

## IN PASSING

Places are *made*, given meaning, by the people who live in them and the relationships they make. Agnes Heller (1984) characterises home as that fixed point from which we venture into our everyday encounters, and to which we return. If 'home' is a sleeping bag on a friend's floor, or a sofa, but not for too long in case the hospitality wears thin, the 'experiencing self' is destabilised and identity undermined. On return to something approximating 'home', individuals have to re-build their knowledge and experience of what 'home' means. Doreen Massey asks whose identity we refer to when we call a place 'home'; whose home is it, with its supposed supports of 'stability, oneness and security' (Massey, 1994: 167). In their response to the local cultures they inhabit and from which they draw their sense of Self, Dan, Charlie, Izak, and Kelly acknowledge a complex web of relations embedded in their understanding of place, at once known and familiar, but also imagined. Any sense of community is seen, 'in terms of notions of commonality, shared values or solidarity in particular contexts' (Stewart & Strathern, 2003: 4). Home is seen through the prism of a fractured and partial narrative. This sense of Self, evident in their stories, reflects and refracts the ruptures in the world of their immediate family and the wider social network, geographically and temporally located. Burkitt articulates how

The self is not separate from its engagement with the world, *but is constituted by the activities it performs*. We make ourselves as we engage in transforming the material, cultural and interpersonal world. [italics in original] (Burkitt, 2008:55)

We discuss seeking shelter, about the Foyer, their temporary home, as an advocate and agency for change, at times painfully slow, often with breaks and ruptures along the way. Their resilience is a key factor in this process.

As we work through their fragmented narratives that question assumptions about image, circulate around categories of identity, challenge received notions of belonging, we understand again how the uncertainty of ordinary lives can be shaped, fashioned into the narrative framework of the documentary film. However, documentary structures lived experience, but it is 'not real life'. We know that

What is regarded as 'real', by whom, and how it is represented is unstable, dynamic, and ever-changing, precisely because realism is irrevocably tied to the specifics of time and place, or 'moment'. (Lay, 2002: 8)

In *Passing*, reflected and refracted through lived experience, draws on representational conventions to set up questions about the nature of the 'real'. Moving between those 'codes and conventions' within which the documentary is understood, we worked with the young people to find ways that enabled them to articulate concerns about perceptions of youth, help shape the raw material, the form of the final edit. Izak's monologue recorded as an interview, is confessional, reflects uncertainty as he articulates his changing sense of identity; Dan's questioning is challenging, confrontational in his use of stereotypes, directed straight to the viewer; Kelly's quiet reflection and silence is eloquent; Dan and Charlie, as young parents, challenge opinions as they emerge into adulthood. Jodie and Benn's technical inputs mirrored conversations about shared concerns and desires.

Our work requires that we engage with the problematic nature of documentary and its relation to the real, to documentary as an aesthetic, bound up in the 'negotiation between two potentially conflicting factors: the real and its representation' (Bruzzi, 2000:13). Central to this impulse to re-present lived experience is the integrity of the relationship between the filmmaker/s and those being filmed, and an acknowledgement that any notion of 'truth' is

sought through the, 'codes and conventions that have become associated with realism' (Lay, 2002: 7). This relationship is at the core of our practice, of our storytelling.

Fundamental to this process is the involvement of the people being filmed. We listen, allowing experiences to unfold, often not in any ordered sense. We know the value of being guided by the people we work with, as we attempt to tease out the narrative strands of a life. These scattered threads are collected and shaped in the process of editing, a process where those we work with are equally important: they need to have some control too. People may say more than they mean to; we are aware of over-disclosure, of sensitive issues, raw memories re-surfacing in the conversations. So, the video is simply rewound at the end of filming and we look, and listen to what's been said, reflect and sometimes reshoot a half articulated thought. We make an agreement, the same with everyone we work with, to take all edited material back, and talk it through before we move on. Anything too sensitive will be removed. We are mindful that we are working with young people going through transformation in their lives; they may want to leave behind elements of their story, re-work others as they rework their own senses of self and belonging.

Working ethnographically, exploring ideas of what constitutes home, how people view belonging, we attempt to facilitate the co-existence of contradictory strands within the framework of a shared narrative. Because we work ethnographically, the substance of our work evolves over time - the process is essentially messy, but also instinctively developed. We never really know what might be discovered, and recognise that for some researchers, this way of working can seem challenging. Research questions act as a framing mechanism rather than determining content, and can change over time. Ours is an iterative process that relies on instinct and experience, as well as empathy with participants and an acceptance of the complexity, the fluid nature of their lives. Our working method is intended to enable participants to value and articulate their own life experiences, through the film narratives we produce: they are co-authors although we also recognise that this relationship is uneven.

**For reflection:**

Some of the ethical dilemmas our work with marginal groups constantly confronts us with:

- what *are* the editorial decisions we make during the collection process?
- to what extent are participants able to make informed decisions about disclosure during their participation?
- Does the messiness of the process impinge on the value of the end result/product?
- Does our role as researchers, committed to co-authorship, conflict with the impetus to discover and capture a 'good story' or a compelling research theme?
- How much/to what extent can or should researchers assume participants could have a stake in sharing their narratives of marginality?

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