

***Braided Channels: Documentary Voice from an Inter-
disciplinary, Cross-media, Cross-cultural and Practitioner's
Perspective***

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Creative Arts in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Technology, Sydney



Photo courtesy of Guy Fitzhardinge

Volume 1: Dissertation

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Certificate of Authorship/Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of the requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged in the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Trish FitzSimons

Production Note:
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Item One: Documentation of the *Channels* Exhibition *in situ*, including two walkthroughs on DVD, catalogue pamphlets and launch invitation (2002 – 2005).

Item Two: Touchscreen Interactive documentary component of the *Channels of History* exhibition reauthored as a clickable DVD (original 2002, reauthored 2008).

Item Three: ‘Drought’, *Rear Vision*, ABC Radio National program by Annabelle Quince, broadcast 17 and 19 December 2006 with elements of *Braided Channels* oral history archive.

Item Four: Concept Document/Brochure for *Elsies Story* (2005).

Two Concept documents (2006 and 2008), two showreels (2006 and 2008) and a rough montage and selection of rushes (2006) for *Durham Downs: A Pastoral*.

Item Five: Two examples of the transcripts and DVDs of the 27 interviews that make up the underlying *Braided Channels* audio-visual archive: Alice Gorringer’s (2000) being used by Dr Paul Gorecki in support of a Native Title Claim and Edith McFarlane’s (2002), a key source of *Durham Downs: A Pastoral*.

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— **Acronyms and Abbreviations**

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
AFC	Australian Film Commission
AFI	Australian Film Institute
AFTRS	Australian Film, Television & Radio School
AQ	Arts Queensland
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CD	Compact Disc
CDB	Creative Development Branch, Australian Film Commission
Dir.	Director
DVD	Digital Video Disc
DVD ROM	Digital Video Disc: Read Only Memory
EP	Executive Producer
Film Australia	Federal Government's film production unit
FFC	Film Finance Corporation
GFS	Griffith Film School
GU	Griffith University
NFSA	National Film & Sound Archive
NIP	National Interest Program
NMA	National Museum of Australia
PFTC	Pacific Film and Television Commission
Prod.	Producer
QCA	Queensland College of Art (Griffith University)
SBS	Special Broadcasting Service
SBSI	SBS Independent
SPAA	Screen Producer's Association of Australia
SLQ	State Library of Queensland
The Accord	FFC documentary investment agreement with TV networks
UTS	University of Technology, Sydney

Abstract

Braided Channels: Documentary Voice from an inter-disciplinary, cross-media cross-cultural, and practitioner's perspective

Voice is a concept that is a metaphoric proxy for authorship in a wide range of areas of human creativity. In the area of documentary filmmaking, Bill Nichols' conception of voice has been pre-eminent, dating from a 1983 essay 'The Voice of Documentary' that has been frequently republished since. Nichols' essay forms the basis of his even more widely quoted taxonomy of documentary forms. This dissertation argues that Nichols' conception of documentary voice requires revision to take account of shifts in: the forms of documentary and their relation to other cultural formations; the surrounding (cross) cultural politics; and the way that the concept of 'voice' appears when viewed from the perspective of a reflective practitioner rather than from that of a media studies theorist. The work combines elements of both thesis and exegesis to develop a vocabulary of voice to account for the relationship between the voice of the documentary filmmaker and other categories including subjects, audiences and broadcasters. In particular the categories of the ventriloquic, the dialogic and the choric are interrogated and their application considered both in relation to the candidate's work and more widely

Introduction: Voice from an Interdisciplinary Perspective

Channels of History is the name of a social history exhibition that I wrote, directed and curated. It forms a key part of the broader *Braided Channels* creative research project described in greater detail below. Together with other elements of the *Braided Channels* project, *Channels of History* constitutes the major creative practice component presented for examination for my Doctorate of Creative Arts.

This piece of writing frames my practice, making clear its ‘distinct and significant contribution to knowledge’, whilst independently adding to knowledge in the field of documentary theory, with relevance for museology, historiography and visual ethnography. It is neither the exegesis of a single piece of completed research work nor an argument responding to a unitary research question. Rather, it is a knowledge report from a serious, extensive and ongoing process of project-based research that is iterative in nature. The *Braided Channels* project has involved not only various forms of audio-visual-material production, but also a constant process of reading, reflection and writing that has then inflected subsequent iterations of practice. In turn, this practice has informed my contribution to theory. My doctoral research can therefore be described as both ‘practice based’ and ‘practice led’ (Candy 2006). This written dissertation should be considered half of my doctoral work presented for examination. In the section of this introduction where I provide an inventory of my creative work submitted for examination, I also nominate the order in which I would like my work to be perused. But first some background.

As will be discussed in greater detail below, the central metaphor of my creative practice presented for examination is topographical: the visual patterns made by braided river channels in far outback Queensland are used to express the multiple perspectives or pathways by which knowledge in the humanities can be understood. In this theoretical component of my dissertation, by contrast, the central trope is a form of metonymy, in which ‘voice’ is used to speak of human creative agency and subjective expression, although I will also periodically draw on the ‘channels’ metaphor. Many contemporary cultural discourses, including the mainstream media, have made metaphors of voice and other rubrics associated with speech ubiquitous as a way of

discussing forms of human creativity. This piece of writing aims to sculpt in time (to use Tarkovsky's (1986) wonderfully evocative description of cinema) my production process and the influences upon it, using voice as its central trope. It seeks to provide an intellectual genealogy for the works by weaving back and forth between the framing discourses that gave rise to my creative practice and critical analysis of that practice. It further considers the ways that this has come to modify the underlying theory. It is an account of how each iteration of practice and theoretical reflection in the interstices of production has then given rise to — or 'given voice' to — the next iteration of production. This is a process that will extend beyond my enrolment in a Doctorate of Creative Arts without any obvious endpoint because I remain deeply engaged and each outcome feeds the next. My work, however, is presented for examination at this time because the combination of history, theory and practice is sufficiently complete that it is now 'available for critique, appreciation, interpretation, description (and) evaluation' by examiners (Gibson, in Candy 2006 p. 8).

The Channel Country is a huge region in inland Australia, approximately the size of the island of Great Britain but with a contemporary population of only fifteen hundred people. Although technically a desert region, receiving less than 200 millimetres of rainfall per year, the Channel Country is a landscape formed and framed by periodic pulses of water. It is a largely flat, low-lying area that drains whatever rain falls in much of the north of the state of Queensland, forming an inland delta to the usually dry salt lake known as Lake Eyre. Three main river systems — the Georgina, the Diamantina and Cooper's Creek — flow through the Channel Country and form a tangled mass of braided channels that, during the periodic floods that define the region, can reach more than 110 kilometres across.

I had lived in Brisbane for almost seven years before I could confidently have placed on a map this part of the country that in fact constitutes a quarter of the state of Queensland. I came to this region via Pam Watson's (1998) book *Frontier Lands and Pioneer Legends: How Pastoralists Gained Karuwal Land*. This book introduced me to the very particular ecology and history of the Channel Country of far Southwestern Queensland, an area of remote outback Australia in which Aboriginal people were central to the pastoral economy well past the period of initial colonial contact.

In the days after reading *Frontier Lands* in October 1998, whilst developing a funding application to the Australian Centenary of Federation secretariat, I conceived the *Braided Channels* creative research project. From its inception this was a project that incorporated a ‘shared histories’ approach, in which I as a white Australian sought to incorporate both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives. This element of the project is foundational to its form and the theoretical matrix within which I locate it below.

By 2000 I had funding from the Queensland Centenary of Federation to produce an oral history of the women of the Channel Country — both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal — with a plan to work with the most interesting material uncovered to subsequently produce a documentary film. My research process was therefore critically interested in visual sources as well as documents, and all interviews were filmed, as well as having a separate audio master. My project, from its first funding application, was about the way that the stories of the area’s women confirmed and contradicted, and constantly intersected with, each other in a manner reminiscent of the braided channels of the landscape. So the concept of ‘braided channels’ as both a feature of the landscape and as a visual metaphor for the histories being presented was embedded in the foundation of the project.

Works Presented for Examination

The practical works Presented for Examination comprise:

- the DVD and print-based documentation of the *Channels of History* travelling exhibition on the women, land and history of the Channel Country (Item One);
- The interactive touch screen kiosk element of the *Channels of History* exhibition converted into a clickable DVD (Item Two);
- a podcast episode of the Radio National program *Rear Vision* produced by Annabelle Quince on the theme of the history of drought in Australia broadcast on 17 December 2006 and making use of a substantial number of excerpts of the *Braided Channels* Oral History Archive (Item Three);
- two concept documents, two trailers, rough montage and some rushes of a broadcast documentary with the working title of *Durham Downs: A Pastoral*,

produced with the assistance of Film Australia and the Pacific Film and Television Commission, and the concept document of an earlier incarnation of the same project, known then as *Elsie's Story* (Item Four);

- two examples of the oral history archive which underlies other elements of the project. Interviews with Edith McFarlane, Alice Gorringer are provided as a sample (Item Five).

This is not an exhaustive list of the outcomes of this cross-media project.

Other Elements of the Braided Channels Project Extant but Not Presented for Examination

- *Braided Channels*: A case study of 'the Documentary Project' meeting 'Exhibition Practice', *Placing the Moving Image: Working Papers in Communication No. 3*, School of Arts, Media and Culture, Griffith University, Brisbane, 2004, pp. 123–46 (FitzSimons 2004) parts of which have been rewritten and incorporated into Chapter 2 of this doctoral submission (see Appendix 1).
- '*Braided Channels*: Reflections on a documentary filmmaker curating a social history exhibition in an era of representational contention.' Published July 2005 in the papers of the 12th Film & History Conference, Canberra, December 2004, pp. 87–105 and largely rewritten as Chapter 2 of this dissertation (FitzSimons 2004) (see Appendix 2).
- Numerous public lectures associated with the exhibition at many of its venues, including: '*Braided Lives* — Women's History in the Channel Country' (State Library of Queensland, March 2003) and 'Interactive Documentary' at the University of Western Australia under the Auspices of the Centre for Advanced Studies (June 2004). In accordance with Nicolas Bourriaud's theories of contemporary art discussed below (FitzSimons 2004), such events become part of the artwork itself but are intrinsically ephemeral, not having been recorded or documented. Publicity documentation is available for perusal if required (see Appendix 3).
- I have had preliminary discussions with the State Library of Queensland and

Griffith University about a cross-referenced database developed from the underlying *Channels of History* archive. A pilot of this material is available if required.

- Having generated and gathered together a good deal of primary research material about the few inhabitants of this huge area, it would seem that research offshoots of this project will continue to proliferate. Following are two recent examples. Dr Paul Gorecki, Consultant Archaeologist to the Mithaka Native Title group from Southwest Queensland, asked me in June 2007 to provide him with DVD copies of four of the interviews in the *Braided Channels* oral history archive to assist him in a native title claim he is currently preparing. In 2006/07 the ABC's Arts Unit produced a series entitled *Painting Australia* that links landscape artists to the country they portray and contacted me in regard to an episode that focuses on a part of the Channel Country.
- At the request of the Queensland State Archives, I provided several images for an exhibition the Archives mounted in 2007/08 entitled *In the West*, which showcases their documents from Far Western Queensland.

As alluded to above, much of the written component of this Doctoral submission consists of pieces of reflective writing produced in the interstices of screen production. As the major component of my creative arts practice presented for examination is an exhibition that you won't have seen staged, I would suggest that you first read this written component and then view the studio practice components in the order laid out above. First however I want to consider something of my overall methodology for the project.

Notes on Methodology

Describing the overall methodology of a project with the many facets, production stages and collaborators of *Braided Channels* feels beyond either the word count or likely interest of readers: this dissertation is in no way a 'how to' manual. At a macro level, however, I could describe my practical methodology as being 'to *do*, in intelligent order, within the bounds of the resources I have been able to gather to the project, and following the highest possible professional and ethical standards, that which needs *doing*: compile the oral history archive; produce the exhibition including its interactive documentary components; write the concept document for the

documentary; shoot and edit the trailer for the documentary; and provide the oral history materials from which a nationally broadcast radio documentary can be constructed. And along the way write academic papers and this dissertation which inform this practice; capture and communicate the knowledge generated through it; keep a textually oriented university system happy; and meanwhile fulfil the requirements of the Doctorate of Creative Arts.'

But in forming the preceding sentences I am reminded of Greg Denning's (2002 p. 37) statement that he tries to dissuade his students from 'doing' history in favour of 'performing' it, because of the way this keeps them in touch with their intended audience: 'They will know the ways in which they sculpt their narrative. They will be focused on the theatre of what they do.' In a project where metaphor and staging and framing have been critical, terms like 'performance' and 'sculpting' of narrative feel highly pertinent. To assist me in this task, I will devote considerable attention in the early chapters to defining what I mean by voice as my key term and to then considering how, within the broad frame of a vocal metaphor, a finer gradation of terminology can provide a set of conceptual tools for analysing my own work and that of others.

I want, then, to detail my processes of sculpting the various narratives of *Braided Channels*, and in particular to look at the nexus of theory and practice in this process. In the latter chapters of this dissertation, this will involve spending a considerable amount of time presenting a narrative account of the evolution of my research to give a fully nuanced treatment of the emergence of my understanding of the complexity of the issue of voice. At times, this account could appear anecdotal; however, looked at as a whole, a close and selective view of the interweaving of layers and strands of my understanding, and of the different forcefields of affordance, impedance and interpretation, along the way will function as yet another iteration of the *Braided Channels* metaphor. My narrative will show how all these influences and impedances are progressively clarified and interwoven or discarded along the pathway of practice-based iterative research.

Given that some elements of the underlying data have reappeared in various of the research outcomes detailed above, this could appear to be a classic example of

‘redaction’. John Hartley (1996 p. 30) has described a ‘redactional society’ as one where ‘mixing existing ingredients to produce something new became such a feature of contemporary culture that it is possible to argue that this characterized the millennial era’. Hartley developed this thesis in reviewing the profession of journalism and journalism studies theorists in an era in which the World Wide Web has made a plethora of information and the means of production available to the populace and meanwhile taken away something of the special status of the journalist’s role as a writer of original material. In response to these developments, says Hartley (2003 p. 82)), ‘the journalist can develop a new role as one who cuts through the crap ... Journalists are search engines who provide editorial services for other users’.

Certainly Hartley’s definition (2000 p. 43) of ‘a redactional society (as)...one where matter is reduced, revised, prepared, published, edited, adapted, shortened, abridged, to produce, in turn the new(s)’ is relevant to understanding my processes of producing the various outcomes of this project. And the digital technologies that underlie the World Wide Web and are at the centre of Hartley’s model of redaction are also critical to the development of multi-platform cross-media projects of which *Braided Channels* is an example. Hartley’s term then is useful for understanding something of the ‘iterative’ nature of the *Braided Channels* project; it cannot however explain its ‘generative’ aspects, which have brought together some seventy hours of previously unrecorded life stories with a multitude of related images, maps and documents, as well as associated reflection and theorization.

The work of Nicholas Bourriaud (2002, particularly his concept of a ‘relational aesthetic’ as an organizing principle of much cultural practice, takes me closer to an enunciation of my working methods. Bourriaud is a curator and art critic who coined the term ‘relational aesthetics’ in 1996 as a way of understanding the specific ontology of an important strand of contemporary art. Bourriaud counterpoints a romantic aesthetics, with its focus on art as ‘a product of human subjectivity’ expressing the mental world of a subject (2002, p. 92) with a relational art, concerned with *inter*-subjectivity. He postulates ‘dialogue as the actual origin of the image making process’ (p. 26), where the audience for an artwork is conceived of as a community and where all the events and elements of an exhibition together, rather than the various

components, are conceived of as *the* artwork. A corollary of all the various elements of a project forming the artwork is that 'relational art', by its nature, has something of the ephemeral to it, with the audience finding its way through the material becoming a component of the artwork itself. Bourriaud writes: 'it would seem quite normal, today, that a piece, an action or a performance should end up becoming documentation on videotape.' (p. 76) This concept is relevant to understanding the documentation components of my work presented for examination, and also to the interrelation of studio practice, reflection on practice/exegesis and theorisation presented for examination.

To understand the nature of the *Braided Channels* project as 'reflective practice' the work of Donald Schön is apposite. Schön's book *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, details how poorly a positivist concept of professional practice as the application of coherent theory to a particular problem does justice to the complex realities of many practice-based professions. Schön (1983) writes that:

With this emphasis on problem solving, we ignore problem *setting*, the process by which we define the decision to be made, the ends to be achieved, the means which may be chosen ... Problem setting is a process in which, interactively, we *name* the things to which we will attend and *frame* the context in which we will attend to them (p. 40).

Whilst his argument is mainly developed in relation to the helping and managerial professions such as social work, town planning and psychotherapy, it can also be applied to the creative and intellectual professional work that constitutes the *Braided Channels* project. In Schön's schema, whilst the kinds of problem-framing and problem-solving of the professional can often involve *tacit* and ritualised forms of knowledge, there is also the capacity to consciously develop processes of reflection, a kind of self-generated theorising to create new *knowing in practice* (p. 61) . This kind of rubric can usefully explain the kind of trial, error and refinement approach that the exhibition designer, Georgina Greenhill, and I took in developing the layout for the text panel elements of the exhibition that the multimedia company Toadshow then realised. Schön's theory is similarly useful to understand the processes of video editing that

editors David Huggett and Rebecca Richardson and I undertook. As director, I construct an initial paper edit from which the editor produces a first assembly. I and the editor then respond to what ‘works’ and what does not to take a ‘cut’ through successive processes of refinement, routinely using the techniques of intuition, trial and error and reflective analysis that Schön details. In fact, one could enunciate a multitude of such processes of reflective practice along the path of producing the *Braided Channels* project and bringing it to its current point.

As a counterpoint to the reflective practice that he advocates, Schön also discusses in depth the tendency within professions founded in the early twentieth century to divide theory from practice, and to privilege the work of theorists who formulate the precepts applied by practitioners in response to particular production problems. To a degree, the field of documentary production and studies has tended to reflect this binary opposition. While, for example, documentary filmmakers such as Michael Rabiger (2004) and Alan Rosenthal (1995) have produced very useful manuals which draw on their extensive industry experience to indicate the ways in which both conceptual as well as physical technologies can be applied to produce quality documentary and docudrama work, there is separately a:

whole genre of documentary work ... often referred to as ‘documentary theory’ indicating a set of connected propositions and concepts concerning the socio-aesthetic nature of documentary (Corner 1996 p. 9).

This work has generally been produced by academics educated in critical philosophy and in cultural and media studies, rather than those involved in filmmaking.

At the heart of this documentary theory project has been a series of typologies of different categories of documentary work, divided according to various parameters, usually relating to style and form (See for example Nichols 1991; Renov 1993; Nichols 1994; Plantinga 1997; Bruzzi 2000; Nichols 2001). Bill Nichols’ ever-developing typology (2001)¹ is easily the most frequently quoted of these. Very many dissertations

¹ Nichols’ latest version has the Poetic, Expository, Observational, Participatory, Reflexive and Performative Modes.

accompanying documentary practice apply Nichols or other of these theorists to explain retrospectively what the filmmaker has produced. Personally, I find John Corner's much less well-known typology, based on the *work* that a particular text performs, the most useful of these schema, with the corollary that various forms and styles will then flow from these functions (Corner c. 2001).² In relation to Corner's taxonomy, various of the elements of the *Braided Channels* project would contribute to the projects of 'Democratic Civics' and 'Radical Interrogation and Alternative Perspective'. Finally, however, each of these ways of dividing up the entire field of documentary has such a macro lens that by necessity most works cross into more than one category, casting some doubt on the value of the taxonomic enterprise as the fundamental undertaking of much documentary theory. And with my goal of adding to forms of theory that facilitate practice — practice-led in Linda Candy's schema — then an intellectual project which begins from when a documentary film is complete can miss the chance to theorise how that form has arisen in ways that are generative of more practice.

Although I heartily concur with a statement in the preface of Schön's book that 'the contributions I have found most helpful in this endeavour are those of people for whom research functions not as a distraction from practice but as a development from it' (Schön 1983 p. ix), what he means by research can only take one so far in understanding my methodology in producing the various elements of *Braided Channels* presented here for examination. His book is necessarily generic — about processes rather than specific debates or approaches — and while engaging in media production is certainly a prime example of an area where problem-setting and choice of competing paradigms is paramount, to understand the specifics of such choices requires a closer focus on particular debates and upon the methodologies of those who have eschewed a divide between theory and practice in their work.

The Harvard system of footnoting does not in general use footnotes. There is, however, a variant of Harvard in which footnotes are used for additional information, examples or insights while standard bibliographical referencing continues to be in-text. This variant version of Harvard shall be followed throughout this dissertation. See www.swinburne.edu.au/lib/guides/harvard_system.pdf.

² Corner establishes the following documentary projects: Democratic Civics; Journalistic Inquiry and Exposition; Radical Interrogation & Alternative Perspective; and Diversion.

In this regard, Trinh T. Minh-ha and David MacDougall are exemplary of media practitioners/filmmakers who have also contributed to our understanding of media theory, particularly in a cross-cultural context. Trinh T. Minh-ha is Vietnamese/American writer, filmmaker and postcolonial and feminist theorist. In *Framer Framed* (1992 p. 122), a collection of essays by and about Trinh and her work, she writes that:

There is a tendency in theorizing *about* film to see theorizing as one activity and filmmaking as another, which you can point to in theory...When one starts theorizing *about* film, one starts shutting in the field; it becomes a field of experts whose access is gained through authoritative knowledge of a demarcated body of "classical" films and of legitimized ways of reading and speaking about films. That's the part I find most sterile in theory. It is necessary for me always to keep in mind that one cannot really theorize about film, but only *with* film. This is how the field can remain open.

This feels entirely apposite to the way in which various kinds of cultural theory have intersected with my media practice on *Braided Channels*. Although, from its inception, the project (and I and my collaborators as its agents) generated an enormous amount of primary data, these data were created *with* various concurrent theoretical and research frameworks in view. This was interdisciplinary research, drawing variously on the fields of screen production, museology, cultural studies, social history (women's history and indigenous history in particular), media studies (documentary theory in particular), historiography and environmental sciences.

David MacDougall, an eminent ethnographic filmmaker and academic based in Australia but with an international oeuvre and reputation, says of inter-disciplinarity (1998 p. 92) that:

The willingness to borrow, to cut across the grain of human perspectives, has become a way of combating intellectual and moral tunnel-vision. This sometimes creates a kind of vertigo, as anthropologists and critics stand on the boundaries of

their disciplines. They rightly fear losing their balance, but there is often, as well, a powerful urge to jump.

