent in the material. I also noted whether the entry seemed relevant to myself as the filmmaker, to the participants, or to both (identified respectively as ‘F’, ‘P’ and ‘F&P’ in the tables below). The reader-response notes amounted to some 38,000 words and I introduced around 60 separate theme ‘tags’.

Finally I grouped the themes into broader categories and added up the occurrences (or mentions) of each, for consideration.

A sample page of the Production Journal, with reader-response comments and tags in a three-column layout, is attached as Appendix D.

At the outset, it must be acknowledged that the entries made in the Journal, and the themes and issues noted, reflect my personal interests, prejudices and biases, along with the research questions I was formulating in the process. However, this being a reflexive investigation, I trust I am reasonably aware of those biases. For example, as my own concerns are very much about ethics and the filmmaker-participant relationship it would be surprising if entries concerning these did not figure significantly. What is important to appreciate is that, as Karen O’Reilly points out with regard to ethnographic studies, ‘coding is not content analysis’:

It is crucial to consider the purpose of coding. It is not so that the data can be minutely explored in search of instances of phenomena; it does not amount to counting occurrences or utterances. Data were collected by someone who
decided what to write down and when, how often to note something, and when to ignore it. Field notes are not direct records of events and interview transcripts are not all there was to say on a subject. Something that happened numerous times may never have been recorded, while something else that happened a few times was written about at length. This does not make the latter more important. Using a computer to count how many words are said on a certain topic or how many times something happened will simply count those things the ethnographer thought relevant to note or to code into categories as the data were sorted (O'Reilly 2009, p. 35).

According to O’Reilly, content analysis is more about the close examination of the data that goes on in the process of ascribing coding, line by line—a painstaking and time consuming task. That close examination is of value in itself, bringing into one’s consciousness relevant themes, issues, events, thoughts and ideas that assist in evaluating the process under investigation.

**Summary of themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Themes</th>
<th>Mentions</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Ethics</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Filmmaker-Participant Relationship</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Vulnerability</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Motivation/Purpose</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Improvisation/Chance</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Filmmaking philosophy</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Filmmaker role</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Participant agency/Initiative</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Reflexivity</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Inter-culturality/Gender</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Consent/Veto</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>721</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Frequency of mentions of main themes in the Production Journal.
Table 1 summarises the frequency of references in the Journal to the main thematic categories that I assigned. In total, there were 721 references to 58 themes in the combined Journal/Reader-Response document. When grouped into 12 main thematic categories, around half of these (52%) fell into the three most mentioned, which were: Ethics, the Filmmaker-Participant Relationship, and Vulnerability.

As briefly discussed in Chapter Three, what stands out in this initial analysis is that at least one issue traditionally regarded as being problematic, that of Consent, does not seem to have been influential or problematic in my day to day practice of film-making. Only 3% of all mentions (21 out of 721) referred to issues of Consent (including Veto).

This indicates that either issues around Consent were not a significant factor in the filmmaking process, or I did not regard them as important. As already stated, I regard the fact that consent cropped up as an issue so infrequently as indicating that it was taken care of by methodology during the filmmaking process. Those mentions of consent that did occur were primarily concerned with questions about its meaning, or the design of an appropriate release form. Also, mentions of veto were confined to its importance, rather than issues about it.

The most frequently mentioned thematic category was Ethics, making up almost a fifth (19%) of all mentions. This was no surprise. However, an initial scan of the themes (reported in more detail below) within the Ethics category indicates that concerns under this heading were widespread across the entire filmmaking process. As already noted, the frequency with which ethical questions came up during editing, rather than filming, is a finding that came as a surprise.

The other most commonly mentioned thematic categories were: the Filmmaker-Participant relationship (including Collaboration, Negotiation, Communication and Trust), and Vulnerability (including Emotional Investment, Anxiety and Stress). These together made up a third (33%) of all thematic mentions. The relative frequency of mentions of the Filmmaker-Participant relationship is to be expected if one assumes the primacy of collaboration in the kind of documentary making under discussion. While confirming that notions such as negotiation and trust are central to my filmmaking practice, the frequency of mentions related to vulnerability within the filmmaking
relationship indicates that feelings of exposure and susceptibility (on both sides) are also an important factor.

Ethics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ETHICS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>F&amp;P</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethics/Responsibility in Prod</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(86%)</td>
<td>(0%)</td>
<td>(14%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics/Responsibility in Post</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>113 (84%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(81%)</td>
<td>(3%)</td>
<td>(16%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTALS</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>134 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(82%)</td>
<td>(2%)</td>
<td>(16%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Breakdown of mentions of Ethics/Responsibility in the Production Journal.