Especially since the *Braided Channels* project took me right beyond the kinds of repetitive tacit knowledges that Schön says professionals routinely develop, and into hitherto unfamiliar professional zones — such as exhibition curation and interactive kiosk design — I have found it invaluable to become familiar with the discourses around the various forms of practice that my work has encompassed or touched upon. But, in common with Margaret Somerville (1999 p. 9), who in describing the methodology of her *Body/Landscape Journals* wrote that ‘I approach theory like a bower bird, choosing fragments by colour, taking them into my bower and leaving the rest’, I have drawn on parts of discourses from many disciplines rather than seeking to produce within the boundaries of any one. This has included many radio broadcasts, especially those of Radio National, and broader media discourses aimed at an educated general audience in the fields of literature, cultural studies and musicology, amongst others.

This has been anything but a casual or incidental process however; theory has been intrinsic to my task. To extend the metaphor that has framed all the elements of this doctorate I have approached my task as one who *braids* together various forms of theory with written, visual and aural primary sources, to create works in which an audience can similarly engage in *braiding*. Although at one level of course *Braided Channels* is a detailed local history in audio-visual form, in the forms of the work itself and in the way that I approached its production and integration into the cultural landscape I have aimed to produce work whose *address* is much broader than the local.

One further point should be noted on the framing metaphor of *braiding* to underlie the practice component of this doctoral submission. By their nature, all metaphors eventually break down, some sooner than others. Further, the power of any metaphor is dependent on a cultural producer and their audience sharing a set of references that allow one thing to be understood in relation to an analogous other. As previously noted, *braiding* as a central metaphor of this project came out of the specific ecosystem of the

Channel Country and was constitutive of the project rather than being imposed upon it later; it was the combination of this landform with an area rich in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal stories that ‘made me’ form my project around the area. There could be other metaphors to express similar relationships. In *Performances*, for instance, the eminent historian Greg Denning (1996 p. 62) uses the metaphor of the double helix, writing of his essays that they ‘were each written with the conscious effort to unwind the double helix of past and present that was life as it happened and is now as I make history of it’. For this project, however, I have found ‘braiding’ and ‘channels’ to be metaphors that have served the exhibition, exegesis and documentary practice well, and created fertile resonances for diverse audiences. In this written component, voice is the central trope used. At the risk of mixing metaphors, another way of considering it is that I am offering to my reader a choice of figures of speech with which to understand versions of ‘stranded singularity’.

In finding models for positioning myself both as practitioner and theorist, I have found that a number of historians — in addition to filmmakers such as MacDougall and Trinh — provide valuable examples. Denning’s (1996) previously quoted book *Performances* traverses the domain of both history and historiography, as does *Experiments in Rethinking History*, edited by Alan Munslow and Robert A. Rosenstone (2004). When seen in conjunction with the component authors’ individual works of history, the various chapters of *Writing Histories: Imagination and Narration*, edited by Ann Curthoys and Ann McGrath (2000), similarly bring together historiography and history. Specifically in the area of non-Aboriginal cultural producers working in areas with a strong indigenous component, Heather Goodall (2002) has provided a valuable model for reflecting theoretically on her practice, as will be discussed in greater detail below. All these authors place reflections on their own work next to that of other authors, which becomes a way of looking at a number of works in common as a kind of ‘theory’. Greg Denning’s (2004) way of understanding this process is to say: ‘Story is my theatre ... Theory will never add to the reflection of my theatre. Reflection will’ (p. 52). But if theory is understood as ‘that department of a science or art which deals with its principles or methods, as distinguished from the practice of it’ (1981), then what Denning describes here is indeed a kind of theorising about processes of history-making. For all these reflective practitioners, particular problems arising from their

professional craft have become the impetus for reflection on both their own work and that of colleagues in ways that have then extended both practice and theory.

The Central Research Focus and Its Location in an Interdisciplinary Context

In this spirit, I want now to turn to a set of problems and questions that have arisen in my own practice and which I have therefore found engaging and productive to consider in this written component of my doctoral dissertation. As a practitioner, teacher and researcher of documentary, seeking constantly to relate my practice to broader trends and histories through interdisciplinary reading and analytical reflection, a set of questions has recurred relating to the ‘voice’ of documentary. As will be discussed further below, in different ways my own process of ‘coming to voice’ was challenging in both the exhibition and documentary elements of the *Braided Channels* project with the cultural politics of ‘braiding’ Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal stories a key source of this complexity. The cross-media and cross-cultural nature of the *Braided Channels* project have caused me to consider the way that voice is discussed within documentary theory/media studies, and to understand that this theory requires some refinement. Specifically, I want to understand the fluidity of the dialectical relationships between the voice of my various documentary subjects, the explicit voice of my chosen narrative devices and my own implicit authorial voice. And I want to grasp how these relationships might shift across the project’s various media and textual forms. In a post-September 11 world, questions of the circumstance of ‘giving voice’ to others and its inverse have arguably never loomed larger. These challenges inevitably took me to available theory as a starting point for a reflective understanding of my own practice. It is my aim that these reflections in turn enrich not only my own practice, but (at least potentially) that of other practitioners and of theoretical understandings of documentary.

Primarily, I will locate my theoretical discussion within documentary/media studies. But the cross-media cross-cultural and primarily historical nature of the *Braided Channels* project has also caused me to consider the way that voice is deployed in discourses other than documentary theory/media studies. So, before approaching questions of documentary voice directly, I want to explore briefly what it is I mean by my key term, approached from an interdisciplinary perspective.

A complete etymology of the term ‘voice’ is beyond my scope here, but one or two key elements of its history as a metaphoric construct are useful. Jean Jacques Rousseau, the influential forerunner of the philosophical and cultural movement known as Romanticism, wrote in the eighteenth century of voice as a synonym for divinely sanctioned conscience, a resource to an individual that is free from the pollution of corrupt social structures:

Let us obey the call of nature ... we shall see that her yoke is easy and that when we give heed to her voice we find joy ... Conscience! Divine instinct, immortal voice from heaven; sure guide for the ignorant and the finite indeed, yet intelligent and free; infallible judge of good and evil, making man like God. (Rousseau in his novel, *Emile*, 1762, pp. 301-04, quoted in Guignon 2004 p. 58)

In this usage Rousseau was drawing on an older biblical tradition equating a ‘still small voice’ with the voice of God internalized — for example, where Elijah hears ‘after the earthquake a fire ... and after the fire a still small voice’ (*The Bible*, I Kings 19:12). A more recent and secular version of this usage was the acerbic writer H.L. Mencken’s aphorism that: ‘Conscience is the inner voice that warns us that somebody may be looking.’ It is a truism of linguistics that any word carries deep within it the traces of its detailed etymology: this romantic conception of voice as the human expression of the divine, while no longer primary, still recurs in the metaphoric ether surrounding the term.

The contemporary concept of voice is a slippery one. Voice is at once a physical capacity of animate beings (usually but not exclusively applied to humans), a name for particular grammatical structures in English and other Indo-European languages (active voice, passive voice, imperative voice, etc.) and the common terminology for a metaphoric extension of physical voice into a cultural arena, being a synonym for making a contribution to debate that is in some way validated by being heard. In common parlance, particularly in the mass media or other components of what could be described as the public sphere, voice is often used with the connotation of expressing

the subjectivity/ies of person/s that have been deemed to be absent or muted within civil discourse.³

Another application of 'voice' in the public sphere anthropomorphises the intrinsically human capacity for speech and applies it to a range of abstract human art forms. Usually in this kind of metaphoric application, voice is construed as a unitary category. In *The Architecture of Happiness*, Alain De Botton (2006) uses the figure of buildings having 'voice', expressing something of their architect's underlying psyche and in so doing having specific impacts on the psyches of the humans that occupy them. Indeed, the rubric of voice as a synonym for 'personal authorial expression' is almost ubiquitous in the broader cultural sphere. Clive James, for instance, discussing the paintings of Brett Whiteley, said that 'each painter has a certain tone of voice, you can tell it's a Whiteley from that little bit of blue there' (ABC 7.30 Report, 27th June 2006).

One element of the way the term is deployed in generic educated discourse emphasises the potential for multiplicity within voices and other forms of sound. This is the capacity for voices to be heard side by side but to be experienced by an audience as a singular entity, albeit a braided one. In the 2006 Reith lecture, for example, Israeli conductor Daniel Barenboim analysed the work he had undertaken with the Palestinian intellectual Edward Said to create the 'West-Eastern Divan Orchestra' composed of musicians from each of their two countries. In the fourth lecture, 'Meeting in Music' (2006), Barenboim suggested that music has different 'voices' which exist in a relationship to each other and which paradoxically embody both 'hierarchy and

³ For a couple of indicative examples of voice being used as a term to refer to marginalised groups, see the website of ANTAR Victoria (Australians for Native Title), which has a banner headline 'Restore Indigenous Voice Now' in response to the federal government disbanding the ATSIC organization (see www.antarvictoria.org.au/RestoreIndigenousVoice.htm, accessed 21/02/2006); and

a website entitled *Converse & Company: An Online Newspaper for Women in Adult and Vocational Education, An Australian Feminist Network*, which includes the following text: 'WAVE submission: Equity and VET— Submissions are being sought for the National Client and Student Voice Action Group to recommend future advisory arrangement for equity in the national training system.' (see www.converse.com.au, accessed 21/02/2006). Finally, see GlobalVoices.org: 'Global Voices was founded to strengthen transparency and accountability in government by effectively integrating citizen voices in policy- and decision-making.' This central organization has spawned www.globalvoicesonline.org (accessed 20/10/2006).

equality'. He uses this musical relationship of voices as a metaphor for the way that warring peoples might find a way to peacefully interrelate:

In music, different notes and voices meet, link to each other, either in joint expression or in counterpoint, which means exactly that — counter point, or another point ... In times of totalitarian or autocratic rule, music, indeed culture in general, is often the only avenue of independent thought. It is the only way people can meet as equals, and exchange ideas. Culture then becomes primarily the voice of the oppressed, and it takes over from politics as a driving force for change ... when you play music, whether you play chamber music or you play in an orchestra, you have to do two very important things and do them simultaneously. You have to be able to express yourself, otherwise you are not contributing to the musical experience, but at the same time it is imperative that you listen to the other ... the art of playing music is the art of simultaneous playing and listening.

This use of the term 'voice' in its metaphoric sense as a kind of braided singularity has some resonance too within two other disciplines highly relevant to this project: ethnography and historiography.

Voice as a Concept Within Ethnography and Historiography

Within the discipline of history, there are many who downplay any notion of the subjectivity of the historian implied by a term like 'voice' in favour of a more functionalist account of their professional role. Greg Denning (1996) has written of a view common amongst his compadres that it is wise to: 'Leave the fancy stuff — like voices, authorial presence and politics of knowledge ... Narration is what *we* do, just telling what happened.' (1996 p. 33) This view is counterpointed by Denning himself, as well as by other historians influenced by concepts of postmodernism who share an underlying assumption that historians faces crucial choices in the *way* that they tell a particular story. Often these are the same historians who publish in the field of personally inflected historiography (eg. Curthoys 2000) and use the term 'voice' to speak about the choices they have made as historians. The back cover of Curthoys and

McGrath's *Writing Histories: Imagination and Narration* (2000), for instance, posits 'how to find a voice' as one of 'the most difficult and interesting questions any history-writer faces'. This strand of history-making is closely related to what Paul Gillen, using the discipline of history as his primary example, has described as the 'conversational turn' in public discourse, where there is a greater emphasis on story and subjectivity than previously, and where historians seek more to persuade than to denigrate those who take opposing positions within a discourse (2004). The use of specific examples told from a subjective position has brought some varieties of text-based history closer to the methodology of documentary, with its long history of metonymic specificity.

Whilst Denning (2004 p. 37) uses the language of theatre and performance as his primary metaphor to describe what he does, he also uses the trope of voice in a way that acknowledges that his is not the only vocal presence in his texts. In one instance he says that 'giving the dead a voice has been reason enough for my history', while adding the rider that 'I have not silenced any voice by adding mine'. As will be discussed in a subsequent chapter, this divide amongst historians is highly germane to the so-called 'history wars' or 'culture wars' currently being waged, and within which the *Braided Channels* project needs to be located.

Within ethnography, the term 'voice' is particularly associated with James Clifford. Trained originally in history and with work that crosses over into cultural theory more generally, his is a model of cross-humanities interdisciplinarity with ethnography as its primary locus. Clifford and others have been involved in breaking down the discipline's traditional distancing of the ethnographer from their subjects via visual modes and metaphors of observation. He writes:

Once cultures are no longer prefigured visually — as objects, theatres, texts — it becomes possible to think of a cultural poetics that is an interplay of voices, of positioned utterances. In a discursive rather than a visual paradigm, the dominant metaphors for ethnography shift away from the observing eye and toward expressive speech (and gesture). The writer's 'voice' pervades and situates the analysis and objective, distancing rhetoric is renounced ... The evocative,

performative elements of ethnography are legitimated. (Clifford and Marcus 1986 p. 12)

Clifford locates this shift within a return to an emphasis on traditions of rhetoric within ethnography, a rhetoric that 'is less about how to speak well than about how to speak at all' (Clifford and Marcus 1986 p. 11).

Clifford's latter comment invokes the source of my own original engagement with questions of voice. For almost a decade from the early 1990s, I periodically considered the idea of producing a documentary film about women, land, history and inheritance in Australia. Part homage to my mother who lived her adult life in a rural area, part a response to the gender politics around inheritance that I could see causing great conflict in a number of rural families I knew well (though thankfully not my own), this was an idea that would neither go away nor come to fruition. The block, as I now understand it, was that I could not speak filmically about questions of inheritance and the relationship of women to land without including an Aboriginal dimension, but in the postcolonial Eastern Australia through which I moved it was not easy to find the place and parameters in which to do this. As discussed previously, basing a project in the Channel Country provided a way through this impasse. In 2005, however, when I came to develop a documentary film that arose from research for the *Braided Channels* project, concerning the life story of one Aboriginal woman, especially in relation to one particular Channel Country pastoral property, questions of voice again arose, this time in relation to me as a non-Aboriginal woman telling an 'Indigenous story'. These questions will be discussed at length in Chapters 1 and 3 and returned to in the conclusion. But before bringing my focus in specifically to questions of documentary voice, I want to consider the way the term is generally used in film theory.

Voice in Film Theory and Conclusion

Voice has been an important conceptual tool in film theory's primary engagement with narrative fiction film. This strand of work has been mainly concerned with the analysis of the relationship between image and sound in fictional narrative cinema. An influential issue of the journal *Yale French Studies* published in 1980 brought together many authors working in this vein. Mary Ann Doane's essay 'The Voice in the

Cinema: The Articulation of the Body and Space', for instance, considered the implicit and explicit relationships between voices and bodies in cinema and the effort that the cinematic apparatus classically makes to unite them. Although in this article she briefly considers documentary narration as a particular example of a disembodied voice, her primary examples and interest are in the analysis of film dramas (1980 p.41). Michel Chion's *The Voice in Cinema* is a more recent version of the study of sound-image relations within cinema studies, again with particular interest in the disembodied voiceover of narrative dramas. From this kind of work comes an awareness that, just as sound as a physical phenomenon is able to envelop bodies and other objects, to infiltrate a space and go around corners, whereas imagery is typically contained by various kinds of frame, so voice as a concept is much harder to contain than the closely related visual concept of 'point of view'. Similarly, whereas the different components of composite images can typically be discerned, the production of soundtracks in cinema has been based on the capacity of multiple soundtracks to be experienced fundamentally in a unitary fashion.

In Chapter 1, I consider voice as a category specific to the theorisation of documentary, analyse the ways in which this theory may require reframing to take account of its contemporary cross-cultural and cross-media dimensions, and develop the conceptual tools for undertaking this task. Chapter 2 applies these tools to an exegesis of the *Channels of History* exhibition, while Chapter 3 is an exegesis and account of 'coming to voice' within *Durham Downs: A Pastoral*, the broadcast documentary component of the *Braided Channels* project. My conclusion then returns to the tools developed in Chapter 2, considering their broader relevance in light of the project's case studies and some directions for further work, particularly in relation to developments known collectively as Web

Towards a Reworked Concept of the Voice of Documentary: Some History and Some Tools

The introduction has considered the term ‘voice’ very broadly, by way of developing a conceptual breadth equal to the task of framing the various elements of the *Braided Channels* project and setting up some of the questions raised around the concept. Voice in relation to documentary film is more usually discussed with a narrower frame of reference, generally with the writings of Bill Nichols at its core. In this chapter, I locate Nichols’ theories of voice; think about their impact on the field more broadly, consider what usefully may be added to and subtracted from this theory to provide an understanding the contemporary cultural politics of authorship in documentary as it applies to a cross-media and cross-cultural project such as *Braided Channels*, and develop some conceptual tools to assist in this task.

Some History of Voice as a Term Within Documentary Studies

To scholars working on documentary theory, Bill Nichols’ categorisation of documentary into a typology of different modes of voice — the poetic, the expository, the observational, the participatory, the reflexive, the performative — has become almost axiomatic through repeated quotation. Which is not to say it is unchanging. Nichols himself has argued (1991 p. 12) that: ‘Documentary ... adopts no completely known taxonomy of forms, styles or modes ... Documentary film practice is the site of contestation and change.’ Over a series of subsequent publications, he has continued to develop his schema, adding new categories and refining his rubric; the above is just the latest published incarnation (1991; Nichols 1994; Nichols 2001). However, throughout all his documentary theory work, Nichols assumes that the mode of a documentary’s voice is a label, or a collection of labels, that can be affixed to the completed form of the film as a stable entity.

As previously mentioned, other scholars have either critically refined Nichols' typology (eg Bruzzi 2000) or developed their own alternate systems to divide up the category of documentary film (eg. Renov 1993; Corner 1996; Plantinga 1997; Corner undated, most likely 2001). And innumerable scholars since have used the typologies of Nichols and others as the jumping-off point for their academic work. It is not my aim to add to this work of cataloguing here, though in some of my comments about documentary voice I will be referring to these various taxonomies.

Rather, I want to go back to Nichols' now classic 'Voice of Documentary' essay, first published almost 25 years ago (1983) and republished regularly since (Nichols 1985 (2nd Edition); Nichols 1988; Rosenthal 1988; Rosenthal and Corner 2005). I will consider how he conceived the category of documentary voice, the ways in which this was then 'tactical' (to use this term in the spirit of Trinh T. Minh-Ha's pronouncement that of its very nature 'speech is tactical') (Trinh, Julien et al. 1992 p. 205) and how shifts in the forms of documentary production since, as well as in the surrounding cultural formations and in the ways that documentary is now theorised, might require some adjustment in how we might now strategically think about documentary voice.

In Nichols' essay (1983 p. 18), voice is defined as:

Something narrower than style: that which conveys to us a sense of a text's social point of view ... voice is not restricted to any one code or feature, such as dialogue or spoken commentary. Voice is perhaps akin to that intangible, moiré-like¹ pattern formed by the unique interaction of all a film's codes and it applies to all modes of documentary.

Nichols' essay on documentary voice was written at a time when the recent ubiquity of synchronised sound as a production tool, and the spread of journalistic techniques of

¹ This is a term from the textile industry that means 'watered as silk, having a wavelike pattern' *Macquarie Dictionary*, 1st edition, 1981. This effect is often achieved by layering two or more sheer layers on top of each other, a technique used by Georgina Greenhill in the design of the *Channels of History* exhibition.

interview into documentary practice, were leading to fundamental shifts in the social relations underpinning production. His essay criticised a trend he perceived in interview-based films in which ‘the voice of the text disappears behind characters who speak to us’ so that ‘the film becomes a rubber stamp’ (1983, p. 18). Nichols was concerned about an automatic assumption that an interviewee’s testimony could be relied upon as a simple statement of truth, as well as about a tendency for documentaries to avoid highlighting any conflicts and contradictions amongst the voices of various subjects, and about filmmakers abdicating their responsibility to assert their own considered view:

Far too many contemporary filmmakers appear to have lost their voice ... they forfeit their own voice for that of others (usually characters recruited to the film and interviewed). (p. 18)

In contrast, he argued that a documentary ought to establish a ‘hierarchy of voices’ in which ‘the voice of the text remains of a higher, controlling type than the voices of interviewees’ (p. 24).

Nichols’ view on this matter was part of a theoretical response to the first generation of filmmakers who, through the ready availability and portability of synchronised sound equipment, were *able* to include their subject’s physical recorded voices in their films. These filmmakers often reacted against what was viewed as the overt didacticism of the predominantly expository documentaries of previous decades. To a degree, Nichols in this essay echoes the views of an older generation of filmmakers looking on at postwar shifts in the form. In an interview in 1965, the filmmaker Joris Ivens (quoted in Youdelman 1988 p. 458) said of the then-emerging observational cinema that:

Cinema direct is both indispensable and insufficient ... it gives us the chance to hear the people in the film speak for themselves, and adds another dimension of physical reality. [But] only commentary can express the complete, responsible, personal action — the involvement of the author, director or commentator. In *verité*, people talk too much and the director too little.

Jeffrey Youdelman's essay 'Narration, Invention History' (1988 p. 464), first written in 1982, endorses Ivens' view and calls for filmmakers to 'first go back to the people [but] after taking from the people ... what they owe is some leadership' by way of arguing that filmmakers should not abandon narration so quickly or so completely, as was then the fashion. However, by the time Nichols was writing in the mid-1980s, Ivens' (and Youdelman's) view would generally have been regarded as anachronistic, and much of film practice was dedicated to eliminating narration wherever possible. In the common parlance of the time, documentary subjects were 'unsung heroes' who could 'speak for themselves' and give the public 'the voice of the people'. In the case of films on historical topics, a common rubric was that an audience could access previously 'hidden histories' through the voices and images of interviewees, taking knowledge of social histories deeper than the official written record previously at the heart of the Historical Enterprise.

The Current Status of Nichols' Theories of Voice in Documentary Theory

There is much to admire in Nichols' essay on documentary voice. In establishing a conception of voice in documentary that includes, but exceeds, both the soundtrack and any text-based elements, Nichols' theory implicitly connects to contemporary usage discussed in the previous chapter in which non-textual forms such as buildings and paintings are also said to 'have voice'. 'Voice' is a useful trope with which to think about authorship in documentary, in ways that allow both the individual and collective elements of this category to be expressed. One could compare this for instance to theories of authorship in journalism studies which, in emphasising categories such as 'objectivity', 'balance' and (in counterpoint) 'bias', tend to preclude the possibility of a strong individual stamp on work.² And his assertion that filmmakers should not naively assume that the 'hidden histories' (and current realities) they were discovering in interview were some kind of gospel truth that precluded them from critically analysing and arranging their sources to put forward their own points of view is an argument well made. Remembering as a practitioner the way

² Where 'voice' is used in the rubric of journalism, it tends to be in an institutional sense of the term, viz *The Voice of America*, *The Village Voice*, thereby implicitly suggesting that the individual journalist is at the service of a collective entity.

that, for a time in the 1980s, narration was a ‘dirty word’ — regardless of its eloquence, aptness or efficacy — reminds me how important a theoretical intervention Nichols’ essay was. It is unsurprising, therefore, that in a recent compilation of articles of documentary theory and history this essay was republished at the very beginning of the book, for the perusal of a new generation of scholars (Rosenthal and Corner 2005).