Table 2 shows that 84% of all mentions related to Ethics or Ethical Responsibility occurred during post-production. As noted in the body of this thesis, despite an acknowledged tendency to hyper-awareness of ethics in editing because of my experience with Hope, I was surprised by the degree of this imbalance, although, of course, a lot more time is spent editing than shooting. The fact that ethical issues were recorded as occurring throughout the film production process is important to note. There is no abatement in this regard.

A closer look at the particular themes noted in the Journal under ‘Ethics’, reveals that predominant concerns during filming were related to the following (not in any order of frequency):

- Filmmaker’s responsibilities
- Interviewing
- Dealing with past events
• Decision making and occurrences of chance
• Aesthetic choices

As themes/issues related to the Filmmaker-Participant relationship were recorded separately to Ethics, it is reasonable to assume that concerns about Collaboration, which would also have ethical relevance regarding questions around Negotiation and Trust, could be added to the list above.

During post-production, as well as those already mentioned, themes and issues specific to editing emerged that can be grouped as follows (again, not in any particular order):

• Representation
• Absence of participants
• Transparency
• Imperatives of storytelling
• Aesthetics (including editing devices, music and narration)
• Technological possibilities
• Developments in participants’ lives after filming
• Cutting/sacrificing material and participants
• Audience

It is also interesting to note that, on average, 82% of all mentions, during both production and post-production, were felt to apply to me only and not to participants. Whilst perhaps this is not surprising given the obvious bias in recording my own concerns, it does indicate that I put a great deal of onus for ethical practice on myself.

The filmmaker-participant relationship

Table 3 below shows that I felt two-thirds (66%) of mentions of issues/themes concerning the filmmaker-participant relationship applied to both parties. This is not surprising, given that by definition this is a two-way relationship. Compared to mentions of ethics, for example, the figure is roughly four times higher (only 16% of ethics mentions were thought to apply to both parties). This reinforces, as noted above, that
questions of ethics most often felt a matter of responsibility for me, rather than participants, whereas questions of relationships felt more mutual.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FILMMAKER-PARTICIPANT RELATIONSHIP</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>F&amp;P</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration/ Negotiation</td>
<td>6 (11%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>50 (89%)</td>
<td>56 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>17 (71%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>7 (29%)</td>
<td>24 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>5 (24%)</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
<td>15 (71%)</td>
<td>21 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocation (mutual obligation)</td>
<td>10 (53%)</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
<td>8 (42%)</td>
<td>19 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language (ESL)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (100%)</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transparency</td>
<td>3 (60%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (40%)</td>
<td>5 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTALS</strong></td>
<td><strong>41 (32%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>2 (2%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>84 (66%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>127 (100%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Breakdown of mentions of the Filmmaker/Participant Relationship in the Production Journal.

The table also shows that almost half of the themes/issues mentioned (44%) fell under the heading of Collaboration/Negotiation and the rest were fairly evenly distributed among Communication (19%), Trust (16%) and Reciprocation/Mutual Obligation (15%). However, issues of Communication were felt to be much less applicable to both parties.
(29%) and more applicable to me (71%) than in the cases of Collaboration/Negotiation and Trust (89% and 71% to both, versus 11% and 24% to me). This indicates the degree of responsibility I put on myself to communicate well.

Interestingly, the balance of onus was pretty even regarding Reciprocation (42% both and 53% me), indicating that generally both parties engaged in ‘giving back’, which is itself perhaps a sign of successful collaboration.

As already mentioned in Chapter Three, more detailed analysis of my data shows that 80% of all mentions of the Filmmaker-Participant Relationship occurred during filming rather than editing. This is consistent with the fact that filming involves intensive face-to-face contact, compared to the more occasional consultation during editing. Interestingly though, the frequency of mentions of Trust during post-production was significant (38%), indicating the importance of participants feeling able to trust me during that period when they have minimal involvement with the process.

**Vulnerability**

The third highest thematic category of Journal mentions after Ethics and the Filmmaker-Participant was that of Vulnerability, including Anxiety and Stress, which amounted to 15% (106) of all mentions (see Table 1). I have combined the latter into one category because they are generally interrelated.