Why There is a Need to Revisit Nichols’ Underlying Concept of Voice

More than 20 years on, it is time to revisit and revise some of the assumptions underlying Nichols’ essay. First, however, a note about this work in relation to Nichols. In the ‘Voice of Documentary’ essay (1988 p. 49), in describing the ongoing emergence of new forms of documentary, Nichols says that:

The success of every form breeds its own overthrow: it limits, omits, disavows, represses (as well as represents). In time, new necessities bring new formal inventions.

I would argue that the same process applies to documentary theory and that, while Nichols himself has to a degree continued to update his theoretical framework, there is value in other scholars doing likewise. And if, in common parlance, ‘imitation is the sincerest form of flattery’, then revisionism represents a compliment of a deeper kind because it acknowledges the power of the ideas being revised. In this instance, in revising the concept of documentary voice, I am proposing a shift from the perspective of the theorist ‘looking in’ to documentary to the perspective of the reflective practitioner ‘looking from within’ and seeking to develop conceptual tools to assist this process. But back to the context that occasions the need for this revision.

Although Nichols tells us that his definition of documentary voice applies to ‘all modes of documentary’ (1983 p. 18), his discussion — both in this essay and in subsequent elaborations of his documentary taxonomy — assumes linear film and video documentary, exhibited in the cinema and in festivals, as the unexamined locus of his analysis.

Writing in 1999, Michael Renov (p. 323) postulated that this decision was probably a ‘strategic’ one when the essay was written, given the paucity of any theoretical writing on documentary at the time; however, less than a decade later, the narrowness of this definition ‘begins to bind’ as the ‘sites and situations of documentary culture have exploded exponentially — on cable TV twenty-four hours a day, on urban billboards and big-screen displays, in museums and on the Internet’ (p. 324). More generally, Renov asserts that the lack of focus on other forms of documentary — including the now almost omnipresent television documentary — is a gap in US-based scholarship, the product of ‘a culture that presumes that maverick practitioners of any sort can always beat the odds’ (p. 315). In keeping with the above, I would like to begin a process of reconceptualising documentary voice within a broader frame of reference than that of Nichols. It would, for instance, ‘speak to’ the various forms of documentary work of the *Braided Channels* project and not just its linear documentary component.

One starting point for this reconceptualising is that, as a practitioner, I am very aware of all the myriad decisions and inputs that go into the final form of any documentary, and therefore of all the films and filmic ‘voices’ that ‘could have been’ underlying ‘that which is’. If one is aiming for a mandalic diagram of all varieties of documentary, focusing on just the final form of a film is very probably a necessary constraint. But it is also in other ways a limiting factor, encouraging an unnecessarily teleological form of analysis. I believe there is currently strategic value in focusing on the *process* of what could be called ‘coming to voice’, even at the expense of letting go of a complete typology of the genre. This is especially the case in a cultural universe where digital technologies are facilitating multiple iterations of many projects, in a phenomenon John Hartley (2000) was quoted in the previous chapter as describing as ‘redactional’. Later, I make some moves towards considering what a focus on the process of developing a documentary voice might mean in practice.

In Nichols’ essay, while at some level he looks at questions of documentary voice generally, he is particularly exercised by forms of interview-based documentary that were

prominent as he was writing in the early 1980s. His essay can be read as a strategic theoretical intervention into the practice of the time in which he wrote. Similarly, in this chapter I focus on documentary voice as it relates particularly to a couple of forms of documentary with which I am most familiar as a practitioner, and from which I conclude that Nichols' work needs extending. Following on from Renov's critique above, this relates in the first instance to documentary produced for broadcast television, where simple assertions about the voice of a piece representing an individual filmmaker's subjectivity need modification. Whilst obviously the whole emergence of reality television as a key feature of the broadcast landscape, and what Corner has called (c. 2001) 'documentaries of diversion', raise important definitional questions, I will not canvass these questions here. But I am also in this piece especially concerned with emerging forms of documentary which, while staying within the broad outlines of 'the creative treatment of actuality' — John Grierson's endlessly flexible and still apt aphorism to describe documentary — move beyond the precise strictures of a 'time-based medium' in a linear form to be a kind of 'event without end'.

Much of this strand of the work I am discussing occurs in the context of exhibitions in museums, art galleries or libraries. Some takes the form of 'interactive' kiosks within a larger exhibition, such as *My Brighton* (1996) or *Channels of History* (2002 - 2005); other work consists of stand-alone installations with a random generation engine so that various audio-visual media endlessly combine and recombine for an audience — for example, *The Bond Store Tales* (Gibson 1996) to versions of the above with the addition of a video booth where the public can record their own stories that potentially then becomes part of the overall piece (e.g. the *Eternity* exhibit at the National Museum of Australia — (Jensen 2001). Another related form exists on CD-ROM or DVD-ROM, in some instances as a stand-alone work (e.g. *Rehearsal of Memory* (Harwood 1996), and in other instances in association with films (e.g. *The Decay of Fiction*, 35mm — O'Neill, 2002; *Tracing the Decay of Fiction* DVD (Kinder 2002) or exhibitions. Online documentary is another arena where producers have set up a 'creative treatment of actuality' with the capacity for an audience to move through a work according to a series of selections and typically to add in their own stories (e.g. *Wrong Crowd* (Beattie 2002), *Bubbe's Back Porch* (Don 1998,

continuing). And in other instances linear documentaries, usually in association with their broadcast, have an online presence in which the public is encouraged to pursue interests aroused by the broadcast and also typically to input into online blogs/forums (e.g. *Frontier* (Belsham 1997) *The Man Who Stole My Mother's Face* (Henkel 2002) *An Inconvenient Truth* (Gore and Guggenheim 2006).

I'm mainly using Australian, British and US examples because I'm familiar with those, but you can add your own examples to form a picture of the genre of work about which I write. Because my original disciplinary training and the bulk of my production work have been in the area of social history, this list of examples is also skewed towards this genre, though the points I want to make have broader relevance. Most of this work would not exist without the concomitant explosion of various forms of digital technology. These technologies have not only facilitated the growth of new forms of media, but also — as the list of examples above makes plain — the growth of cross-media models of production, in which a set of research materials/content emits as various forms of cultural product. This model of production certainly predates digital technologies (e.g. *The Ascent of Man* (Bronowski 1973; Bronowski and British Broadcasting Corporation. 1976), but has become much more common as the movement of 'assets' across different platforms has become easier. But I do not want to be detained in any technologically determinist account of what the 'digital revolution has/has not done' to documentary. Rather, in the spirit of Nichols, I am interested in developing tools for the analysis of the social relations underpinning documentary work in general, and these subsets of documentary work in particular.

The contemporary plethora of such cross-media work calls into question a theory of voice devised for a moment when such work was an exception and when it was possible, or at the very least 'strategic', to talk about the voice of documentary in isolation from other areas of cultural production. Following on from Hayden White's famous title *The Content of the Form* (1987), which analyses the deep structures of text-based narrative histories — the very forms of documentary that are part of its voice — cross-media examples also raise the point that not only can the 'voice of documentary' be divided into its various modes or

genres, but the entire documentary project itself has a ‘voice’ that can be seen in relation to the ‘voice’ of other cultural forms.

The Impact of Post-colonialism and Indigenous Studies on Questions of Voice

Not only have the forms and formats of documentary shifted since the 1980s, so too have the cultural politics surrounding documentary production, especially in relation to Indigenous people. Nichols’ confident assertions that filmmakers must desist from silencing themselves by hiding behind the voices of their documentary subjects, and that the voice of the text must (re)assert its position of hierarchical primacy sit oddly in a world where Indigenous protocols routinely recommend procedures that in various ways impinge on what could be considered the authorial and textual prerogatives of documentary filmmakers. These developments require some detailed background and analysis.

The emergence of post-colonial and subaltern studies around the time that Nichols first wrote his essay, and their subsequent development and academic diaspora, represents one key discourse that points to the need to refine Nichols’ theory of voice in documentary. An outgrowth of post-structuralism, this branch of humanities takes for its subject those classes and human groups which were left out of colonialist histories, in South Asia in the first instance. It critically asks the question ‘Who is speaking for whom and by what right?’ (Chakrabarty 1997 p. 21), thus intrinsically complicating Nichols’ preferred hierarchy of voices in a documentary text.

Trinh T. Minh-ha, an artist and author for whom multiple descriptive nouns and adjectives flow so easily from the fingers, says of herself: ‘I am always working at the borderlines of several shifting categories, stretching out to the limits of things, learning about my own limits and how to modify them.’ (Trinh and Mayne 1992 p.138) The borders that Trinh traverses include ‘documentary’ (a category about which she has written an article arguing that it does not truly exist (1990)), ‘postcoloniality’ (the subtitle of *Woman Native Other* (1989), her best-known work, is *Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*), ‘ethnography’ (she has described a ‘resistance to ethnography’ as an impetus to her work (Trinh 1992 p. 113) and ‘feminism’, though she has written that ‘imputing race or sex to the creative act’ (1989 p. 6) is a means of

sidelining cultural producers outside the mainstream. Trinh's films, too (e.g. *Surname Viet, Given Name Namh*, 1989), have a strong performative component, where the lines of fiction and documentary are blurred. In theorising around her work, questions of different forms of voice have regularly arisen. The Jamaican/UK filmmaker Isaac Julien, when interviewing Trinh (1992 p. 193), spoke of the 'the burden of representation — making films about subjects that have not been given voice — that you face in relationship to trying to give that subject in some way its own voice without it being the "authentic" voice' (1992 p. 193). Julien is here problematising the notion of a unitary authorial voice in documentary.

In Australia, various forms of Indigenous protocol — which tend to come from a rubric of anti- rather than post-colonialism for example Langton (1993 p. 7) — have similarly questioned this notion in relation to the long-established tradition of white Australian filmmakers looking to the lives and histories of Aboriginal people as frequent subjects of our documentary films. These same protocols have also impacted upon the way in which Aboriginal filmmakers approach the task of filming the story of an Aboriginal clan or kinship group other than their own. From the end of the 1970s, white filmmakers were occasionally ceding their authorial credit to the black subject(s) of their films (e.g. Essie Coffey, *My Survival as an Aboriginal*, 1979) (Langton 1993 p. 63). By 1987, the first protocols for the more usual situation of non-Aboriginal authorship of films about black subjects had been drawn up, paradoxically by two non-Aboriginal advisers to the Northern Territory's Northern Land Council, Chips Mackinolty and Michael Duffy (Langton 1993 p. 71). Many protocols have been drafted since — usually by Aboriginal filmmakers working in an institutional context. Darlene Johnson's (2000), drawn up for SBS Independent, the independent production entity of Australia's multicultural public broadcaster, is perhaps most widely in current use. This protocol includes such statements as:

The subject should be fully informed of their rights as storytellers, i.e. the right to full consultation at all stages of the production process, including the research and scripting stages, and during the filming and editing.

Such a protocol implicitly questions any assumption that the voice of the filmmaker should always carry greater weight than that of the documentary subject, and suggests that

‘control’ of the voice of a text with Indigenous subjects might be a complex field for negotiation in ways not anticipated in Nichols’ essay.

In the related field of print-based historiography, some Indigenous authors have gestured in the direction of the answer to the question of who may speak for whom being ‘never’ in the case of a non-Aboriginal person speaking for or through the voice of an Aboriginal person, as indicated by the title of a paper by Aboriginal historian Wendy Brady, ‘Indigenous Insurgency Against the Speaking for Others’(2000). Brady’s ire in this article is particularly reserved for historians who use government archives concerning Indigenous people as the basis of their career, without ever themselves talking in depth with Aboriginal people. Brady’s view is by no means unanimous amongst Indigenous cultural producers, however.

Marcia Langton (1993) described her impulse to writing ‘*Well I Heard it on the Radio and I Saw it on the Television ...*’ as:

I am trying to move boundaries and undo the restrictions which make it so difficult for any of us to speak ... I hope my approach will make it possible and less difficult for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists, including film and video makers, to say and do what they would like to say and do. (p. 9)

More recently, Frances Peters Little has reaffirmed the value of cross-cultural documentary production in her article entitled ‘The Impossibility of Pleasing Everybody: A Legitimate Role for White Filmmakers Making Black Films’ (2003). A public forum amongst Indigenous cultural producers broadcast on Radio National (2005) in which the playwright Wesley Enoch spoke of the potential for a ‘paralysis of integrity’ for Indigenous people working within the strictures of contemporary protocols, suggests that it is not just non-Indigenous cultural producers for whom coming to voice is an issue.

The Gunditjmara songwriter and filmmaker Richard Frankland has used the trope of voice to discuss a form of discursive reconciliation (2006 p. 21):

Reconciliation is about voice, and voice is about freedom and freedom is about responsibility. We are all responsible for the soul of this country, we are all responsible for where we can go as a country.

Frankland's statement would appear to offer the possibility of a form of discursive sharing between filmmaker and subject that could be an example of what Daniel Barenboim was referring to when he said that listening was a precondition for a publicly sanctioned voice. Heather Goodall is a print-based historian who has developed a 'shared histories' approach and has provided a very useful account of this approach in recent Australian historiography. She makes clear that 'shared history' can be tokenistic and, if seen as simply adding Aboriginal stories to already established white accounts, can result in distortions and unnecessary polarisation (2002 p. 8). But in her article, Goodall concludes that there *are* ways of pursuing a shared histories approach that can be valuable to a society currently in conflict about the way that its history is represented:

In which Indigenous and non-Indigenous people ... share common tasks while the actual histories remained open ended ... and where there remained space for reflection and ambiguity, re-evaluation and complexity. (2002 p. 21)

She is here primarily referring to community-based projects such as the memorial on the site of the Myall Creek massacre in North Western New South Wales.

The court case that has been before the Federal Court of Australia for several years, concerning the way that filmmaker Dennis O'Rourke incorporated the voice and images of two young Aboriginal girls in his film *Cunnamulla* (O'Rourke 2001) and the nature of the permissions underlying their incorporation, is evidence that the relationship between an authorial voice and the actual and metaphoric voices of documentary subjects can be very contentious, particularly when there are disparities of age, race, class, geographic locale and gender between filmmaker and film subject.

Indeed, it would seem that the print-based historian Victoria Haskins spoke for many when she described herself in a radio broadcast (2005) as feeling ‘tormented’ as to:

How could I, a middle-class white woman, write a history involving Aboriginal people that would be in any way valid? Worse still, was I just perpetuating colonialism by writing yet another white version of the Australian past?

Her account detailed the way the way her project changed when she found links between her own family history and Aboriginal people, such that ‘it was with no small sense of relief that I set about writing up a history I felt so clearly my own’ and concluded that: ‘The most powerful histories we can tell are our own.’ As Aboriginal filmmakers and historians have become more numerous and developed a collective voice, a number of non-Indigenous historians and filmmakers have ceased to ‘take on’ topics with a substantial Indigenous component. But, as Marcia Langton so aptly reminds us: ‘The easiest and most natural form of racism in representation is the act of making the other invisible.’ (1993 p. 24) What is required, then, seems to be a way of thinking about documentary voice that allows of some kind of ethical relationship of different categories of voice in relation to a text in ways not enunciated in Nichols’ essay. An addendum to this task from the field of print-based historiography comes from Haskin’s statement about ‘our own’ histories needs considering in light of Greg Denning’s reminder (2004 p. 46) of how colonial histories have complicated any simple binary opposition of what might be the histories of ‘Native and Stranger’, given that a substantial portion of the population would share elements of a genetic inheritance that would blur the edges of these apparently discrete categories. The field of ethnographic filmmaking offers some starting points to developing such a theory.

Recent Developments in the Theory of Documentary Voice, from an Ethnographic Perspective

The complex cultural politics that are intrinsically a part of an overt ethnic difference between documentary filmmaker and documentary subjects probably constitute a key reason why it is from within the ranks of ethnographic filmmakers and theorists that

debates about documentary voice have most obviously been furthered since Nichols' essay was written. And because ethnographic filmmaking exists within the broader field of anthropological discourse, these debates have largely occurred without reference to the way voice has been discussed in generalist documentary circles.

In the introductory chapter, James Clifford was quoted as discussing performative versions of the 'ethnographic project'. Ethnographic filmmaking has been a key site for such innovation since the 1950s. Jean Rouch, the eminent French filmmaker and ethnographer, routinely shared the discursive space of his films with his Indigenous subjects from the mid-1950s onwards. Rouch's film *Jaguar* is a classic example of why one cannot simply read film practice from a given technological base and how cultural innovation associated with technological advances is routinely presaged in the experimentation surrounding a preceding technology (1965). *Jaguar* was made over several years before its release, with Rouch filmed it on celluloid film without synchronised sound. Rather than filling the soundtrack with an expository voiceover, however, Rouch handed over the discursive space of the soundtrack to his film subjects, recording their responses to their own image and the way they had been constructed by the filmmaker and his team, and building these recordings into the soundtrack of the film. Rouch described this method as 'shared anthropology' and the material so gained as an 'audiovisual countergift' (Eaton 1979 p. 62).³

As previously noted, David MacDougall is an ethnographic filmmaker (often in conjunction with his wife, Judith MacDougall) who has also been an exemplary 'reflective practitioner'. His book *Transcultural Cinema* (1998) is a compilation of his articles spanning the period from the late 1970s until the late 1990s. Its later material is fundamentally an argument for the potential of visual media in ethnography and a polemical assertion that this capacity has often been undervalued in a discipline that, while it was critically involved in the early history of non-fiction cinema (through the work of such practitioners as Haddon and Baldwin Spencer), has predominantly been word-based in

³ This is Mick Eaton's translation of Rouch's words, originally in French. It is also described by the simpler term 'feedback'.

its recent manifestations. One reason MacDougall adduces for the value of visual sources to ethnography is that, unlike text-based forms that necessarily highlight difference, photography and other visual media can at one and the same time reveal specificity but also the way that things conform to more generally human patterns. In this way, he argues, images give rise to a ‘transcultural’ ethnography, thus ‘transcending the limitations of cultures ... crossing the boundaries of cultures’ (p. 245).

Ironically, given MacDougall’s focus on the visual, but perhaps bearing out the shift in principal anthropological metaphors from the visual to the verbal that I quoted James Clifford discussing in the Introduction, MacDougall very often uses the trope of voice to describe forms of authorship in ethnographic filmmaking. But voice as discussed by MacDougall is a much more fluid category than in Nichols’ schema. For instance, in the penultimate paragraph of his book, in an eponymous chapter entitled ‘Transcultural Cinema’, MacDougall writes that:

Most critics discuss the authors of films and anthropological texts in term of an ‘authorial voice’ that stands in solid contradistinction, often *dialogically*, to the ambiguous and often suppressed voices of others. However, the concept of the author of a work as a stable centre is illusory and seems more like the reification of one side of a structural or moral abstraction. In fact, our voices as authors are plural. At any moment, we represent shards and fragments of a continuing social and cultural experience, in which those we film or write about form a crucial part. The author is never isolated but always a contingent being, and the author’s ‘voice’ is always constituted in relation to its object. Finally, no author is fully aware of what constitutes its voice — it speaks differently in different contexts, it goes shifting subjectivities with others, it is a *ventriloquist* for its teachers, parents, friends and heroes. (my italics 1998 p. 274).

This passage, in many ways much more passionate than the sober discussion of anthropological consciousness in which it is embedded, raises many fascinating issues in regard to documentary voice, some of which — such as the tropes dialogic/dialogism and

ventriloquism — will be considered below. Although MacDougall does not refer to Nichols' work directly in his text, a footnote at the end of the first sentence of the quote above refers back critically to Nichols' voice essay as an example of work that treats authorship in documentary as a 'stable centre'.

In an earlier essay called 'Complicities of Style' (1992), MacDougall had begun to consider what the process of 'shifting subjectivities' might mean for voice, positing that forms of 'intertextual cinema' were arising. In *Transcultural Cinema*, he offers some further detail to this concept:

In recent years one sees a movement away from monologue toward — not even polysemic or polyvocal expressions — but poly thesis: an understanding that comes out of the interplay of voices rather than merely their co-presentation. (1998 p. 121)

Threaded through a book that is fundamentally about the visual aspects of ethnographic documentary — a tiny subset of the overall category of 'the creative treatment of actuality' — David MacDougall offers some fascinating but not fully worked through insights into documentary voice that for me are nevertheless more satisfyingly complex than Nichols' neat but somewhat simplistic schema.

Also from within the confines of specifically ethnographic film, Faye Ginsburg, an American professor of anthropology, has further developed MacDougall's concepts of a documentary's voice having multiple inputs, especially his concept of a move towards an intertextual cinema. In an essay entitled 'The Parallax Effect: The Impact of Indigenous Media on Ethnographic Film' (1999), she considers what has to become of the project of ethnographic film, in light of various burgeoning movements of Indigenous film, with the Australian as the most fully worked through example. She deploys the notion of the parallax — 'the phenomenon that occurs when a change in the position of the observer creates the illusion that an object has been displaced or moved' — explaining that it is this physiological difference between the view of our two eyes that creates the human capacity for depth and three-dimensionality of vision (p. 158). She then applies this trope to cinema

to argue that ethnographic and Indigenous film form a continuum which, when viewed ‘within the same analytic frame’, lead to a fuller, truer and more complex picture of culture (p. 173). In the same essay, she also lends further weight to MacDougall’s concept of transcultural cinema to argue against any notion that only members of a particular group should be able to represent that group, arguing that this reinscribes ‘essentialism in the face of a growing recognition of the complexity and instability of identity’ (p. 164). I find her argument generally persuasive, as it frees up notions of who can speak for whom, though it seems clear that the greater the cultural, ethnic or gender differences between filmmaker and subjects, the more important it is to find ways for the voice of the text to reflect both parties in some way. As will be discussed further in the concluding chapter, it is also the case that, when a particular group — women for instance, or Aboriginal people — has been denied a voice in the public sphere, a period of separatism in which primary focus is on an ‘injection of the repressed’ into civil discourse is valuable. It is in this context that MacDougall’s and Ginsburg’s contributions to debate need to be understood.

From the fields of anthropology and ethnography, then, the theory of documentary voice has been developed in ways that break down Nichols’ competitive binary opposition between the voice of the filmmaker and the voice of documentary subjects, and Ginsburg has provided a metaphor derived from the physiology of sight to talk about how differing perspectives can be resolved within her overall field and within a particular text. In his 1994 book *Blurred Boundaries*, Bill Nichols himself has used the case study of ethnographic documentary to argue that: ‘The voice of the traditional ethnographic filmmaker has become one voice among many’; however, this is not an insight to my knowledge that he has then taken back to the broader category of documentary film (quoted in Ginsburg 1999 p. 156). Ethnographic cinema being a vital but minority practice within the field of documentary, I want now to take this work on voice coming out of ethnographic discourse and build upon it for the field of documentary more broadly.

Tools to Understand the Vocal and Social Relations of Documentary

The simplest refinement to Nichols' argument that a documentary filmmaker's voice must take precedence over that of their subjects could be to argue that each must equally share the discursive space of a film so that a documentary is literally *equi-vocal*. But just as this word has negative connotations of ambiguity in common usage, so this concept has limitations as a way of construing discursive authority in documentary. I now want to consider a refined and expanded vocabulary from within the overall vocal metaphor for authorship in this field. In the long quote above on voice and authorship from David MacDougall, he uses two key figures of speech almost incidentally: *ventriloquism* and *dialogism*. I will discuss each in turn in greater detail, and explore their usefulness for a revised theory of documentary voice before proposing the *choric* as a third and in many circumstances potentially more useful term. I want to determine, to use Trinh's term, the ways in which it might now be 'tactical' to think about documentary voice, and in particular the relationship between a documentary filmmaker and various 'actors' upon a text, and to examine what rhetorical tools might be best suited to this task.

Ventriloquism

Ventriloquist/ventriloquism comes from a Latin root meaning 'to speak from the belly'.⁴ As a feminist, and leaving aside for a moment the wider connotations of the word, 'speaking from the belly' is in many ways an attractive concept to me. In this I am influenced by a whole feminist discourse, predominantly associated with French theorists such as Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, who rejected the tendencies of Rene Descartes and those who came after him to separate the mind and body, and instead created a woman-centred philosophy that was about reintegrating the two. Trinh (1989) writes out of this tradition in *Woman, Native Other* in a section headed 'Write your Body':

⁴ 1584, from L.L. *ventriloquus*, from L. *venter* (gen. *ventris*) 'belly' + *loqui* 'speak'. Patterned on Gk. *engastrimythos*, lit. 'speaking in the belly', which was not originally an entertainer's trick but rather a rumbling sort of internal speech, regarded as a sign of spiritual inspiration or (more usually) demonic possession. Reference to the modern meaning seems to have begun early in the eighteenth century, and by 1797 it was being noted that this was a curiously inappropriate word to describe throwing the voice. *Ventriloquist* is from 1656; *ventriloquism* is from 1797 (<http://dictionary.reference.com/search?r=2&q=ventriloquy>, accessed 12/02/2007).

Women must write through their bodies. Must not let themselves be drawn away from their bodies. Must thoroughly rethink the body to reappropriate femininity ... when new awareness of life is brought into previously deadened areas of the body, women begin to experience writing/the world differently. (1989 p. 36)

But of course, in standard usage ventriloquism refers to a performing art where an actor's lips do not appear to move, throwing the perceived source of their voice out from their body to a doll or 'dummy'.⁵ In his long quote above, MacDougall is using the term to describe how we not only learn the building blocks of any language we speak from those around us who already have competence in that language, but also of the way that we adopt opinions, figures of speech, aesthetics, and so on from those by whom we are surrounded.

Ventriloquism as a trope has a mixed history in cinema studies. In the field of the analysis of sound-image relations, especially of fictional cinema, Rick Altman wrote a key essay entitled 'Moving Lips: Cinema as Ventriloquism' (1980), which argues that the image track of cinema is a 'dummy' to the more fundamentally powerful but often disregarded soundtrack. This overall argument is too convoluted to feel helpful as a way of thinking about documentary voice, but some of the ventriloquists' manuals that Altman cites have a certain resonance. One manual states that: 'All of us have hidden desires that we suppress. The most successful ventriloquists have let these hidden desires be expressed in the personality of their dummies.' (Hutton, in Altman 1980 p. 77). From one perspective, this sheds light on the relationship between a documentary filmmaker and the themes to which they are attracted. Another manual says of the ventriloquist's dummy: 'His voice and personality should be richer and stronger than yours.' (Houlden, in Altman 1980 p. 78) At one level, this seems an apt metaphor to describe especially documentary with interview at its core, because of the way in which, compared with traditional expository documentary, documentaries with a strong interview component tend to express the filmmaker's position

⁵ The use of the term 'dummy' from dumb, as in without the capacity for speech, ironically 'gives the game (of ventriloquism) away', making it at least subliminally clear to an audience that the source of both voices is in fact the performer.

through the selection and organisation of the voices of their interviewees rather than the more direct forms of speech associated with films with a strong narrational component.

The notion of a form of ventriloquism to describe this relationship echoes the critic Lucien Taylor (1998) in the introduction to *Transcultural Cinema*, where he discusses interview-based films and the way in which they allow filmmakers to speak indirectly, ‘to conceal their own editorial point of view, and their own discursive voice, behind the testimony of their subjects’ (1998 p. 5). And ‘speaking from the belly’ is a powerful metaphor for the deep personal investment documentary filmmakers typically have in their films. On the other hand, the term ‘dummy’ as the counterpoint to ‘ventriloquist’, as in the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition ‘without voice ... one who is a mere tool of another’, is too negative to be useful as a way of generally thinking about the relationship between filmmakers and documentary subjects and/or broadcasters. Bearing this out, a brief search for uses of this trope in other discourses suggests that ventriloquism is used negatively as an indication of an erasure of some sort for persons who *could speak* if only they were given the space (eg Le Master 2004). For me, with my focus on documentary voice emerging from a process with multiple inputs, the notion of ventriloquism is ultimately too simple to be my central trope, although I will draw on it periodically as a way of thinking about situations where one entity’s discursive expression is subordinated to that of another. Forthwith, I will use the word *ventriloquic* to indicate this kind of discursive relationship.⁶

The Dialogic

This takes us to the second term that MacDougall uses in the extended quote above: ‘dialogic’. This is an adjectival version of the noun ‘dialogue’ whose etymology derives from the combination of the Greek word for two and the Greek word for reason, thus a process of sense-making involving a dialogue or conversation back and forth. Definitions and etymologies of ‘dialogue’ emphasise that it is about ‘two or more’ entities or persons

⁶ This is a neologism, coined to ‘match’ dialogic and choric. While it is a clunky term, I would argue that it is less awkward than the alternate adjectival form which is to be found in conventional dictionaries: *ventriloquial*. Readers are entitled to disagree and if you give the neologism no ‘airtime’ it can safely be expected to die out!

engaged in a conversation, metaphoric or actual (e.g. *Shorter Oxford* and *Macquarie Dictionaries*) (Little, Fowler et al. 1973; 1981).

In almost the inverse of what Nichols had to say about the filmmaker's authorial voice in relation to a documentary subject's voice, MacDougall in his extended quote earlier in this chapter uses the term 'dialogically' pejoratively, to suggest a kind of 'shouting'. In various forms of cultural theory, however, 'dialogic' is more often used to imply some kind of diminution of authorial prerogative and an opening out to input from others, most usually a member of the audience or general public. From psychology, Frank Richardson, in a 1998 article entitled 'The Dialogical Self', argued that: 'The mature human self is not essentially a center of monological consciousness ... rather it is a scene or locus of dialogue.' (quoted in Guignon 2004 p. 122) So in ethnography, museology, musicology and media studies, amongst other fields, dialogic tends to mean that in some way those other than the primary author can have input into or influence the form of a cultural work. As an example of this kind of usage, Andrea Witcomb in *Re-Imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum* speaks approvingly of the Museum of Sydney as representing a 'new museology' in which it approaches a 'dialogic interactivity' (2003 p. 156) through a design that she quotes Alexander and Brereton describing as 'less a mausoleum of dead cultural artefacts than a kind of electronic layer cake of interpretations capable of being revoked or transformed' (2003 p. 158).

Much of this usage can be traced back to M.M. Bakhtin, the Soviet literary theorist who first propounded his theory of dialogism in a 1929 essay on Dostoevsky (Bakhtin and Holquist 1981 p. xxiv). In subsequent decades, and ironically working very largely in isolation, Bakhtin developed this concept, along with many other terms relating back to an underlying metaphor of voice — for example, utterance, polyphony, heteroglossia. This work is gathered together in a collection and translation of his essays published posthumously as *The Dialogic Imagination* (Bakhtin and Holquist, 1981). For Bakhtin, novels achieved value and status in terms of the degree to which they were able to create literally 'novel' forms in relation to previously established forms. By extension, dialogism was the 'characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia ...

there is a constant interaction of meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others' (p. 458).

This notion of a metaphoric (and to a degree actual) process of dialogue as a way of understanding how documentaries come to assume their final forms is a useful one that periodically will be deployed below. The discourse — written and verbal — between filmmakers and subjects, filmmakers and broadcasters, filmmakers and their audiences, filmmakers and their colleagues centrally shapes the final form of documentaries in ways not accounted for in Nichols' theory of voice. Finally, however, the number of different inputs into any given text, and the relationship between a filmmaker and the various inputs to their work, are such that the metaphor of the chorus — from which I derive the adjective 'choric' — is a valuable addition to our analytical toolkit.

The Choric

This is not a common word in media studies or documentary theory. In fact, in reading extensively around concepts of voice in documentary, I have only once come across it. Stella Bruzzi, in a detailed textual analysis of *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984) in a chapter of *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* (2000), refers to 'a protracted series of interviews with the same friends and colleagues that have proffered choric opinions of Milk throughout' (2000 p. 48). In this usage, she would appear to be working from 'common or garden' notions of a choir as a group of persons 'singing from the same song-sheet', albeit typically with different harmonic parts.

If it is a truism that all words retain traces of their etymology, then it seems reasonable to suggest that 'choric' also carries with it something of the history of the Greek chorus (*khōros*, *khōreia*, *khōregia*, respectively the abstract 'object' of the chorus, the practice of same, and the underlying institution) from which the word is derived. The chorus was one of two fundamental performance elements in classical Greek theatre, the other being one or more protagonists played by professional actor/s. The chorus constituted:

The collective and anonymous presence embodied by an official college of citizens. Its role is to express through its fears, hopes, questions and judgements the feelings of the spectators who make up the civic community. (J.P. Vernant & P Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, in Wilson 2000 p. 111)

A Greek chorus, typically located at the side of the stage, generally consisted of collective speech, music and movement in masks that hid the identity of the individual participants. By their nature, many elements of choral performance were ephemeral, and this genre is now subject to academic debate regarding its details (eg. Wilson 2000; Ley 2007; McDonald and Walton 2007). Scholars concur, however, that the chorus (*khoregia*) was an institution central to Athenian democracy in which young men typically participated for several years, as part of their education for full citizenship. In the theatre, choruses often represented the perspective of those for whom citizenship was an impossible dream: slaves, foreigners and women (Wilson 2000 p. 80; Ley 2007 p. 191). Each chorus (*khoros*) was presided over by a *khoregoi*, a usually wealthy male citizen whose role it was to form and train a group. It was the Arkhon of Athens, a kind of titular magistrate, who assigned particular *khoregoi* to a specific poet and text (Wilson 2000 p.4, p. 61). In his book *The Athenian Institution of the Khoregia: The Chorus, the City and the Stage* (2000), Peter Wilson examines the overall impact of Athenian theatre with a choral element on its polis:

The political character of Athenian drama is now generally understood not as if it were a forum for narrow, thinly veiled political pamphleteering for a particular course of action ... but rather more as an institution ... in which could be raised the more unwieldy, problematic, big questions of life in the polis that underlie it but exceed the capabilities of diurnal debate. (p.67)

I have quoted this at length here because, if Athens was a society characterised by one medium at the heart of its body politic, and ours is a society notable for the central importance of a range of different audio-visual media, with documentary a genre crossing over a number of these media, currently we are seeing something of a reprise of the choral function in certain forms of documentary.

Bruzzi's usage above references the ensemble nature of a choir/choric. I am interested in this resonance, in the capacity of a choir to meld together the voices of individuals into something with more significance than just the sum of its parts. I am also interested in the trope of choric voice as a way of thinking about the structural function of inputs to the overall voice of a documentary which, while perhaps more muted than that of the central author, still have their part to play: commissioning editors, representatives of funding bodies, philanthropists, documentary subjects and members of the audience (especially in versions of documentary which have something of the nature of an ongoing event to them). At the edges of metaphoric application one could perhaps think of the first three of these categories as latter day *khoregoi*, but this will not be pursued any further. The category of the 'choric', following on from MacDougall, helps me to think about the voice of a documentary not as an expression of any single individual, but rather as what could be considered a form of 'stranded singularity'. I will test out these propositions below; first, however, I need to say something about a separate but related form of cultural theory.

Chora/Khora

Since the mid-1980s, a field of philosophy has arisen where writers including Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, Elizabeth Grosz, John Sallis and Gregory Ulmer have gone back to one of the Platonic dialogues known as *The Timaeus* to construct an esoteric branch of scholarship known variously as chora/khora/chorology. Kristeva is usually considered the pre-eminent figure in this movement. She defines chora as the earliest post-foetal stage of the development of human subjectivity, up to the age of four months, in which children do not distinguish themselves from their mothers (Felluga 2003). Ulmer, drawing on Derrida, describes chora as 'the space between two different discourses' (e.g. architecture and philosophy) (Hawk 2006). Ulmer elaborates that: 'Chorography as a term is ... a rhetoric of invention concerned with the history of "place" in relation to memory.' (Ulmer, *Heuretics*, in Hawk 2006 p. 39)

While there are many fascinating resonances in this discourse that relate to my doctoral work, I am not here aiming to add to it. Rather, like Bruzzi, I want to use the word in a

simpler sense — albeit giving it greater weight as a conceptual category than she has done. The text of Plato's *Timaeus*, certainly in the translations mainly available, does not actually use the word 'choric' or 'chora', and I am therefore unable to comment directly on the various readings derived from it. The text, however, has a statement that helps me to understand the underlying constitutive strands to a particular utterance, in documentary film and elsewhere. The main section of *The Timaeus* is a cosmology or creation story in which we are told that Timaeus is an astronomer who 'has made the nature of the universe his special study'. Timaeus himself, or the construction in the text bearing his name, writes that:

We who are going to discourse on the nature of the universe ... must invoke the aid of Gods and Goddesses and pray that our words may be acceptable to them ... to which I add an exhortation of myself to speak in such manner as will be most intelligible to you, and will most accord with my own intent. (Plato and Jowett(translator) 360 BCE p. 7)

This statement, while in no way referring to documentary film, carries within it something of the complex field of relations surrounding any particular example of voice or 'utterance' of documentary. If, in this secular world, we need to substitute 'commissioning editors' or 'funding body project managers' for the category of Gods and Goddesses so be it; documentaries must find a voice that conforms to a particular funding/cultural context, to the needs of their audiences and also be in accord with the individual subjectivities of their filmmakers. And to Plato we must add the category of the documentary subject/s; praying that 'their words' and 'our film' might be acceptable to them whilst remaining intelligible to audiences and in accord with the filmmaker's discursive intent!

I will now sketch out what a revised conception of documentary voice might sound like, approached as a dynamic process to aid filmmaker analysis of the position from which they speak rather than as a summative label applied after the fact by theorists. I will primarily use the tropes of 'ventriloquic', 'dialogic' and 'choric' to understand the process of production. I will do this across several categories: the filmmaker and documentary

subjects; the filmmaker/film object and the audience; and the film object in relation to other film objects. I will then consider how the form/s itself of documentary, devoid of specific content, make up part of what could be called the ‘ontologic’ voice of this area of cultural production before mapping something of the theoretical territory that might lie ahead if this approach were to be adopted more widely.

The Documentary Filmmaker’s Voice in Relation to Their Subjects

In Nichols’ framing essay, he enjoins filmmakers to take to themselves and their film texts the power that ought rightfully be theirs and which had been assumed in the era when expository documentary framed by narration was the predominant form. In counterpoint, David MacDougall, speaking from his position as an ethnographic filmmaker, has taken up Kristeva’s category of the intertextual to suggest that a filmmaker’s authorial voice is ‘contingent’ and can only be ‘constituted in relation to its object’ of which ‘those we film or write about’ form a crucial part.

In the closely related field of feature journalism, Janet Malcolm’s polemic, ‘The Journalist and the Murderer’, first published in the *New Yorker* magazine in 1989 and later published as a book, puts forward a different view again, which assumes the over-arching power of the cultural producer’s voice as a statement of fact rather than as a state of affairs to be aimed for:

Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself [sic] to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible. He is a kind of confidence man, preying on people’s vanity, ignorance or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse ... On reading the article or book in question he (the subject) has to face the fact that the journalist ... never had the slightest intention of collaborating with him on his story but always intended to write a story of his own. (Malcolm 1998 p. 1)

'The Journalist and the Murderer' was written soon after Malcolm herself was sued by Jeffrey Masson, the subject of a biography she had written. No overt trace of her personal experience of her topic is in the book, however; instead, she focuses on a case where a convicted murderer named Jeffrey MacDonald sued Joe McGinniss, an author who had written a book about him and his crime which MacDonald found offensive. The case hinged on McGinniss's alleged perfidy in being more sympathetic to MacDonald in person and in personal communications than in the book he subsequently published. The trial resulted in a hung jury, and McGinniss then came to an out-of-court settlement with MacDonald rather than facing a retrial. Malcolm's book about this case, which also canvassed the analogous relationship of the writer, Truman Capote and the prisoner, Perry Smith (recently revisited in the films *Capote* (2005) and *Infamous* (2006)), was extremely controversial. It led to Malcolm being publicly excoriated by many of her journalistic peers. Most of the criticism was for her unflinchingly negative portrayal of the relationship between journalists and subjects; however, for others her key failing was her refusal to connect this work to her own experience of going through the courts at the behest of an unhappy subject, even when questioned about it after publication (eg Seligman 2000). In this sense, Malcolm could be said to be undertaking a form of authorial ventriloquism, exploring and expressing her feelings about her own professional tribulations by writing about an analogous case.

Malcolm's detailed analysis of the interrelationship of McGinniss and MacDonald — both in its private and public manifestations — and the court's focus on the same issue are very interesting. Her analysis could be said to be dialogic because she explores the communication back and forth between writer and subject in great detail and the influence of elements of their personal relationship upon the subject's appreciation or otherwise of the final account. Such personal accounts of the process by which a work is produced and the surrounding social relations are rare in the existing literature on documentary voice, with some notable exceptions. Popular magazine and journal profiles notwithstanding, if it was the *tensions and potential breakdown* of the relationship between journalist and subject that sparked a wider discussion of the issue in Malcolm's case, the same is true of a couple of the documentary films of Dennis O'Rourke. O'Rourke's film *Good Woman of Bangkok*

(1991) sparked enormous controversy and substantial subsequent academic analysis (Berry, Hamilton et al. 1997) that revolved around the ethics of a middle-aged divorced Australian filmmaker forming a relationship with a Thai prostitute in order to make a documentary, and the means by which he secured her participation in the project. More recently, O'Rourke and his backing production company Film Australia found themselves in the Federal Court of Australia after the release of his film *Cunnamulla* (2001) over the issue of whether filming an interview with two young adolescent Aboriginal girls about their promiscuous sexual behaviour in an outback Australian town breached both the ethics and legal contract underpinning his filmmaking. In particular, this case — still on appeal to the High Court of Australia — turns on the statements O'Rourke gave to the girls' parents about his reasons for filming them compared with his actual interests as evidenced by the final film (Burgess 2004).

Clearly, then, to understand voice in documentary as it relates to the relative weight and intersection of the filmmaker's voice and their subjects' voices, a simple conflation of the former with the 'voice of the text' will not suffice. We cannot simply read from the surface of a work all the nuances of this interrelationship, but need to go to some kind of narrative account of how a documentary came into being, with both written and spoken dialogue vital primary sources. In the texts above, it is in some way the troubled relationships between author and subject that have been recounted, but such difficult relationships are not inevitable or axiomatic. At the risk of excessively lionising David MacDougall's work, his latest book, *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography and the Senses*, offers examples of theoretically informed personal accounts of how some of his film work — in particular, the series of films he made about the Doon Schools in India — came into being. MacDougall's focus in these accounts is on the embodied experience of filmmaking (and, from an external perspective, the experience of being a filmic subject) and the way in which 'before films can express ideas, they are a way of engaging with the world' (2006 p. 143). He emphasises the way in which his own documentaries are a record of that engagement, and then extrapolates to the more general case:

Any project ... is nearly always better viewed as a process than a statement. It marks out a trajectory toward a destination beyond itself, which is perhaps best foreseen at its point of extremity, where it leaves off. (2006 p. 140)

If all of the above examples emphasise that there is a power relation at work between documentary filmmakers and their subjects, in the spirit of Michel Foucault's work this is not a power relation that is all one way or reducible to a simple formula. Rather, the balance between the personal voice and perspectives of a filmmaker, the overall voice of their texts and the voice of any speaking or embodied subjects will shift and change according to the particular personnel and production context. In several recent examples — *Choir of Hard Knocks* (Permezel 2007), *After Maeve* (Cattoni 2006), *All Points of the Compass* (Rymer 2005) — the focus of publicity and discussion surrounding a documentary has been on the subject rather than the filmmaker. In the case of *After Maeve*, which traces the journey of an Australian family to deal with the accidental death of their ten-year-old daughter, the child's parents — as the key documentary subjects — decided that they would like a film made of their grief journey, selected filmmaker Jan Cattoni for the task, and shared editorial control of the resulting film with the filmmaker. At an Australian Academy of the Humanities symposium in November 2001, the Australian historian Donald Denoon described 'the right to tell one's story is a fundamental human right', a right sometimes denied by inhuman regimes, as reflected in the way Australia has treated illegal refugees in recent years. If at ground zero a filmmaker has the capacity to give and to take away that right from a subject then, as usually interpreted, a film subject equally has the right to withdraw from a project up to the point of completion or broadcast.