Table 4 below shows that while mentions of Anxiety/Stress totalled slightly more than Vulnerability, a notable difference between the two is that Vulnerability was distributed relatively evenly between filmmaker and participants (65% and 50%), while Anxiety/Stress was predominantly ascribed to the filmmaker (86% to 16%). As already discussed, while this result cannot be read as saying anything meaningful about the participants, it indicates a significant degree of ongoing anxiety/stress felt on my part, reflecting the high level of demands made by the collaborative filmmaking process on ‘the director’ (or at least the degree of responsibility I put on myself).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VULNERABILITY</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>F&amp;P</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerability</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>40 (38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(50%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(35%)</td>
<td>(15%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety/Stress</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>49 (46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(84%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(14%)</td>
<td>(2%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant trauma</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(33%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(42%)</td>
<td>(25%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant family issues</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(100%)</td>
<td>(0%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTALS</strong></td>
<td><strong>65</strong></td>
<td><strong>31</strong></td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
<td><strong>106</strong> (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Breakdown of mentions of Vulnerability (including Anxiety/Stress) in the Production Journal.

Although filmmaker stress is not an issue that I explore further in this thesis, there is anecdotal evidence that it is an area worthy of further study. In the survey conducted with professional, American documentary makers by Aufderheide, Jaszi and Chandra, for example, many respondents felt unsupported in their practice. While arguing for ‘situational, case-by-case ethical decisions’, they ‘daily felt the lack of clarity and standards in ethical practice. They also lacked support for ethical deliberation under typical work pressures’ (Aufderheide, Jaszi & Chandra 2009, pp. 1–4).

It should be added that mentions of Vulnerability, Anxiety and Stress were ongoing throughout the filmmaking process, although particular concerns arose at particular times. For example, early in the project, I made numerous mentions related to whether people would agree to participate or not, while in the latter stages there were dilemmas about representation and which participants might be excluded from the final film.
Filmmaking approach

The thematic categories in 5th, 6th and 7th place in Table 1 are:

- Filmmaking Philosophy (52 mentions = 7%)
- Role of Filmmaker (43 mentions = 6%)
- Improvisation/Chance (52 mentions = 7%)

When combined, these can be taken to refer to my overall Filmmaking Approach. Together they make up 20% (147) of all thematic mentions in the Production Journal, roughly equal to the most mentioned thematic category of Ethics (134 = 19%).

On consideration, such a high frequency of mentions is no surprise because, firstly, from the personal and philosophical approach to practice all else follows. That stance determines my approach to ethics, relationships, aesthetics, performance, etc. Secondly, in effect, the Journal constitutes a self-reflexive analysis of my filmmaking practice. It is therefore unsurprising that the Journal entries are slanted towards the nature of that practice as well as particular questions about ethics that arise from it.

Under the category of Filmmaking Philosophy, a variety of questions came up, predominantly concerning the practical consequences of my beliefs about collaboration and film-as-catalyst. In other words, having made certain assumptions about the ethical basis of my filmmaking approach, I then had to make day-to-day decisions as to how best to put those into practice. This ‘working out’ is the focus of Chapters Four and Five of this thesis.

Under the category of Role of Filmmaker, most issues/themes concerned the practical skills and sensitivities required to achieve a successful, collaborative approach. In examining the sub-category tagged ‘Personal Skills’, the requirements that repeatedly occurred were: persistence, patience, perseverance, resilience, flexibility, understanding, sensitivity, determination, openness and attention. It is clear that, in the kind of filmmaking I am describing, one needs to cultivate such personal skills, as well as artistic ones.

Finally, as far as Improvisation/Chance goes, the mentions of this in my Production Journal indicate a growing awareness on my part, of the important roles of improvisation
and chance (or synchronicity and serendipity) in my filmmaking approach. I reflect on this at various points in the written thesis.
Appendix F

FLYING CARPET FILMS

Release Form

Documentary Working Title: ‘FREEDOM STORIES’ – A Multi-Platform Documentary

1. I agree with the nature and purpose of the documentary project as explained to me by the Producer (Steve Thomas FLYING CARPET FILMS). I have also been given the opportunity to view the intended edited content of the project.

2. I grant the Producer the right to use visual and/or audio recordings of me in the documentary.

3. I understand that it is not intended that the project should make a financial profit and that any returns received will be used firstly to cover necessary expenses and then to assist asylum seeker organisations. I therefore agree that I am not entitled to any payment for my participation in this project.

4. I understand that all copyright in the documentary belongs to Flying Carpet Films.

5. I agree that Flying Carpet Films and its licensees and distributors may use edited parts of the material which has been recorded of me in the project and in any program developed from it for the full period of the copyright and in all media throughout the world. I understand that this material which has been recorded of me cannot be used in another unrelated program without my written permission during my lifetime.

6. I also give my permission for my picture and/or voice to be used in any promotional material which relates to publicity of the project.

SIGNED: .............................................

NAME (block capitals): ..............................................................

ADDRESS: ........................................................................

......................................................................................

TELEPHONE: ....................................

Signed by PRODUCER .......................... DATE:.........................
Appendix G

Freedom Stories Feature Credits

Very special thanks to those who shared their stories:
Mustafa & Amir Jawadi
Shafiq & Mahdiya Monis
Reyhana and Mariam Akhy
Amir Javan
Sheri, Mohammad, Hamid & Ali Shoari
Arif Fayazi
Alana Elias
Jamila Ahmadi
Parviz Avesta

Director, Narrator, Co-Producer
STEVE THOMAS

Producer
LISA HORLER

Editor & Screen Designer
URI MIZRAHI

Composer
BRETT APLIN

Cinematography
PHILIP BULL
JENNI MEANEY
ROBIN PLUNKETT
PETER ZAKHAROV

Additional Camera
JAMES ARNEMAN
MAX DAVIS
PETER BUTZ
LARA DAMIANI
JOSE ANDRADE

Research Assistance
VESSAL SAFAEI
MARSHA EMERMAN
NATALIE CUNNINGHAM

Transcriptions
MISS TRANSCRIPTION
KATE ROGERS, KATHRYN GOLDIE, NEESHA BREMMER
Accounting
NOGA MIZRAHI

Development Trailer Editor
LUCY PAPLINSKA

Editing Assistance
PETER JACOBSEN

Post Production Facilities
BLUE ROSE - U & A EDITING

DDP Studios Melbourne:
Post Producer
HALEY GILLIES
Colourist
BRETT MANSON
Online Editor
GEORGE AWBURN
DCP Mastering
JOEL O'BRIEN
Conform Editor
JOHN KERRON

Soundwaves:
Sound Editors
FRANK LIPSON
PETAR RISTIC
ERIN McKIMM
Foley
JOHN SIMPSON (FEET’N’FRAMES)
Sound Mixer
ANDREW MCGRATH

Freedom Stories Advisory Panel:
Matthew Albert, Sister Brigid Arthur,
Julian Burnside AO QC, Kate Durham,
Rt Hon Malcolm Fraser AC CH,
Mustafa Najib, Prof Louise Newman AM,
Robert Sessions, Shahin Shafaei,
Fionn Skiotis, Assoc Prof Suresh Sundram,
Arnold Zable, Mike Zafirooulos AM JP

'Welcome to Woomera' (2004) excerpt &
Woomera Detention Centre Footage
Archive supplied by the NFSA Film Australia Collection

'Hope' (2008) excerpt
Courtesy Flying Carpet Films - www.hopedocumentary.com.au

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Woomera protest footage (2002)
Courtesy Bill Runting, Rockhopper Productions

Extract from 'Kan Yama Kan' (2002)
Courtesy Robin Laurie

Stock Footage
Alessandro Zavattero and www.alexfreestockvideo.com
Sunrise footage courtesy Supranaut - www.beachfrontbroll.com

Archival Photos
National Library of Australia,
Dean Sewell, Dr Caroline Fleahy,
Wayne England, Peter Russell,
Greg Uhlhorn, The West Australian,
Nic Ellis, Fairfax Syndication

Song
'Not One of Us'
Written by Luke McDermott & Tom Lynch
Performed by SWAP

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Jacqui Everett, First National Regency Realty Chatswood,
Sally Francis, Nicolette Freeman, Ardeshir Gholipour,
Annie Grindrod, the Griswolds, Alanna Hector,
Robyn Hughan, John Hughes, Nasrin Hosseini,
Zerghona Jawadi, Jeff Jenkins, Jane Keogh,
Farshid Kheirrollahpour, Louise Kuramoto, Katy Marriner,
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Vessal Safaei, Rosie Scott, Shahin Shafaei,
Leea Skiotis, VCA School of Film & TV, Steve Warne,
Victorian Information Technology Teachers Association
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Film Victoria

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RE Ross Trust
Scanlon Foundation
Victorian Multicultural Commission
Faculty of the VCA & MCM, University of Melbourne
Documentary Australia Foundation
Creative Partnerships Australia

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www.freedomstoriesproject.com

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Author/s: Thomas, Stephen

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File Description: Written Thesis

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