For a documentary project that might extend over many years, this latter power can, of course, be a source of great anxiety to a filmmaker. In Australian documentary practice, one way in which this anxiety is managed is to require all speaking subjects to sign a release form handing over copyright in any filmed material to the filmmaker. As a standard legal contract with an extrinsic 'quid pro quo' structure, a release typically gives to an interviewee either \$1 or an end credit in return for them ceding the right to the filmmaker use 'their voice and image'. The legal status of these documents has never been clear, and

the fact that they are not generally used in journalistic practice — even in the extended current affairs format that is a close cousin to documentary — suggests that their use might have more than a purely legal function. But if underpinning the standard wording of releases is a commercial notion of reciprocity, other forms of reciprocity are possible at the heart of the filmmaker–subject relation.

Bob Connolly is a director with his now deceased wife Robin Anderson of many award-winning films including *Rats in the Ranks* (1997), a searing portrait of local government politics as it is played in inner urban Australia. Connolly says he never uses releases because, in the kind of blunt observational portraits that are Connolly and Anderson's distinctive style, subjects would never sign them. Instead, the couple routinely showed each of their key subjects their films before the edit was locked off and before the film had been seen publicly to complicate a subject's response with the audience response. In their experience, if a subject could see that material had been cut in a way that had a congruence with original events, even if a compressed and truncated one, they would generally willingly accede to their own representation. In fact, Connolly says that:

The only people we've ever really upset in films are people who we've actually left out. Which makes me think that deep down people would prefer to be portrayed in any way than not be in it. (FitzSimons 2000)

So at the heart of documentary practice with human subjects there is an issue of voice and the potential for competition between the voice of the filmmaker and the voice, physical and metaphoric, of their subjects. A clear impetus to Nichols' influential voice of documentary essay more than 20 years ago was analysing tensions in this relationship that had been less obvious in an era when expository documentary predominated. The mobile cameras with synchronised sound that facilitated both observational and interview-based documentary created opportunities for filmmakers to speak indirectly through the edited words of their subjects, and also opened up the possibility for those who did not themselves control the means of production to reach an audience. This progressive democratisation — at least from certain perspectives — of the ability to speak into the public sphere has

continued apace in a world of online forums and blogs, in ways that will be discussed further in the next section.

These developments are not, however, just about technology, because the way these issues have played out has been influenced by cultural politics. The past couple of decades have seen a rolling back of the author's assumed power in documentary and in other cultural spheres, and a greater focus on who has the right to tell which stories. A powerful assumption has arisen — not confined to documentary — that we should stick to stories that are our own, even in the face of academic arguments that this assumes an essentialism of identity at odds with the diasporic world in which we live.

In picking through the above, it is clear that no single rhetorical gauntlet of the sort that Janet Malcolm lays down for journalism can account for the ways in which voice moves in and through documentary filmmakers and documentary subjects. This interrelation is as various as any human dyad: the whole growth of chequebook journalism, for instance, is another wrinkle to this that it is beyond this dissertation to encompass, other than to say that it potentially affords a documentary or journalistic subject whose story is seen as commercial property a great deal of power, while at the same time laying them open to a potentially demeaning commodification. Portraying this interrelation as dialogic is useful, with the addendum that the actual dialogue beyond the frame of the film is as relevant as the textual interrelation of a filmmaker's and a subject's point of view in the film. Filmmakers and their subjects are in a necessarily reciprocal relationship, with that reciprocity able to take many forms. And if it is possible to see that some of the authority of the text is shared with subjects, the same is also true of the relationship of filmmakers and their audiences. This is the relationship to which I will now turn.

The Audience of Documentary and Voice

The phenomenal growth of the World Wide Web, and other digital technologies that facilitate storage and retrieval of information, in the past decade or so has been one of many factors that has shifted the relationship between authors (whether in documentary or other

forms) and their audiences. Without entering directly into the once-fierce debates created by Roland Barthes (1977), with his famous ‘Death of the Author’ polemical essay — written long before the World Wide Web was ‘everywhere’ — it is clear that online sites such as Wikipedia change the notion of ‘authority’ which is at the heart of the concept of authorship. The Wikipedia model, in which authorship is collaborative and negotiated, reflects a world in which the kind of reciprocal exchange mooted above between cultural producers and their subjects has been extended to the relationship of authors and audiences. As the world of so called ‘Web 2.0’ and its foundation in ‘user-generated content’ expands, this category of cultural production is becoming increasingly significant.

From a theoretical perspective, it is again the field of ethnography that, from amongst the humanities disciplines, seems to have begun most fruitfully to think through the implications of these shifts. MacDougall’s *Transcultural Cinema* (1998) quotes Marilyn Stathern, a print-based anthropologist, noting in 1987:

If anthropologists write now about ‘other peoples’ they are writing for subjects who have become an audience ... that in turn makes problematic the previously established distinction between writer and subject: I must know on whose behalf and to what end I write (p. 91).

This statement, in contradistinction to an earlier time in which anthropologists and ethnographers worked to ‘explain one culture to another’, was part of what MacDougall had in mind when talking of an intertextual cinema.

When the frame is expanded beyond ethnography and ethnographic cinema to documentary more generally, it is clear that this intertextuality also now includes audiences — in other words, some of the distinctions between authors and their audiences have broken down, so that at least to a degree audiences also have a voice. I would suggest that, as a tool to understand this phenomenon, we can usefully apply the term ‘choric’ to denote ‘the voice of the people in the text’ or in the whole infrastructure (website, forums, talkback sessions, etc.) that has come to surround many documentary films, particularly those where the

filmmaker sees their work as part of a broader movement of social change around the issue explored in the film.

In the arena of broadcast documentary, this is most obviously expressed through the associated website and online discussions that are today a corollary of many documentaries. One example is Cathy Henkel's *The Man Who Stole My Mother's Face* (2002), which considered the impact on her mother's life of a rape in South Africa several years ago and documented Cathy's efforts to secure justice on her mother's behalf. The website that accompanies the film, www.hatchling.com.au/face/pages/storycontinues, at one level is the equivalent of the 'extras' on a DVD, providing director's statements, detailed character profiles, behind-the-scenes accounts and information on the theme of sexual assault that underpins the film. The website has an extended statement from the actor Glenn Close, detailing her response to the film as one of the judges of the Tribeca Film Festival that gave it a significant award. The site also contains the remnants of an extended online discussion thread. Most of this dialogue is between Laura Henkel, the main character of the film, and members of the audience who were moved by the film to take their engagement with the text further. In a section entitled 'The Story Continues', the website also documents what has happened to Laura since the film was released. This details that some of her poems have for the first time been published and that a women's sexual assault crisis centre in Liberia has been named after her. This kind of profiling of a documentary character is a good example of why Malcolm's statement about the relationship between a cultural producer and a subject always being stacked in the favour of the former is by no means a foregone conclusion. In a film such as *After Maeve* (Cattoni, 2006), the web elements are even more significant, many of them preceding and indeed constituting the broadcast documentary. One could cite many other broadcast examples.

In the arena of exhibition practice, input from the audience can take many other forms. The *Eternity* exhibition that is a permanent feature of the National Museum of Australia, for instance, incorporates both substantial elements of the material culture (e.g. the dress Azaria Chamberlain was wearing the day she was taken by a dingo) as well as touchscreen interactive documentary components (one of which considers the media furore which surrounded Azaria's mother, Lindy Chamberlain). This exhibition, the overarching theme

of which is the impact of emotion on Australian history, also has a booth where members of the public are encouraged to record one-minute stories detailing the impact of strong emotion on their personal histories. In the explanatory material surrounding this booth, members of the public are required to grant a licence to the museum to use any material so recorded in subsequent versions of the exhibition (Jensen 2001).

If Nichols' essay on voice can be seen as a response to his era and to some of the more facile declarations in the early days of interview-based documentary that characters were 'speaking for themselves', then it is equally clear that in updating this theory to take account of recent developments it would be easy to overstate the extent to which the locus of voice in documentary had shifted in the direction of audience power. In each of the examples cited above, finally it is the filmmaker, and the institutions that have formed a conduit for a filmmaker to come to voice, that determine the degree to which any audience feedback can form part of the overall voice of a piece. In one sense, the various forms of audience input or agency could be construed as dialogic, although there in a sense implicit in this term of the conversation, being an interchange of equals is to overstate the case. To understand this element of voice, then, the trope 'choric' is useful, in the sense that the various forms of audience feedback fulfil the ancient purpose of the Greek Chorus as a representation of the 'fears, hopes, questions and judgments and feelings of the spectators who make up the civic community' formally incorporated in the text. These categories will be taken forward into the next chapter as a way of understanding my own work before in the final chapter considering what they mean for future work on theories of voice in documentary. First, however, I will take these conceptual tools to the task of considering the ways in which institutions themselves can be said to have voice.

Different Documentaries in Relation to Each Other: Institutional Voice

In both his original 'voice of documentary' essay and in subsequent taxonomies of the field of documentary, Bill Nichols has defined voice as a distinct characteristic of individual films, even as those singular voices are then grouped together into modes, 'something like sub-genres of the documentary film genre itself' (2001 p. 99). Only in the last incarnation

of his schema is there a suggestion that ‘voice’ might also be an attribute of institutions, not just of individuals or individual texts:

Every documentary has its own distinct voice ... [that] attests to the individuality of the filmmaker or director or, sometimes, to the determining power of a sponsor or controlling organization. Television news has a voice of its own just as Fred Wiseman or Chris Marker ... does. (2001 p. 99)

In the text surrounding this quotation, Nichols continues this sense of a binary opposition between works that have an individual voice and works like television news that in some way bear the imprimatur of an institution. Working within Nichols’ framework, Gillian Leahy and Sarah Gibson (2003) have expanded this analysis and particularised it to the Australian case study, arguing in ‘Repression and Expression: the Filmmaker’s Voice in Australian Documentary’ that, in an era when television has become the major commissioner of documentary, the individual voices of filmmakers have been suppressed: ‘What’s needed for more expression and less repression of the filmmaker’s voice is a production environment that supports documentaries about ideas and innovation.’ (p. 96). A recent article by Frank Rijavec (2005), an Australian filmmaker who has worked with an outback Indigenous community to construct video documentaries in isolation from mainstream media institutions, continues this theme, arguing that only by isolating itself from broadcasters and the like has the community been able to keep its voice ‘sovereign’. Some of my own work within media history, while not explicitly deploying the rubric of voice, continues this paradigm of argument, looking back longingly to earlier systems of funding for Australian documentary, where cinema rather than television product was privileged and where less overt control of film form was exercised by funding bodies and broadcasters (FitzSimons 2002).

There is a seductive attractiveness in this line of argument which hints that ‘if only I/we could be left alone our true creative genius/individual voice could emerge’. This discourse is firmly rooted in a Romantic conception of voice following on from Rousseau and other philosophers of his tradition. Under the overall rubric of the closely related concept of

authenticity rather than voice, the philosopher Charles Guignon (2004) has traced this notion through time. Guignon's starting point is not documentary but rather the self-help movement and industry, which implies that happiness and creativity can be found in shucking off the social and finding the untouched individual within:

There is the nostalgia for an earlier state and the intimation that by turning inward and hearing the inner voice of the true self, one might make contact with the great groundswell of Nature from which we have sprung. (2004 p. 59)

Guignon identifies the flaw in romantic conceptions of the self as the assumption that it is either possible or valuable to completely isolate the voice of the individual. He draws on the work of the philosopher Richard Rorty to suggest that the authentic selves to which we are drawn are socially and historically constructed and therefore 'contingent'. Guignon develops this argument to suggest that we need to understand authenticity socially:

Becoming an authentic individual is not a matter of recoiling from society in order to express the inner self. What it involves is the ability to be a reflective individual who discerns what is genuinely worth pursuing within the social context in which he or she is situated. (Guignon p. 155)

I find this set of arguments persuasive when applied to voice in relation to documentary. The authentic voice of the filmmaker then becomes one productively contributing to the common weal, in whichever way audiences are reached. Using this notion of voice, just as I am here developing my argument through constant reference and dialogue with others who have thought through similar topics, and just as children develop a particular version of the innate human capacity for language acquisition through listening and interacting with others, so as filmmakers we develop our individual style amidst a plethora of influences. And it is as members of groups that we come to develop our identity and voice. But to characterise this interaction of self and others purely as dialogic is perhaps to be overly determinist. It may be my remaining traces of the Romantic conception of voice speaking, but it seems to me important to retain a sense of the possibility of positioned but

idiosyncratic utterance, influenced but never entirely accounted for by its context. Here again, a notion of the choric, in counterpoint to a filmmaker in the role of individual protagonist, is a useful trope.

One can borrow from Nichols his definition of voice as the ‘moire-like pattern formed by the unique interaction of all a film’s codes’ and substitute something like ‘an institution’s products/programs/films’ in place of the noun predicate (i.e. a film’s) to think about how voice can also be an expression of groups and institutions. Thus not only does television news have a voice, but so do networks/funding bodies/nations/festivals, etc., and these could be considered forms of *institutional* or collective voice. By institutional voice I mean all the ways that all the various institutions with relevance to documentary film production — broadcasters, government funding bodies, production houses, etc. — ‘speak’ through the choices they collectively make and their outcomes. So the institutional voice of the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) or the Australian Film Commission (AFC) in the era of the Creative Development Fund (CDF) (1978–88) demonstrated a greater willingness to explore different registers/relation to audience than would be the case with Australian free-to-air commercial channels or the ABC at present. And filmmakers and commentators are currently watching SBS Television closely to see in what ways the recent introduction of intra-program advertising is changing the voice of the network.

An institution aware of its overall voice and authentic cultural function in Guignon’s terms would set up structures designed to bring to the public sphere a range of voices not otherwise represented. From this perspective, dissonance as well as harmony, contradiction as well as coherence, *diversity* within as well as between these institutional voices all become especially valuable. Again Guignon’s words have resonance for me, not in relation to documentary specifically but in the civic sphere more generally:

The expression of unpopular views is especially important for a democratic society, because it is a presupposition of a free society that it is only by playing off a diverse range of views in the ongoing conversation of the community that the best possible answers can be reached. (2004 p. 160)

So, while the voice of each documentary will to various degrees and ways reflect multiple inputs rather than a pure essence of a filmmaker's voice, a healthy institutional culture of the various supporting institutions requires a wide range of registers and tones and possibilities to be represented rather than being monologic. Here, understanding the structural affordances and impedances that bring some individuals and groups to voice in the public realm, and silence and marginalise others, is vital. And the relative weight of individual voices and institutional influences needs to be considered. It may well be, for instance, that many broadcasting systems — certainly, in my view, contemporary Australian television — give too much weight to the chorus of schedulers, commissioning editors, and managers and marketers, and not enough to the creative producer/director, such that the widespread assumption that Michael Renov identified (especially in US culture) that the maverick voice can always cut through institutional constraints simply cannot be sustained. And issues such as laws governing the concentration of media ownership, the ability of filmmakers to access news footage in subsequent years as archive, free trade agreements and countervailing regulations to support national as opposed to generic global programming, and the influence of advertising and other commercial influences become critical if voices that need to be heard by the common weal are to 'cut through'. Any situation where the institutional voice is so strong that there is little possibility of dialogic interchange with the component individual filmmakers' voices risks those *filmmakers* becoming ventriloquic 'dummies' in relation to an enabling institution: a network, state funding body, etc.

It is a truism of linguistics that languages are dynamic, their robust health being marked by their ability to adapt to new circumstances. Applying this truism to institutional voice, one could consider the classic Saussurean dialectic of *langue/parole*. In Saussure's schema, each language — while always dynamic at any moment — also has a completeness to it (Hawkes 1997). As applied to documentary, I would argue that the health of an institutionally based documentary *langue* benefits from the greatest possibly diversity of component documentary *paroles*. This focus on the importance of a distance between different voices that are nevertheless in what we could call a choric relation to each other is

reminiscent of the sentence that is perhaps the nub of Nichols' argument in the slightly amended 1988 version of his essay:

The greatest problem, at least in recent documentary, has been to retain that sense of a gap between the voice of interviewees and the voice of the text as a whole. It is most obviously a problem when the interviewees display conceptual inadequacy on the issue but remain unchallenged by the film. (p. 55)

As I understand the voice of documentary in 2007, the greatest contemporary problem in Australian documentary is to retain a sense of a gap between the voice of a text or of a filmmaker and the voice of the television networks that are their primary commissioners.⁷ It is most obviously a problem when the institutions or commissioning editors display conceptual inadequacy on an issue but remain unchallenged by a citizen populace and governments with the power to change structures of documentary regulation, subsidy and production.⁸ And this is where the range of ways that the documentary impulse has been expressed in new and emerging forms — on the net, as part of art and exhibition practice, and the academy — becomes so important to the overall health of the form, retaining within its fold the seeds of its continual future reinvention.

Documentary: The Content (and Voice) of the Form

Before concluding this chapter, there is one final perspective from which I would like to consider the voice of documentary, which is to ask what its ontological status might be in relation to other cultural forms. While this is too large a question for a complete answer here, this is important by way of developing a contemporary conceptual framework to discuss documentary voice. Nichols and others who have come after him have tended to talk about documentary voice in isolation. In this paper as a whole, I have sought to connect

⁷This focus on television, of course, leaves out the recent spate of mainly United States commercial feature-length documentaries that have been successful in cinemas, such as *Bowling for Columbine* (Moore 2002) and *Supersize Me* (Spurlock, 2004). While vital, this work is nonetheless currently a minor strand of documentary as a whole, especially of works produced in Australia.

⁸ With apologies obviously to Bill Nichols, whose forms I am here mimicking.

arguments about voice within documentary theory circles with something of how these questions are taken up in other discourses. In and of itself, I argue that this provides new perspectives and insights. The increasing ubiquity of cross-media models of production, however, in which a body of research or thought might emit in a number of separate but related products — one of which is a documentary — raises the question of what the particular ‘grain’ of documentary as a whole might be, to use Roland Barthes’ term for ‘the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue’ (1977 pp. 179 - 89). We could perhaps think of this as the (inner) voice of documentary, or perhaps again draw on Saussure as the overall *langue* of documentary.

Another way of thinking about this is to go to Hayden White’s (1987) neat aphorism ‘The Content of the Form’ and to ask what this might be for documentary. White is an intellectual historian who analysed his own discipline of narrative history, seen as a kind of literary genre. He concluded that narrative history intrinsically has a content, regardless of the specific topic that it treats:

It is historians themselves who have transformed narrativity from a manner of speaking into a paradigm of the form that reality itself displays to a ‘realistic’ consciousness. (1987 p. 24)

Within the field of documentary studies, White’s work has been applied extensively to the analysis of historical documentary, most obviously by Bill Nichols in *Representing Reality* (1991) and *Blurred Boundaries* (1994). This part of Nichols’ work usefully considers the difference between common forms of historical documentary and historical fictional dramas, viz:

Unlike historical fiction, documentary lacks the problem of finding itself with a body too many, namely that of an actor. When an actor reincarnates a historical personage, the actor’s very presence testifies to a gap between the text and the life to which it refers. It reduces representation to simulation. Documentary by contrast, faces a scarcity of resources when it foregoes the use of actors. Its problem is to represent a

historical person as such but within a narrative field as a character — an agent of narrative functions — and within a mythic or contemplative field as an icon or symbol — the recipient of psychic investments. Documentary faces the dilemma of a body too few. (1991 p. 250)

Nichols' analysis stays fundamentally within the frame of film studies, although by the time he returns to these questions in *Blurred Boundaries*, as the name implies, he considers something of how the categories of 'documentary' and 'historiography' are beginning to blend into each other. In the later book, he again draws on Hayden White and his concept of 'willing backwards' to support work that, rather than aiming for a realist recreation of history, instead involves 'fragmentation, strange or irreconcilable juxtapositions and the necessity for a retrospective form of reading' (1994 p. 118).

Stella Bruzzi also refers to Hayden White in *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, but in her case it is to criticise what she describes as White's 'inflexible formalism' (2000 p. 18). White argued that: 'To be historical, an event must be more than a singular occurrence, a unique happening. It receives its definition from its contribution to the development of a plot.' (1987 p. 58) Bruzzi points out that, from Esther Shub's time onwards, compilation historical documentary has often used fragments of material that may well represent nothing more than a 'singular occurrence', and quotes Eisenstein to the effect that it is juxtaposition through which cinema creates meaning (2000 p. 23).

What hasn't happened systematically, to my knowledge, is to think about what the content of the form or 'ontologic voice' of the whole edifice of documentary might be. Such formulations as Nichols' concept that documentary is a 'discourse of sobriety' (1994 p.47) approach something of the task, but of course documentary is only one of a number of such discourses. In common with many other discourses, including historiography, narrative is central to most forms and sub-forms of documentary, although some documentaries in the 'blurred boundary' with fine art practice would challenge this statement — for example, Chantal Akerman's *From the East* (1993).

Bruzzi's (2000) analysis of the centrality of juxtaposition to documentary comes closer to the mark, and to documentary's propensity to create meaning in the continuities and discontinuities of image and sound. But again it is the statements of filmmakers who then come to theorise their practice that most closely approach the nub of questions of the overall voice of documentary. Because he is working in the inherently cross-media universe of ethnography, David MacDougall in his latest book has begun to think through in detail the differences between written and visual ethnography, particularly in relation to the excess of communicative power intrinsic to any image and to the power of the spaces *between* two shots as a source of meaning (2006 pp. 38-43). In a somewhat similar vein, Michael Rabiger (2004 p. 93), practitioner turned author of an excellent how-to manual for directing documentary, has noted that:

Getting the reader to notice a fragile and transient moment of significance is easily accomplished by a writer but is much harder to accomplish in documentary unless you are willing to use narration. This drives documentarians to play safe by resorting to sensational subjects.

While one could think of plenty of counter-examples to this statement, especially in regard to sensational subject-matter, the way in which, as a documentary filmmaker, one routinely searches for narrative arcs amidst the continuum of life and lives does seem intrinsic to very many versions of documentary, especially in our contemporary era where television in particular has focused on 'character-based' documentary. Paula Rabinowitz (1994 p. 17) has noted that most documentary footage consists of 'filming an essentially ephemeral event, a vanishing custom, a disappearing species, a transitory occurrence'. It is perhaps precisely this focus on the specific instance with a contemporary angle that differentiates much documentary practice from print-based narrative discourses such as history, although there is also something to suggest that they share in common a tendency to be 'life with the boring bits left out'. This use of metonymy is the essence of most versions of observational and interview-based documentary and their hybrids, though Lucien Taylor (MacDougall and Taylor 1998 p 4) has pointed out that this figure of (audio visual) speech was not used to the same extent in expository documentary.

To develop a coherent idea of what could be called the ontologic voice of documentary, a detailed case study of some of examples of cross-media projects would be useful. Something of this is my task in subsequent chapters of this dissertation. Another example that comes to mind from the Australian perspective would be a group of works by Ross Gibson published over twelve years from the mid-1980s to the late-1990s. Each of these works in different ways arises from a set of archival documents that represents the idea and actuality of the continent of Australia: the *Diminishing Paradise* (Book 1984), *Camera Natura* (Documentary 1985) *South of the West* (Book 1992) and *The Bondstore Tales* (Exhibition and Book 1996). The particular voice of each can be partly but not wholly explained by differences in media.

A detailed discussion of the ontology of each component form is beyond the scope of this thesis, but almost certainly it would reveal that the voice of any particular work is not entirely predetermined by the precise intersections of its author, format, genre or institutional background, although all of these have an impact. Authorial voice in whatever format also has something of an alchemy to it, a moment when a creative impulse and an opportunity come together. To go deeper into this question, one would also have to read carefully the works that attempt to account for the deep structures/inner voice of other cultural forms, the works equivalent to Hayden White on narrative historiography. David Malouf has attempted something of this project in relation to narrative fiction. In an article entitled 'An Artful Seduction between the Covers' (2006 pp. 28-9), he analyses the relationship between fiction writers and readers using vocal metaphors:

Nothing in the whole heady business of writing is more mysterious than the relationship between writer and reader. That is the spell that is cast by the writer's voice; the way we internalise that voice and make it, for the time of reading, our own, so that the experience it brings us seems no less personal and real than what we experience in the world ... the writer's consciousness and the readers imperceptibly merge, in an intimacy where, all conditions being propitious, I and the other, mind and world, are one.

Such a relationship cannot fully be accounted for by any one of my key analytic terms to describe interrelationship in regards to authorial voice — ventriloquic, dialogic or choric — and almost certainly speaks of a connection more intimate than any normally applicable to the relationship of documentary filmmakers and their audiences, though with some resonances perhaps for the possible relationship of filmmakers and their subjects. Through a continued process of comparison and refinement, one could move closer to a sense of the inner voice of the documentary project as a whole.

Conclusion

Bill Nichols has been a singularly important scholar in the field of documentary theory, and it has been his ever-developing schema of different modes of documentary voice that has formed the backbone of much documentary studies. What I have aimed to do in this chapter is to go back to his essay that in many senses underpins these various typologies, to interrogate its suppositions and to develop my own propositions within its rubric. It was an essay written as a tactical response to documentary culture in the early 1980s; and I am thinking through what might be the most strategic reworking of his schema in the first decade of the new millennium.

I have done this by treating documentary less as a subset of cinema in isolation and more as a component of the ‘discourses of sobriety’, to use Nichols’ term. In particular, I have focused on the interrelation of different forms of voice and the systems by which they arise. I have found that it is ethnographic filmmakers and theorists who have most effectively built upon Nichols’ work; however, as this is such a small subset of documentary cinema, that paradigm needs expanding.

In this chapter, I have been searching for a new way of thinking about voice in documentary that moves beyond an essentially Romantic conception of individual authorial voice. I have drawn on the work of Charles Guignon to suggest that it is impossible to produce a pure voice untainted by social influences, and that it is more useful to think of

socially located authorship and to analyse what is required in a particular social context. In thinking about the relationship of an individual author to their social context, I have explored three key tropes — the ventriloquic, the dialogic and the choric — to think about the intersection of a documentary filmmaker's voice and the various inputs to it. The first of these terms has been found to carry too much negative connotative 'baggage' for wide usage, and I have found that the last two are variously relevant. If we accept that, far from being a simple expression of individual subjectivity, documentary voice is a contingent and negotiated category, then all the many forms of dialogue that surround it — actual and metaphoric — become important. And many emerging forms of documentary depend at their core on ongoing forms of dialogue with their publics. But the number of different inputs to a given piece and the continued centrality of the guiding individual subjectivity ideally at its core suggest that viewing documentary voice as choric can be useful, the filmmaker a kind of conductor of many different voices in a way that nevertheless bears their individual imprint. This same notion of choric voice is a way of thinking about the collective voices of institutions and entities, which need to do more than merely have everyone 'sing from the same songsheet' but allow for dissonance and virtuoso solo performances as well as harmonics.

I have further suggested that, rather than focus on simply labelling the voice of completed documentaries, it will be more fruitful to explore the process by which a particular voice has arisen. David MacDougall has provided some models for this in relation to his own work that, amongst other things, considers how anthropology conducted audio visually differs from text-based work. I have further suggested that this could fruitfully be extended to collections of cross-media works by individual authors, at least one of which is a documentary film. MacDougall's work also considers the embodied journey of the filmmaker towards a particular voice as worthy of deeper consideration. The next two chapters of this dissertation will take on this task in relation to my own creative works presented for examination.

The Voice of Documentary from a Cross-media Perspective — Using *Channels of History: A Social History Exhibition* as a Case Study

Introduction

In this chapter, I want to apply the conceptual tools and analyses developed in the previous chapter to one part of my own work as presented for examination, *viz. The Channels of History* social history exhibition. In line with my overall theme throughout this doctoral work of ‘braiding’, this is an iterative process. In applying theoretical perspectives to an account of my own work, I gain greater insight into screen production works that I have written and directed. Equally, in this process I discover gaps and omissions in theory and in my own understanding that can be refined in subsequent iterations of both theory and practice. Following in the footsteps of reflexive practitioners such as David MacDougall and Greg Denning, I want here to offer an account of how the exhibition came to assume its final form, referring to various forms of cultural theory as it informs/has informed both my processes of production and reflection.

In relation to Bill Nichols’ (1983) earlier quoted definition of documentary voice — ‘that which conveys to us a sense of a text’s social point of view, of how it is speaking to us, and how it is organizing the materials it is presenting to us’ (p. 18) — one could say that this will be an account of the exhibition’s documentary voice. However, whereas in his foundational essay on voice and its later explication in various typologies Nichols focused on voice as a label that can be applied after the fact, here I will focus on what could be called ‘coming to voice’, and the ways this related to other individuals and entities whose voice could be said to resonate in the exhibition. In this chapter, my account of producing the exhibition will be contained and inflected by the overall argument of the dissertation; for a more descriptive account of the process of producing the exhibition, please see my prior journal publications in Appendixes 1 and 2 (FitzSimons 2004; FitzSimons 2004).

By its nature, this chapter itself will be very braided, so perhaps some questions can help to orient readers. My account will also have elements of both chronology and theme to guide it. What might happen to Nichols' theory of documentary voice when applied to a social history exhibition? What happens if we think about the 'voice' of the exhibition through the frames of museology and historiography rather than documentary theory? How might Hayden White's notions of particular cultural formations carrying with them implicit content relate to the form of the social history exhibition? What forms of content might be especially apt to be expressed in exhibition form? Finally, how might we think about the voice of documentary in relation to the *Channels of History* exhibition, and how might that relate back to the broader questions around the social relations of voice discussed in the previous chapter?

First, however, I want to offer a brief account of what it is meant by the *Channels of History* exhibition, as one component of the *Braided Channels* creative research project presented for examination.

The Channels of History Exhibition

Channels of History is a traveling social history exhibition that explores the women, land and history of the Channel Country of Southwest Queensland. The Channel Country has been vital to humans for thousands of years. It was:

- a key trade route and land of plenty for Aboriginal people especially associated with the *pituri* trade;
- in the path of explorers Burke and Wills, McKinlay and Hodgkinson;
- the foundation of huge squatting fortunes such as that of the Durack family — who used the Georgina River as a kind of 'road' through to the Kimberley.

Today, this vast area is home to a handful of Australians — mainly engaged in pastoralism and oil and gas mining — whose lives are as interconnected as the waterways upon which their livelihoods depend.

Channels of History opened at the State Library of Queensland in November 2002 before traveling in the 2003–05 period to five rural and regional Queensland locations (three of them in or on the edges of the Channel Country) and on to the South Australian Museum, the Constitutional Centre in Perth and the Mildura Arts Centre.

It was built upon the foundation of an audio-visual oral history archive that I was funded to create by the Centenary of Federation during 2000/01. The exhibition itself was produced with \$100,000 funding from the Queensland Heritage Trails Network, a section of Arts Queensland. It consists of:

- thirteen text and image panels covering different thematic aspects of the history of women in the Channel Country;
- elements of an art installation that were designed and produced by Georgina Greenhill, working to my overall brief;
- a touch-screen kiosk containing eight three- to four-minute documentaries on different themes relating to Channel Country history;
- a table providing more detailed bibliographical information and reading matter on the theme of Channel Country history, as well as a book encouraging the public to respond both to the exhibition as presented, and to a set of ‘puzzles’ and questions that arose from the process of researching the exhibition;
- a pamphlet detailing key themes and images, a curator’s statement and further reading. This was produced at the request of the South Australian Museum and used in all subsequent stagings of the exhibition.

Realising the exhibition was an intensely collaborative process, one in which I employed two researchers, two cinematographers, an editor, an exhibition designer and a company to realise the touch-screen interface. I was the producer, director, sound recordist and interviewer of the documentary component, and the overall producer and curator of the exhibition. For reasons of simplicity, I use the pronoun ‘I’ here, but my knowledge of this collaborative process is one of many reasons why Nichols’ individually focused theory of documentary requires some rethinking.

Voice as a ‘problem’ in relation to the exhibition

It was the challenges of curating this exhibition that first sensitised me to various questions of voice that have come to frame this doctorate. Firstly, this was because of the length of time between me becoming interested in producing a piece on the intersections of women, land and history and finding the right ‘channels’ through which to do this — it was not until I found a location where it was possible to include strong Aboriginal dimensions to the topic that it felt possible to ‘come to voice’. Secondly, in the shift from the original plan of producing a documentary on these themes to producing a travelling exhibition with a documentary component, questions around an appropriate ‘voice’ for the exhibition loomed large, in particular how to deal with the (for me) novel spatial and potentially material dimensions of the task of curation. Thirdly, in pursuing the path of a reflective practitioner and reading theoretical discourse around my practical work, I became aware of both resonances and disjunctions between the documentary theory with which I was familiar and the new literatures with which I came to frame my production experience: voice is the most apposite term to encompass both the similarities and differences. This will be detailed further below. First, however, I want to look at what the relevant disciplines of documentary theory, museology and historiography have to say about questions of voice in relation to a social history exhibition.

Documentary Theory, Voice and Social History Exhibitions

Neither in his seminal essay on documentary voice (1983), nor in his multiple subsequent divisions of documentary voice into its various constituent modes and typologies (1991; 1994; 2001), does Nichols explicitly consider how the voice of documentary might be inflected by the framing context of its format. Instead, broadcast or cinema exhibition is presented as unexamined locus of what a documentary *is*. Indeed, in using a self-referential and institutional definition of documentary (2001 p. 22) — ‘Documentaries are what the organizations and institutions that produce them make’ — Nichols would almost certainly *not* recognize a social history exhibition as lying within his frame of reference for documentary, given that to my knowledge museums and other exhibiting institutions do not

routinely describe as documentary the non-fictional audio visual works that form part of various fine art, and social and natural history exhibitions.

Voice, Museology and Public History

Nor does the field of museology explicitly provide an alternate concept with which to understand the forms of the *Channels of History* exhibition. Indeed, the whole notion of ‘authorship’ that underpins Nichol’s concept of documentary voice is a very complex one in relation to the practice of exhibiting institutions such as museums and art galleries. Even contemporary definitions of ‘curator’ focus on the primary functions of ‘custodian’ and ‘guardian’¹ — implicitly of precious objects or artworks — rather than of ‘authoring’ a particular way of telling a story through the materials gathered together in an exhibition. And even though various forms of audio-visual media that, in common with part of Nichols’ most recent definition of documentary (2001 p. 35), comprise ‘images and sounds (that) have their origin in the historical world we share’ have increasingly been central to many exhibitions and exhibiting institutions, the word ‘documentary’ is not generally used in relation to these works. I will discuss recent debates in museology in relation to media later in this chapter, but at this point suffice to say that nowhere in the theoretical literature I have reviewed have I explicitly encountered the word or concept of ‘voice’ to describe the task of exhibition design and curation. ‘Voice’ is sometimes used to name exhibitions, in usages where there are connotations of groups suppressed from civic discourse being ‘given voice’ through public display of their material culture. For example, *The Ancestors’ Voices: Speaking Through the Object* was the name of a forum at the National Museum of Australia (NMA) associated with a travelling Canadian exhibition of sacred sculptural objects from the Pacific Coast (Morton 2006). In this example, the objects themselves are located as the source of discursive power, in a manner that is in accord with the deep history of museums as institutions whose primary function is the custodianship of material culture.

I have been unable, however, to locate within museology any more general theory around ‘voice’ in relation to objects. As one who commonly says to market stallholders and

¹ Curator is defined in terms of management or guardianship, implicitly of objects and is from the Latin word *curare* ‘to take care of’. Dictionary.com, accessed 17/7/2007.

retailers ‘I’ll see if x calls to me’ when having looked carefully at something I am considering buying, I am prepared to walk away without purchasing it, I have searched for but not found either an established term to describe this kind of voice. I have also considered, but not come up with, a suitable neologism to describe the kind of voice emitting from objects in an exhibition context.

What is known as ‘the New Museology’ does commonly espouse the virtues of ‘dialogic’ exhibitions in a usage clearly related to the sense in which Bakhtin coined the term.² As deployed by authors such as Andrea Witcomb (2003), a dialogic exhibition is one that opens up:

A conversation between an exhibiting institution and their public/s in which an exhibiting institution is viewed as a site of power relations ... to invoke and encourage new relations between museums and communities (p. 79).

Eileen Hooper-Greenhill has written about how, although museums themselves go back to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, an explicit *theory* of museology has arisen only in the past couple of decades in which:

Constructivist learning theory plays together with post-structuralist epistemologies and post-colonial cultural politics to position the viewer/learner as both active and politicised in the construction of their own relevant viewpoints. (Hooper- Greenhill 2000 p. xi)

This is in counterpoint to an earlier era of museum exhibition design in which the viewer was presumed to be a kind of blank slate upon whose mind the linear progress-oriented argument of a display could be written. It is unsurprising that a discipline formed amidst an era in which post-modernism in its many forms held sway has embraced the notion of the

² For a fuller discussion of ‘the new Museology’, see G. Davison, ‘National Museums in a Global Age: observations abroad and reflections at home’, in D. McIntyre and K. Wehner (eds), *Negotiating Histories*, Canberra, National Museum of Australia, 2001, Trinca and Andrea Witcomb

dialogic. But such a view of the contemporary role of museums is by no means unanimous. The *Eternity: Stories from the Emotional Heart of Australia* (Jensen, 2001) exhibition, set up as part of the inauguration of the National Museum of Australia (NMA) and discussed in the previous chapter, would be an example of what Witcomb would mean by the term ‘dialogic’, with its capacity for members of the public to add their stories to the others exhibited.³ This exhibition was stridently criticised by the journalist Miranda Devine in a newspaper ‘opinion piece’ (12 March, 2001) for being too open to interpretation, trivialising non-Aboriginal history and not being sufficiently serious.

Mathew Trinca, general manager of collections and content at the NMA, has written of the way in which, in the so called ‘History Wars’ that have raged over the past few years in Australia, the NMA and its exhibitions have been key sites of battle in the liminal zone between academic history and the wider public. Heated debate has ensued as to whether the public should be construed as a unitary whole, or whether the various shades of difference constituting various parts of the nation ought to be recognised and separately addressed.

Trinca details the way in which some of the central documents that were used as blueprints for setting up the National Museum of Australia assumed the latter position:

The National Museum should attempt to represent all sections of the Australian population and all regions of the country. *It will seek to give voice to differing views of the national past* (my italics), and in its public programs will seek to promote informed debate on historical and scientific issues of national importance. (Statement of Aims and Objectives for Historical Interpretation in the NMA 2001 in Trinca 2003 p. 5)

By contrast, the Commonwealth government-instigated *Review of the National Museum of Australia* (2004), and its activist recommendations coming so soon after the institution opened its doors to the public, assumed the former position (Atwood 2004 pp. 286-87).

³ Though to my knowledge none of this content has actually been *re-presented* to the public, or formally integrated back into the exhibition

John Carroll (2004 p. 293), social theorist and chair of that review, criticised the nature of the historiography underlying many of the exhibitions within the Museum:

The extreme pluralist standpoint [holds] that history is no more than a collage of different stories and interpretations ... there are no grand narratives, sacred moments, collective traits to distinguish a people, around which they might imagine their identity ... This position is sociological nonsense. No human society can hold together and function without what Emile Durkheim called a 'collective conscience' — a strong, morally charged view of the world and its meaning shared by its members.

From this quotation, it is apparent that Carroll would be amongst those Greg Denning was referring to when quoted in an earlier chapter (2004 p. 33) paraphrasing many of his colleagues as regarding any concern with 'voice' or 'authorial presence' as 'fancy stuff' best left alone. Although it is not a term coming directly out of his discourse, Carroll here is exhorting the NMA to be *monologic* in its address to an imagined community — in Benedict Anderson's (1983) terms — which is seen as singular and unitary. The review of the National Museum of Australia also expressed antipathy to oral sources as the basis of exhibitions, which of course has implications for the forms of media it may be possible to include, as well as for the incorporation of the perspectives of Aboriginal people and other predominantly oral cultures (McCarthy 2004 p. 19).

Trinca (2003 p. 6) responds from within the museological profession to these opposing positions with various suggestions, one of them being that:

Perhaps we need to make the business of making history and representing the past more open and accessible to the public. Instead of an invisible museum hand behind the exhibitions, we should try to lay bare our curatorial practice, warts and all.

This chapter of my dissertation can in part be seen as a response to Trinca's call — indeed, as a laying bare of my curatorial, creative and historical practice, a consideration of its

staging and the implications of this. Although Trinca is not here actually using the term ‘voice’, what he is asking for could be construed as accounts of ‘coming to voice’. In contemporary museology, then, there are traces of debates around questions of authorship that have resonances for the way that these questions have been discussed in the field of documentary theory, but terms such as ‘voice’ also have discipline-specific meanings.

Intellectual Genealogy to the *Channels of History* Exhibition

This, then, was the broad intellectual environment in which I produced the *Channels of History* exhibition, although in the design phases I had no knowledge of these museological debates, and only partial knowledge of the debates amongst historians. In the Australian documentary filmmaking, research and teaching community of which I am a part, my natural position in relation to these debates was to assume that any work of cultural authorship would be inflected by the subjectivity of those influencing creative decisions. And in relation to oral sources, they have of course been at the heart of much documentary practice since the 1960s and 1970s, when mobile synchronised sound first became commonplace in documentary practice.

In a chapter of the book he wrote in the mid-1990s, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*, the film historian Robert Rosenstone wrote about what makes a good historical film. He analysed a number of historical documentaries, including *Snakes and Ladders: A Film about Women, Education and History* (1987), a film that I produced and directed with Mitzi Goldman, and posited that:

The best historical films will:

1. Show not just what happened in the past but how what happened means to us.
2. Interrogate the past for the sake of the present. Remember that historians are working for the living, not for the dead.
3. Create a historical world complex enough so that it overflows with meaning; so that its meanings are always multiple; so that its meanings cannot be contained or easily expressed in words. (Rosenstone 1995 p. 238)

He did this in the context of detailing how what could loosely be described as post-modernism was responsible for a ‘wholesale attack upon the epistemological basis and claims of history’ in which, according to Rosenstone, documentary filmmakers were particularly well placed to respond appropriately with works that would have the above characteristics (1998 p. 27). I would regard his statement about what makes a ‘good’ historical film as a kind of credo for my own work that I ‘took with me’ from a background in documentary film into my first foray into exhibition curating. Some back story will perhaps explain why such aesthetic choices came naturally.

My professional background had primed me to be interested in a kind of ‘history making’ that emphasises multiplicity of voice from both an authorial and audience perspective. I came to the *Braided Channels* project with degrees in social history and film production, and having previously made the aforementioned *Snakes and Ladders*. This is a documentary film that, while linear in format, primarily used structures other than chronology to tell a historical story. In this film, we considered how a history might be produced from multiple simultaneous perspectives after realising that works of history apparently written from a unitary and objective perspective had left out the stories of more than half the population.

I had also produced and directed (with Bernadette Flynn) *A.V.Trix* (1994), a work of educational interactive multimedia designed to teach tertiary students about depth of field in videography. This work proceeded from a constructivist philosophy of instructional design, assuming that users would come to its interface with varying competences and degrees of knowledge. This work made me interested in the capacities of ‘new technologies’ to respond to the expressed interests and existing knowledge bases of users. The experience of writing and producing each of the above works with a co-author, whose views were of equal weight to my own in shaping the works, also heightened my awareness of the way that individual subjectivity influences the authorship of a text and of the possibility of forms of negotiation and sharing around voice in cultural productions.

Moving Image, ‘Interactive Documentary’ and the Representation of ‘Place’

In 1996 I had had a fellowship from the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) to go to Britain to explore the concept and possibilities of ‘interactive documentary’. In exploring various UK intersections of documentary practice and new media technologies, I found that the term ‘interactive documentary’ itself was not much in use. CD-ROMs produced for sale and mass distribution with computer hardware under such titles as *The History of Medicine* and *Great Generals of the Twentieth Century* (Flagtower 1996) were an exception.

However, the work I viewed as part of this fellowship convinced me that non-linear presentation technologies were especially suited to exploring the intrinsic diversity of such topics as human relationship to (various) *places*. Yi-Fu Tuan’s equation that ‘Space plus culture equals place’, from his book *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977), explains why this is so. I also concluded that this work could effectively meet an audience in institutions mainly set up to collect and display material culture. I found that a number of British museums were using the emerging capacity of personal computers to deal with full motion-synchronised video as a way to meet a growing public interest in social history and as a way to lend an air of contemporary innovation to established exhibition practice. In particular, digital media were being used to represent the multiple stories associated with specific locations. In the southern English town of Battle, for example — so named because it was the location of the Battle of Hastings — members of the public could walk around the historic field of war and use a portable digital audio system to listen to the divergent perspectives of three fictional characters, based on research as to what had taken place back in 1066 and imaginatively surmise how this would have been experienced by various groups.

The producers of the *My Brighton* exhibition (1996) for the Brighton Museum and Art Gallery chose thirteen citizens to represent the diversity of the Brighton community. Each was asked to nominate their favourite places in the city and to tell stories from their own lives that allowed the public to understand why these places had acquired a positive resonance. Users interacted with a touch screen interface mounted on a plinth that required

a user to stand watching and listening to the material selected, thereby discouraging anyone from dominating the technology for a long time.

The Croydon Clocktower Museum in South London used a similar interface in its *Lifetimes* (1996) permanent exhibition to gather together the videoed oral history stories of a representative selection of its citizens and to present them via a clickable computer interface that organised the stories under various themes. The chosen themes arose from a more traditional exhibition of object-oriented material culture of the area's social history. For anyone keen to view all available material, the Clocktower Museum provided an upstairs mezzanine floor with comfortable chairs in front of multiple computers loaded with the whole database of stories.

In both the Brighton and Croydon instances, computer interfaces allowed members of the public attending the respective museums to select material that interested them and to view short complete segments for variable amounts of time, according to where they sat on George MacDonald's continuum (1992) of typical museum audiences, which divides them into 'streakers, strollers and students'. The World Wide Web has also been an important location for this style of work, sometimes in connection with a prior or concurrent exhibition — for example, *Brisbane Stories* (www.brisbane-stories.powerup.com.au), produced following an exhibition of the same name auspiced by the Brisbane City Council.

The research I undertook as part of, and following on from, the ACU fellowship demonstrated that this use of digital presentation technologies to express the multiple stories of *place* has not in any sense been limited either to Britain or to institutions of collection and exhibition. Some US university research centres dedicated to fostering the developments of new forms of media have also auspiced such work — for example, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Lab's *Elastic Boston: Renewed Vistas* (Davenport, Tsarkova et al. 1995 - 2004) The University of Southern California's Annenberg Centre, under the leadership of Professor Marsha Kinder, has brought together experimental filmmakers and information technology specialists to create many interpretive historical works, including *Tracing the Decay of Fiction* (Kinder 2002), a DVD-ROM and

documentary work that explores the plethora of stories associated with the Ambassador Hotel in which Senator Robert Kennedy died.

Various kinds of digital arts practice have also fostered this style of work. For example, Graham Harwood's interactive piece *Rehearsal of Memory*(1995), produced in association with patients from the Ashworth Hospital for the Criminally Insane near Liverpool, expresses patients' sense of place and its connection to their (collective) identity. In Australia, the *Bond Store Tales* exhibition(Gibson 1996) at the Museum of Sydney from 1996 used research-based fictional audio visual forms and a 'random generation mechanism' in conjunction with material culture to explore the diversity of ways of representing the history of early Sydney Cove as an emerging mercantile society. Mike Leggett's piece *Sontel* (2002) was produced with new media funding from the Australian Film Commission, and explored the landscape and disparate stories associated with Durras Lake on the New South Wales South Coast. This work's institutional support stressed the nexus of art practice, film and digital technologies, and exists as a prototype without any connection to the display of material culture.

All of the above pieces could be said to have a *choric* dimension, in the terms in which I defined this word in the previous chapter. In different ways, each takes up the kind of aesthetic Hooper-Greenhill(2000) referred to above and defined as *dialogic*, in which a user/exhibition attendee is positioned as 'as both active and politicised in the construction of their own relevant viewpoints'. But in each the primary filmmakers/curators/authors have clearly retained a fundamental shaping role, such that users' inputs can be said to be a part of the 'voice of the people in the text' rather than them becoming authors in any full sense of the term of the work they view.

So I began the *Braided Channels* project alive to the possibilities of emerging digital presentation technologies, and with a predilection for histories that express the formative role of both professional historians' and the general public's interpretations of the past. I would attribute this stance partly to a long-standing interest in women's history and a concomitant assumption that a history will inevitably reflect the social milieu of its author.

Another formative supposition was that *place* and human experience of an environment fundamentally shapes the history that is enacted there. A further foundational concept was that the project would also canvass the processes by which historical knowledges are constructed, which followed on from my interest in representational historiography developed in making *Snakes and Ladders*. In this intellectual tendency, I was clearly aligned with historians like Greg Denning and Ann Curthoys, who emphasise the personal elements or ‘voice’ of histories, rather than social science theorists such as Carroll, who assume that a unitary, monologic authorial position is possible and preferable.

Personal History to the Project

Having grown up on a citrus orchard adjacent to Sydney, and gone to boarding school and university with girls from all over rural New South Wales, I had wanted to explore the issue of rural women, their relationship to land and to inheritance (in the economic, cultural and genetic senses of this term), for almost a decade before I conceived of this specific project. Limiting the topic in some way was one major issue to be resolved before beginning. Equally important was finding a way to adequately address the Aboriginal dimensions of these themes, because to discuss inheritance of land without that felt like reinforcing a colonialist position not helpful in Guignon’s (2004) terms of what might constitute an authentic cultural contribution.

As mentioned previously, reading Pamela Lukin Watson’s wonderful book *Frontier Lands and Pioneer Legends: How Pastoralists gained Karuwal Land* (1998) was a breakthrough. This book both sharpened my vague concepts of the nature and location of Queensland’s Channel Country and introduced me to its history in a way that intrinsically emphasised interpretation and multiplicity in historical discourse. Watson compared and contrasted five different auto/biographical accounts of nineteenth and early twentieth century white settlement in the Channel Country — by Alice Duncan Kemp, Oscar de Satge, H.C. Perry, Michael Costello and Mary Durack. Although none of these writers was Aboriginal, the discrepancies in their accounts of frontier race relations and Watson’s own focus on Indigenous history as a counterpoint to the settler society’s ‘pioneer legend’ sparked my interest in this region as a location within which to explore the above themes. The vital

importance of Aboriginal people to the region's pastoral industry throughout most of the twentieth century was also important. And, while Watson herself does not talk a great deal about Channel Country ecology or the particular aesthetics of its landscape, in reading around her book I was captivated by the representational possibilities of these. I devised a project focused on the more recent history of the Channel Country, where both black and white perspectives on, and experience of, place could be incorporated.

The creation of an oral history archive — funded by the Queensland Centenary of Federation (see examples in Item 5) — was the first stage of the project. These interviews explored individual life stories, but also and explicitly interconnections with the lives of other local women and experience of the specific Channel Country environment: drought, flood, dust storms, insect plagues and more welcome forms of natural plenitude such as flocks of birds and alluvial pasture after rain. As well as women who had lived their whole life in this country, I interviewed women who had married into and out of the area. I was also interested to find out about how individuals viewed their own and their area's history and how these ideas impacted on their everyday lives. An extensive interview with Pam Watson provided a professional historian's counterpoint to the personal accounts.

With a goal of some of this material reaching the public in a documentary film, a cinematographer videotaped all interviews, whilst I was director, interviewer and sound recordist. In this phase, 27 women were interviewed, typically for between one or two hours, each interview was transcribed, and a selection of each woman's personal stills were filmed. While the release that interviewees signed made it explicit that their material forming part of the oral history archive might be the sole research outcome of their story, I was from the beginning talking of broadcast and other media outcomes. Indeed, my funding from the Centenary of Federation had been dependent upon me first getting a non-binding 'letter of interest' from SBS Television. My environmental focus and intention to use the topography metaphorically also meant that considerable attention was paid to filming the Channel Country landscape and trying to express its particular ecology visually.

In a manner that reinforces my sense that it is important to pay attention to institutional voice, this material emitting first in exhibition form was an accident of history — part of my pragmatic response to available opportunities. When I returned to Brisbane after recording the oral histories, I discovered that the Queensland Heritage Trails, a network of 32 interpretive centres across the state, was struggling with the issue of how to deal with the one-quarter of the state that is the Channel Country, a remote area considered too sparsely populated to have a permanent interpretive centre other than in Boulia, on its northern edge. After several face-to-face meetings with Heritage Trails project officers, I was invited to submit an application for a travelling social history exhibition on the theme of women's history in the Channel Country. This stage of the project was intrinsically dialogic as we negotiated an outcome that I was passionate to produce and that fitted their institutional mission. A condition of my successful application for \$100,000 was that the exhibition would be displayed in the communities from which the stories had arisen.

Voice and Questions of Representation in the Design and Process of the *Channels of History* Exhibition.

As discussed in each of the preceding chapters, from the beginning of the project it was both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women's stories that I was interested in, a methodology that following Heather Goodall's nomenclature (2002) I would describe as a 'shared histories' approach. I was not aware of this strand of Goodall's work when establishing the *Channels of History* project, but I was certainly familiar with live (and ongoing) debates amongst Indigenous film makers, film bureaucrats and academics as to appropriate protocols to be pursued by non-Indigenous historians and film makers when drawing on Indigenous stories, especially in relation to audio-visual production (see for example Langton 1993; Johnson 2000).

Given that my project aimed to explore the experience of women within a particular environment, when faced by the complexities of including Aboriginal women's stories or the lie of leaving them out, there was never any doubt that that the former would be my choice. This choice was informed by a feminist paradigm which assumes that, while gender is one of several filters linking together human beings, other determinants (race, class,

domicile, etc.) mean that ‘woman/women’ can never be seen as a unitary category. Margaret McGuire’s (1990) incisive article ‘The Legend of the Goodfella’ Missus’, which analyses earlier generations of Australian white women in interaction with Aboriginal people and the tendency across various incarnations of this myth to portray ‘the former as kind mistresses and the latter as objects of their maternal care’, functioned as a kind of historical cautionary tale, but in no way dissuaded me from my project (1990 p. 124). Although the remoteness of the Channel Country from my main site of production in Brisbane and the cross-cultural nature of my project made the kind of intense and long-term community collaboration with Aboriginal people that Goodall has undertaken in Northwestern New South Wales impossible, in realising the *Channels of History* exhibition I worked formally and informally with several Indigenous consultants, both from the Channel Country community and from the Brisbane-based Indigenous filmmaking community. I also maintained regular phone contact with a number of non-Indigenous women from the area and felt it was important that these women did not feel like second-class citizens in the project.

Applying Concepts of Vocal Interrelation to *Channels of History*

One could reasonably describe this process as *dialogic* in both the common or garden and more theoretically inflected versions of that term. For around three months in 2000, before I first went to the Channel Country to collect the oral histories, I read very widely across history, geography, science and government in relation to the Channel Country, and most evenings found me on the phone for at least an hour as I talked to Channel Country locals to choose the women that I would interview and to map my itinerary. From luminary ethnographers such as A.P. Elkin to iconic journalists such as Ernestine Hill (1974), the geographer and biologist Frances N. Ratcliffe (1947) and innumerable others before and since, the Channel Country has been studied by many Australian and international writers and academics. Without in any way disparaging those named, Channel Country locals were blunt about their feelings for those who ‘came, went, took their material’ and were never heard from again: a healthy scepticism about this project was a common initial response. In that sense, the subsequent funding from the Heritage Trails network, Arts Queensland, and their requirement that I take the exhibition back to the communities from whence the stories

had arisen, was a kind of godsend. It allowed me to frame the material as I saw fit, but the elements of the exhibition that allowed for public response and input were one way of sharing the discursive space, in particular with those who were both its subjects and a significant part of its first audiences.

As to whether *ventriloquic* could describe this input, I would have to say from my perspective: not obviously. As will be discussed further below in relation to how I would represent race relations and specific issues such as records of the sexual degradation of Aboriginal women on the frontier, I framed my material with the certain knowledge that it would be viewed by a large proportion of my interviewees — both black and white. A goal not to ‘inflamm’ issues I knew to be very sensitive was an important determinant of how my material was shaped. But, in developing this exhibition, I also felt an enormous amount of creative freedom in relation to my co-workers, the enabling institutions and my key interviewees. As a single word to describe the relationship between my voice and those of others who funded, contributed to or viewed the *Channels of History* exhibition, *choric* would seem the most apt.

Another way to describe the social relationships surrounding the voice of the *Channels* exhibition would be to use Nicholas Bourriaud’s rubric (2002) for what he says is the defining aesthetic of much of the 1990s contemporary art, *viz* a relational aesthetic. Defining what he means by this, Bourriaud counterpoints exhibitions with a relational aesthetic, ‘concerned with negotiations, bonds and co-existences’, with an earlier modernist art ‘based on conflict’ (p. 45). Of artists working with a relational aesthetic, Bourriaud says:

Their works involve methods of social exchanges, interactivity with the viewer within the aesthetic experience being offered him or her and the various communication processes, in their tangible dimension as tools serving to link individuals and human groups together. (p. 43).

He further posits that, in art with a relational aesthetic, the whole exhibition, rather than the

individual component artworks, becomes the object for aesthetic analysis, and that events and forums surrounding the work are as much a part of the whole as the physical elements of the exhibition. He postulates that ‘artists look for interlocutors. Because the public is always a somewhat unreal entity, artists will include this interlocutor in the production process itself.’ (p. 81).

Whilst Georgina Greenhill, the exhibition designer, produced artworks as a component of the *Channels of History* exhibition, I would in no way locate its overall aesthetics within the conceptual art from which Bourriaud’s theory is extrapolated. His theory, however, is illuminating as a way of thinking about the forms of voice in my exhibition. Firstly, it is a way of thinking holistically about the overall exhibition, placing its overtly ‘documentary’ component in relation to its other elements. Secondly, it is a way of accounting for complex social relations around both the exhibition’s production and its relationship to the public, including the many seminars and talks that Georgina and I gave (see Appendix 3).

His point about ‘negotiations, bonds and co-existences’ being at the heart of relational art rather than conflict is incisive when considering the ontology of the *Channels of History* exhibition in relation to the argument of Hayden White’s *Content of the Form* (1987). While producing the exhibition, and especially whilst travelling around the Channel Country collecting the interviews — often accepting the warm hospitality of my interviewees — I thought a lot about the way that my production process required me to find points of commonality with all my subjects, whereas Pam Watson, in writing her book predominantly from archival and published historical documents written by persons no longer alive, could comfortably distance herself from attitudes of her sources that she found distasteful or disagreed with. I had thought about this in relation to documentary having a different ‘content of the form’ *vis-à-vis* text-based print history, in the way most forms of documentary require human relationships with documentary subjects beyond their status as actants, to use a term coming from Greimas’s analysis of the deep linguistic structures underlying stories (Hawkes 1997). Bourriaud’s is an alternate paradigm for thinking about these differences, and it is at least arguable that the edifice of contemporary documentary as a whole could be said to embody a ‘relational aesthetic’.

Spatial Narrative and Design

Bourriaud's work (2002) is also a 'way in' to thinking about the spatial dimensions of the exhibition that was for me the most novel part of the design process. He says that when an exhibition in its totality is considered the artwork, then the public's process of finding an itinerary within the material becomes a significant choice (p. 75). This also recalls Ross Gibson's (2005 p. 58) adaptation of Michel de Certeau's work on preferred pathways within exhibition design, and the way in which, from the perspective of the didactic progressivist ideologies that have underlain museums for most of their history, the aim is to offer the public a specific evolutionary 'tour' through the chosen material, whereas those designing with a more 'heuristic' bent prefer to offer the public a 'map' of their options, leaving their pathways much more open-ended. Gibson discusses the way that the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney has sought to reconcile this binary opposition over time in the knowledge that:

Too much openness makes things meaningless and too little makes for irrelevance if the exhibit has not acknowledged the complexity and profusion of options in everyday experience. (p. 61).

Whilst Georgina Greenhill — whose professional background is as production designer for film and television — was relatively familiar with forms of spatial narrative as they apply to film, this was a novel area for me. The metaphor of the 'braids' was the key one with which we worked in designing the exhibition. We thought about how to braid together the text and image panels and the kiosk with short documentaries in particular, and planned to do this with a common aesthetic. After experiencing the exhibition with many different kinds of audiences, both individuals and groups, it seems to me that, in ways that perhaps rhyme with the artist Marcel Duchamp's aphorism (1957) of the 'coefficient of art' being 'the gap between artist's intention and their created reality', this was an area of the exhibition that was less successful. This will be discussed in greater detail below in relation to material around an Aboriginal girl called Elsie, but at a general level there was perhaps insufficient signposting to maximise audience 'meaning-making' within the ideal terms

spelled out by Gibson above. Having said that, however, the overwhelming response from the public, as reflected in the comments books (see examples in Item 1) was positive.

Audience/Responses to the Exhibition

The physical transportation of the exhibition back to the places from which its stories had arisen, events associated with a launch in most of the venues and the project's comments book were important forms of putting the choric process into action. Australia in 2003 was in the midst of a great deal of public debate about what might be meant in practice by the term 'reconciliation'. For many rural Australians at that time, questions of native title were divisive, along with discussion of the histories underlying the High Court decisions. The comment 'A pleasant surprise' in the comments book from an Anglo project participant who had talked in some detail about race relations but had clearly afterwards wondered about the wisdom of having done so, and a series of three comments from presumably Murri members of the public in Boulia, "Deadly nice", "Deadly" and "Really Deadly", meant a lot to me (Comments book 14/04/03, Various 2002-2005). After viewing the exhibition, Paul Gorecki, an anthropologist who represents Aboriginal claimant groups from the Channel Country, contacted me to get full copies of the transcripts of some project participants for use in a native title claim. More recently, he has come back to get a full DVD copy of one of the interviews in the oral history archive underlying the exhibition. Another young Brisbane woman, who had only just before viewing the exhibition had discovered that she was a 'white' member of a prominent Aboriginal family from the Channel Country, wrote in the book:

Great display. I always have had a loving of the outback and only recently found out why. It is like completion. Your display brings me close to tears in my longing for wanting to know more. (Comments Book, 7/03/03)

Such intensely positive and gratifying responses need to be seen, of course, in the same frame as the child who wrote 'Boring' and his compadre later the same day who wrote *Very Boring* (Comments Book, 24/01/03).

Channels of History and the History Wars

In two published articles (2004; 2004) I have detailed many aspects of the design process of the *Channels* exhibitions and the aesthetic and intellectual decisions that we made. Here, keeping to the theme of the concept of voice as it relates to social history exhibitions, I want to consider its design mainly from a macro perspective. In a quote above, and speaking in Australia at the History and Film Conference in 1995, Robert Rosenstone spoke of a 'wholesale attack upon the epistemological basis and claims of history' from the perspective of the threat that post-modernist approaches pose to traditional narrative and linear approaches. Yet, as my brief discussion of the 'History Wars' that have played out in Australia in recent years make clear, there has been a 'counter-attack' to this position, as represented by John Carroll's statement that describes a pluralist approach to history as 'nonsense' and calls for historians to undertake their work in ways that lead to 'a strong, morally charged view of the world and its meaning shared by its members'. In the preceding discussion of my own position, I have both spoken of my tendency towards 'a multiplicity of voice from both an authorial and audience perspective' and have also found much in Bourriaud's (2002) discussion of a 'relational aesthetics' and its focus on 'negotiations, bonds and coexistences' that represents my approach to 'history-making'. This could appear to be an intellectual contradiction, a positioning in terms of voice that tries to embrace both a monologic/consensus and a dialogic/choric/multiple position at one and the same time.

There are, however, ways of positioning oneself to resolve these apparent contradictions. I can partially agree with John Carroll's views about societies needing stories that help them to cohere. In curating this exhibition, finding and representing clearly discernible patterns and trends that linked the various individual life histories was critical. The specific and often challenging Channel Country eco-system was a significant source of powerful 'shared stories' and 'shared experience' across temporal, racial and class boundaries. A couple of examples:

On water in the desert: The Georgina never dries ... it's a significant place for pastoralists because it's always the watering hole for their stock. But it was also

significant for us because it was our survival. We travelled the Georgina to do our ceremonies and where there's water there's food. So it is a pathway of two cultures. (Isabel Tarrago, interview, 3 September 2000)

On drought: I guess it's a bit like going into hibernation. You cut down your cattle numbers, of course, because you haven't got the feed, and if you cut the cattle numbers down, well all the work sort of cuts down and, you just try and keep water, I guess. (Jeannie Reynolds, interview, 16 June 2000)

In his Australia Day Address (2002), Tim Flannery suggested that, for a multicultural nation like this, a shared understanding of 'the land, its climate and creatures and plants' is the 'only force ubiquitous and powerful enough to craft a truly Australian people'. This viewpoint struck a chord with me: in curating the *Channels of History* exhibition, I attempted to use the Channel Country environment as a source of common experience and understanding. But in other ways race, class, relation to pastoralism, current abode and individual idiosyncrasy led to diverse experiences and perspectives on that environment, no less important to understanding female history in the Channel Country. I would identify the balance between these elements in the exhibition as my attempt to provide a socially useful and authentic voice in the terms in which Guignon (2004) construed these terms as discussed in Chapter 1. So perhaps the singularity/diversity dichotomy alive in contemporary Australian historiography is a partially false one that histories grounded in environmental specificity can help to break down. But, as will be discussed below, it was material with darker themes that stretched the possibility of consensus and that was most challenging for me as a curator.

Durham Downs Material as a Specific Case Study in Representation

Chapter 3 of this dissertation will deal in detail with the case study of a documentary that I am currently producing entitled *Durham Downs: A Pastoral* in relation to questions of documentary voice. Elements of this material, however, presented both challenges and opportunities in relation to the voice of the *Channels of History* exhibition that I wish to

discuss as one example of broader questions about the kinds of material the ontological voice of a social history exhibition is useful for expressing.

Of all the areas of the vast region known as the Channel Country, it was the material around the 3 million acres of Durham Downs Station on Cooper Creek, in the remote south-southwest corner, that was the richest. I first came across Durham Downs when in the dusty photographic archive of the Stockman's Hall of Fame I found the photo albums of Edith New, a governess to Durham Downs station in the early 1920s. Edith's photo album was full of photos of a small Aboriginal girl known to me then just as 'Elsie', a girl who from the album and an accompanying letter was evidently regarded as special both by the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities (New 1922). When the same child appeared many times in the writings and photo album of the next governess to Durham Downs station, Edith McFarlane (1925-26), and in the photo album of two stockmen working around Durham Downs and the lower Channel Country in the mid-1920s (Milkin Brothers) my interest was truly whetted. The photos showed Elsie living in an environment — especially in the period when the 'first Edith' was there in the early twenties — as an apparent paradise, with a cornucopia of fruits and vegetables grown preternaturally fat on the alluvial soil, Aboriginal people appearing strong and healthy, the house with a simple but strong pastoral aesthetic, and so on.

The somewhat idyllic image of Durham Downs coming from the three sets of 1920s documents above was powerfully contradicted by a set of documents that the exhibition's researchers uncovered in the Queensland State Archives from Durham Downs a quarter of a century earlier, at a time when there were very few non-Aboriginal women resident in the Channel Country and the property was based on sheep rather than the subsequent cattle pastoralism. An excerpt from the central document should suffice in giving something of this contrast:

*To Mr Meston, Office of Protector of Aboriginals, South Queensland, from
H. Fisher — 4th August, 1900*

I herewith place before you the facts of my personal observations during my

shearing on Durham Downs Station in July 1998 ... I will explain the different classes of Gin kept on the station ... No 1 is what are called 'Stud Gins' — they are the servants of Government House to wash etc; and kept exclusively for the use of the Boss. The class No 2 are for the Colonial Experience men and what are called 'pannican bosses' which are also kept for their particular use. Class No 3 are for the general hands. Just imagine after the bell rang for dinner, instead of going to their meals they would go to the Creek and compel a Gin to allow them to have connection and walk back to the hut, and sit down to their meals without a wash. (Fisher and Meston 1900, with the key document describing events from 1898).

A fat file of correspondence surrounding this central document made it clear that this document could neither be discounted as fabrication nor simply accepted as an authoritative eyewitness account, and raised questions about the circumspection with which a historian needs to treat all sources. The disjunction in the two sets of sources about Durham Downs raised questions as to how its history should be represented in the exhibition. To return briefly to the grammatical construct of the word 'voice', that I largely left behind in the Introduction, one could say that in the exhibition I adopted the *interrogative* voice in relation to material on the history of Durham Downs.

It was not possible for me to get to the (very remote) Durham Downs station in the research and design phase of the exhibition, nor was I able to discover who exactly Elsie was and what her biography had been beyond the pages of the photo albums and brief references in a personal memoir written with 60 years' hindsight by Edith McFarlane that will be discussed in the next chapter. Bearing in mind Aboriginal cultural protocols around the (in the case of Elsie, then presumably, now certainly) dead, I developed this segment of the exhibition in careful consultation with Indigenous women. I began by discussing the issues raised with Mary Graham, a Murri filmmaker and the project's formal Indigenous consultant. In ways that remind me of Marcia Langton's previously raised argument about omission being the worst form of racism, Graham's main advice was not to resile from this story because of the complex issues it raised, but rather to consult closely with local Indigenous elders to determine the best way forward. Dot Gorringer, an Aboriginal elder

from Windorah, one of the Channel Country towns closest to Elsie's country, became my main contact in this regard. I sent her copies of key photographs of Elsie and enlisted her help to try (initially unsuccessfully) to find Elsie's family. Dot was herself really interested in the photographs and encouraged me to develop this aspect of the exhibition. In finalising the design and staging of the exhibition, I pondered the best wording for a sign alerting the public that it would include many photographs of deceased persons. My initial plan, following current broadcast documentary practice and protocols, was to phrase this sign just in relation to Aboriginal people. However, after consultation with Isabel Tarrago — a Murri woman senior in Queensland's cultural heritage bureaucracy whose traditional country is along the Georgina River and who became project interviewee and informal indigenous consultant — I drafted a sign without reference to race, which she counselled was the best option in the context of a 'shared history' project.

In the end, I did not fully bring together all the material around Durham Downs in *Channels of History*. As I was designing the exhibition, it felt like this story was too big and complex to explore in its entirety without unbalancing the rest of my material. In White's (1987) terms, the content of the form of social history exhibitions could be said to tend towards broader social categories, with objects the most common form of metonymy, whilst documentary film routinely uses the metonymy of detailed individual stories to represent social categories. Accordingly, from the beginning of my research process, I had been looking for stories in whose microcosm broader themes could be glimpsed as the basis for a broadcast documentary treatment. This material seemed to 'call me' toward a future broadcast documentary form. The material about Elsie was on a panel entitled 'Two Ediths and an Elsie', one of a set of three panels entitled 'Children as Channels of History' that looked at various incarnations of close relations between women and other people's children in the Channel Country, across the racial divide. The material from the document quoted above was incorporated into a panel called 'Strong Stories' which, with framing questions, asked the exhibition's audience to consider what surrounding information and techniques a historian might need to verify the content of this document. The exhibition format seemed best to explore fragments of different women's stories in relation to each other. As the various refractions of the Elsie/Durham Downs story occurred to me, it

seemed best to leave them to the space for greater detail and potentially greater narration offered by a documentary. Paul Arthurs has suggested that interactive media tend to ‘replace narration by navigation’ (2006) and this story is perhaps an example of this — although, as previously mentioned, we perhaps did not include sufficient signposts for the public as to how to navigate in ways that brought the various interconnections of this and other stories together maximally.

The exhibition was always designed with Pieter Geyl’s (1949) aphorism that ‘History is argument without end’ in mind. Accordingly, the exhibition design included a table where the public could read various additional (oral history and academic history) articles, respond to a series of ‘puzzles’ left by the exhibition research process, and provide comment and feedback in a visitor’s book. One such puzzle concerned Elsie: her later biography and how she might have felt about her role in the histories of the ‘Two Ediths’. In the end, it was Dot Gorringer’s sister-in-law, Peggy McKellar (nee Gorringer), who, after viewing the exhibition, was able to tell me that she had known Elsie well, that they had both lived in Windorah for some years before Dot moved there and that she had died in the 1980s. This information became one of the foundations of the Durham Downs documentary, whose voice will be discussed in the next chapter. Without the exposure provided by the exhibition, it would have been very much harder to follow up these threads of the history of Durham Downs. In the introduction to this chapter, I noted that this kind of audience input was generally described as ‘dialogic’ within the ‘New Museology’. I would argue, however, that choric is a more useful descriptor.

Museums, Voice and Material Culture

Another challenging dimension to the exhibition and its intersection with the public related to the fact that its material form consisted of audio-visual media, text and image panels including photographs and artwork with a fabric aesthetic, but no precious objects. This element of its design was integrally related to the requirement of its funding body, the Queensland Heritage Trails Network, Arts Queensland, which was fully embraced by our design team, that the exhibition would travel back to the outback communities from whence its stories arose. The exhibition was launched at the State Library of Queensland (SLQ) and

for its first three months existed in an exhibition space next to the main foyer. A list of further reading provided some link to the bibliographic collections of the library and to the adjacent library bookshop for those with a bent to 'go deeper'. I found that some of the members of the public who attended several of the public seminars associated with the exhibition, especially elderly females, made the effort to follow through on these suggestions, in one case seeking reading *further* to the provided list.

In designing the exhibition, we were always mindful that it would be travelling to outback venues without special security or the physical conditions to preserve precious objects. As a first-time curator with a background in filmmaking, a 'media and art'-rich approach came naturally and we constructed the exhibition so that it could be loaded into four purpose-built boxes and travel on the back of a standard (as opposed to a specialist art) freight truck, and be easily and cheaply insured. Following its three months at the State Library of Queensland, the exhibition went to the Min Min Centre in Boulia, Cooper Arts and Crafts in Windorah and the Stockman's Hall of Fame in Longreach. All three venues are in or on the edge of the Channel Country; only the last of these venues was in a position to provide a level of security that would be minimally required by an exhibition with a precious material culture dimension.

While *Channels of History* raises many issues of local and regional importance, its key themes — of gender and race and class relations, the politics of water and the political economy of pastoralism — have national significance. As the regional tour was proceeding throughout 2003, I began to talk with national institutions beyond Queensland about the possibility of them hosting the exhibition. This related both to my own desire to contribute to wider publics, reinforced by my employment at Griffith University and the increasing pressure on academics to engage in national and international debates through their research. In this sense, my individual voice and the institutional voices of my employer and of potential exhibiting institutions were in dialogue. Difficulties engendered by this plan also raised questions of the ontologic voice, *The Content of the Form* (1987) to use Hayden White's rubric, of institutions of collection and exhibition, that in turn led me to the theoretical and historical literatures surrounding museums.

Tony Bennett's is the name most deeply associated with the museum studies that Eileen Hooper-Greenhill mentioned previously as a relatively new academic discipline. In *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (1995) Bennett traces the emergence of museums as institutions quintessentially expressing the ideology of bourgeois governments of the early nineteenth century. Developed alongside such other material expressions of emerging mercantile consciousness and culture as the arcade, the department store and commercial 'great exhibitions', museums have at their core a belief that exposure to the 'stuff' of the world and at the heart of their collections can confer education and finally power on the middle classes who are assumed to be their primary audiences.

In the deep structure of museums and their relationship to 'stuff' lies a belief in the power of *metonymy*, the same rhetorical trope that is at the heart of much contemporary documentary. However, whereas documentary film typically works with a metonymy of *story*, selecting an individual account to stand for a broader sociological category, museums traditionally work with a metonymy of *objects*, where each piece takes the place of a key stage within taxonomy. Although Tony Bennett and several other scholars associated with museum studies were my colleagues at Griffith University during the mid-1990s, when there was a flurry of publishing in the area, I had only a passing knowledge of their work, being mainly at the time specifically absorbed in documentary practice and theory.

With its stated themes of 'Land', 'Nation' and 'People', and a responsibility to incorporate the whole gamut of national histories, I first approached the National Museum of Australia, hoping it would be the centrepiece of a national tour for the *Channels of History* exhibition. The NMA was initially very positive about the project, and I engaged in dialogue with them for thirteen months before they eventually decided not to display it, the absence of a material culture dimension to the exhibition being a key determinant of this outcome. I also approached:

- the State Libraries of New South Wales and Victoria;
- the National Library of Australia;

- the National Archives of Australia;
- the Canberra Museum and Gallery;
- the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (Powerhouse), Sydney;
- the Casula Powerhouse, Liverpool, Sydney;
- the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory; and
- the University of Technology Sydney Gallery.

Each of these institutions declined to host the exhibition for a range of specific reasons, including shifting personnel between time of first approach and time of decision, dissonance between the content of my exhibition and the formal remit of the particular institution, a sense that a collection of *Queensland* stories was inherently parochial and unlikely to be of interest to a national audience, a lack of perceived relation between my exhibition's themes and the collections of particular institutions, and already having a full exhibition slate stretching years ahead.

However, running behind the idiosyncratic decisions of the various institutions, and the strongest factor in my difficulties in arranging a more comprehensive national tour, was the lack of collected *objects* within the exhibition. Ironically, then, the features of *Channels of History* that had facilitated a regional tour and which resulted in the 'choric' dimension of its design and execution being real for the communities from which its stories arose made designing a national itinerary much more difficult than anticipated. In negotiations with both the National Museum of Australia in Canberra and the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences in Sydney, I offered to develop an additional material culture dimension to the exhibition, but this created timing, budgetary and logistical problems that proved impossible to resolve.

Happily, not every institution that I approached decided in the negative. The South Australian Museum was immediately interested, agreeing to host the exhibition for April and May 2004 and locating it next to its permanent exhibition on the Diamantina River and its Aboriginal People. The location of Lake Eyre in South Australia, as the ultimate destination for much of the water of the Channel Country eco-system, and the historical

north–south axis of the Australian pastoral industry, meant that the content of my exhibition was easy to ‘sell’ to staff of that venue. The Constitutional Centre in Perth, under the auspices of the Institute of Advanced Studies, University of Western Australia also hosted *Channels of History* in June/July 2004. This came about as a result of meeting the Institute’s director, Terri Ann White, through Griffith University’s Centre for Public Culture and Ideas, a typical example of institutional voice being inflected by personal networks. The Mildura Regional Arts Centre’s explicit focus on the intersection of riparian environments and art also led to an immediately positive response, and the exhibition was exhibited there from May to June 2005.

Going to the literature of museology helped me understand what I experienced at the time as painful rejections, and provided an opportunity to learn more about live debates surrounding the relative roles of the *objects* that have provided the historical *raison d’être* for the collections of most exhibiting institutions and the *media* that have provided a key way for the institutions to connect with their (largely tax-paying) various publics in recent years. I discovered that the discipline of museology was in fact engaged in vigorous debate on these questions, a debate that my proposals would unwittingly have tapped into. The title of Andrea Witcomb’s book, *Re-Imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum* (2003) makes it clear that the years around the millennium were a moment of fundamental rethinking of the role of museums and other institutions of collection and exhibition.

The New Museology has been associated with a reordering of priorities in regard to the collections of objects underlying most exhibiting institutions, which Witcomb discusses in the following terms:

In order to develop a more democratic curatorial practice it is necessary to think of museums as ‘ideas based’ rather than as focused on objects ... museums need to overcome the belief that because they work with objects their knowledge claims are necessarily objective ... the result has been a prioritizing of narrative. Objects are understood to be *mute* unless they are interpreted. Not to interpret has come to be seen as elite and anti democratic (*my italics* 2003 p. 86).

Witcomb provides a reflective analysis of her own work, describing how she designs exhibitions with objects at the centre, located within a matrix of interpretation. But her paradigm does not extend to exhibitions *without* a material culture dimension. There are, of course, recent institutions such as the Museums of Sydney and Brisbane that are not based on an underlying collection of material culture collection, but these had a brief too specific to make them hosting *Channels of History* a possibility.

Debates around the role of audio-visual media are the corollary to debates about the status of the object, and this is a part of what has been at stake in the ideological battles of the so called 'History Wars'. A selection of quotations around this media/object interrelation may help to map out something of the field of debate.

Over the past decade or so, human history museums have come to recognize that it is not enough to present display cases full of artefacts, each in isolation from its historical setting or use; that recontextualising these objects gives them greater meaning. Digitisation offers the best prospect we have for recontextualising on a grand scale (Macdonald in Jones-Garmil 1997 p. 277).

Newer forms of visual media such as film, television, photography and the WWW have usurped some of the expository functions of museums. Why is it necessary to go to a museum to see a stuffed dead animal in a glass case when a living one can be seen playing in its natural setting by turning on the TV (Hooper- Greenhill 2000 p. 150).

The emergence of multi media and interactives threatens the traditional responsibility of museums to undertake serious research on their collections and undermined the museums' 'distinctiveness from other cultural institutions and the entertainment industry'. Tim Flannery, - Director of South Australian Museum - 'Research Dying Art in 'super' museums', feature article, *The Australian*, 25/7/01, p. 3.

We find contemporary audiences are fairly sophisticated media consumers and less likely to value a museum that clings to a historic role as a repository of curious objects amassed by nineteenth century specimen collectors. Dawn Casey, then Director, National Museum of Australia, in above article.

Ironically — but understandably, when put into the broader contexts discussed above — the respective institutions then run by Tim Flannery and Dawn Casey responded in diametrical opposition to their opinions expressed above: the South Australian Museum chose to host the *Channels* exhibition, the National Museum of Australia declined.

Although none of these quotations directly uses vocabulary or images linked to voice, one can deduce from them that, within the world of museums and other collecting institutions, objects have been deemed to ‘speak’ and to have discursive authority in the sense in which, as discussed in my Introduction, buildings and paintings and music are said to have voice. And that, deep within the *content of the form* of museums, audio-visual media are construed to speak with a lesser voice. It would seem that the latter is regarded as a *means* to attract a media-savvy and younger audience, but without the same *end*-power to edify and educate them.

Conclusion

A quote from the well-known museum director George MacDonald (1992), previously director of the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the Museum of Victoria, and one of those particularly associated with the imbrication of audio visual media into the fabric of museum architecture, argues that such debates do not need to proceed from an assumption of a binary opposition between precious objects and audio-visual media:

All museums are, at the most fundamental level, concerned with information: its generation, its perpetuation, its organization and its dissemination ... Implicit is the idea that museums’ principal resource — their collections of material remnants of the past — are worth preserving, primarily for the information embodied in them ... The same value is also applicable to the newer, non resource collections museums are

building, such as oral histories, photographs, audio-visual materials, replicas and re-enacted processes. (p. 160)

MacDonald's opinion, however, would appear to be in the minority. The unimaginative interactive kiosks incorporated into the new Maritime Museum in Fremantle, Western Australia, produced by a New South Wales business trading under the name 'Audience Motivation', would appear closer to the mainstream consensus amongst contemporary institutions and curators. Peter Timms, an art critic who for a time worked as a curator at the Powerhouse Museum has summarised that institution's production methodology at the time thus:

The museum's policy was to attach a hands-on component to every exhibit: an interactive video, for example, a touch-screen questionnaire, or some sort of educational game ... Curators were not expected — indeed were not invited — to prepare this material themselves. That job was given to a separate department made up of educators and designers who saw their task as having to jazz up the curators' ploddingly worthy notions.

The result, of course, is likely to be an exhibition with an unpleasantly dissonant voice, its various elements not harmonising effectively in tone and form. Very often it would seem that, even though the very architecture of buildings such as the National Museum of Australia in Canberra and Te Papa in Wellington, New Zealand have been substantially inflected by the audio-visual media that are central to their displays, there has been little interplay between the discourses of documentary theory and museology. One impediment to a greater discursive and practical interplay is that, while both documentary theory and museology deploy a vocabulary derived from vocal metaphors to talk about their respective forms of authorship, these metaphors are sufficiently different that there would appear to be a kind of 'Balkanisation' of theory that has an impact on practice. In the absence of a common lexicon, film and video have tended to be treated by exhibiting institutions as a 'necessary evil' to bring audiences to the material culture that is presumed to be at the core of museum business, and therefore 'tacked on' by companies on consultancies rather than integral to the curatorial process.

This, of course, is a process from which I cannot isolate myself: undertaking this doctorate has exposed me to the discourses of historiography and museology to a greater depth than previously. Just as I, as a documentary filmmaker, have benefited by exposure to the debates of museology and historiography, so might those professions benefit from some organised dialogue around media, and specifically from discussions around voice in documentary. A common lexicon of voice — and perhaps a word for the way that objects have traditionally ‘spoken’ in museums — would be one place to begin. Ross Gibson has written about how intrinsic the category of ‘wonder’ is to ‘how museums work’. Perhaps it is the competing forms of metonymy at the heart of the museum project and the documentary project — the ‘wonder’ of the object as compared with the wonder engendered by a well-honed story — that has functioned as an impediment to the disciplines engaging in the kind of dialogue that could result in exhibitions of maximum discursive power. At least arguably, until museums dispense with the term ‘curator’ and coin an equivalent word that acknowledges the authorial power of those who conceive and realise exhibitions, the current blockages to a free-flowing intersection of documentary and museology are likely to continue.

This discussion of voice in relation to a single social history exhibition — *Channels of History* — located within a broader social and aesthetic context, makes clear that, to understand the ‘voice’ of a particular exhibition, it is useful to understand the discursive culture of the institutions which underlie the production of that exhibition and to understand the ontology of exhibition practice in general, rather than to simply focus on the predilections of a particular curator or design team. Part of this social context has been to understand that exhibitions with an interactive kiosk element can very effectively explore the multiplicity of meanings ascribed to a particular place by humans — that indeed this might be part of the *content of the form*. Social history exhibitions, including those with a documentary element, have a different relationship to audience than does a linear documentary, whether broadcast or exhibited publicly. In the next chapter, I will explore the case study of *Durham Downs: A Pastoral*, another component of the *Braided*

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Channels creative research project, and see what happens to a revised cross-cultural and cross media concept of voice when applied to a long-form documentary.

Channels of History: A Social History Exhibition – Key Credits

Curator, Producer, Director, Sound Recordist — Trish FitzSimons

Exhibition Designer and Artist of Exhibition Components — Georgina Greenhill

Editor — David Huggett

Cinematographers — Erika Addis, Julie Hornsey

Exhibition Set Builder — ‘Bone Built’

Researchers, archival documents, photographs, film — Jonathan Richards, Andrew Walker

Indigenous Consultants — Mary Graham, Dot Gorringer, Isabel Tarrago

Digital Media Design and Realisation — Toadshow Pty Ltd.

Major Sponsor — Queensland Heritage Trails Network, Arts Queensland.

Key Sponsors — Centenary of Federation, Queensland; Griffith University; State Library of Queensland

**The Voice of Documentary from a Cross-cultural Perspective —
Using *Durham Downs: A Pastorale* as a Case Study**

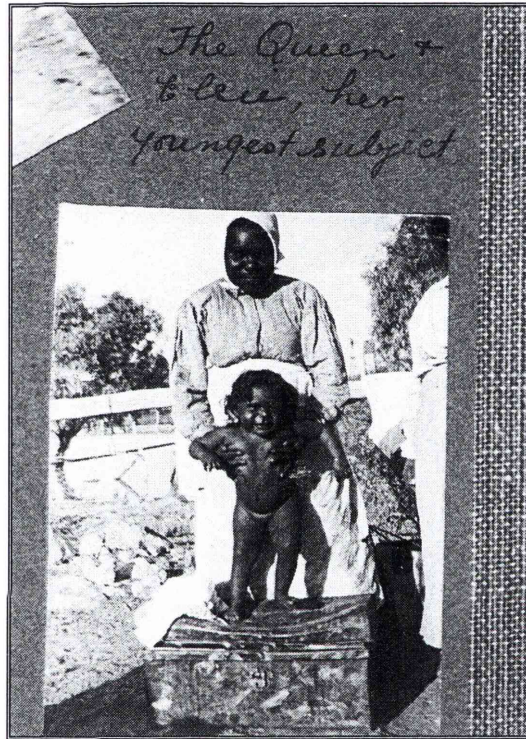


Image from Photo Album of Edith New, c. 1923. Courtesy Australian Stockman's Hall of Fame

Introduction

Every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably. (The good tidings which the historian of the past brings with throbbing heart may be lost in a void the very moment he opens his mouth) (Benjamin 1939 p. 25).

Documentary form, including that of films taking 'history' as their central theme, is usually written about after the fact, when a program is complete and the political economy of its production is ancient history. This can lead to a kind of teleological view of a final piece, in which a documentary seems inevitably to have existed only in the way that it finally reaches an audience. It also tends to emphasise the individual authorship of its primary filmmaker, although this is often then seen in relation to that

of other filmmakers to create generic typologies (see for instance Nichols 1991; 1994; Plantinga 1997; Bruzzi 2000; Nichols 2001; Corner c. 2001). As a documentary filmmaker, I am not satisfied by such theoretical accounts, knowing authorship in relation to a documentary to be the product of complex negotiations and collaboration as well as an individual creative and intellectual journey.

So in this chapter, by contrast, I want to write about documentary form ‘before the fact’, and in particular about the process of finding the best way to present a story that began with some archival photographs that I came across seven years ago, of a small Aboriginal girl I knew then only as ‘Elsie’. As elsewhere in this dissertation, I want to do this using the concept of ‘documentary voice’ as my primary trope.

But first a note on ‘coming to voice’. In the Introduction and Chapter 2 I referred to needing to find an Aboriginal dimension to the story before I felt able to translate my interest in questions of women, land and inheritance in Australia into a specific project. Finding the Channel Country as a framing *place* for these interests brought the underlying oral history and the *Channels of History* exhibition into being. But perhaps ironically, in developing a documentary around one of the many stations in the Channel Country, it was finding a *non*-Aboriginal dimension to the story that seemed a prerequisite to ‘coming to voice’. A desire to understand this apparent contradiction has been one impulse to developing the concerns of this chapter.

I begin this piece of writing quite literally without knowing where it — the chapter and the documentary — will end. To use Hayden White’s words for a moment (1987p. 1), mine is ‘the problem of how to translate knowing into telling’. In braiding together theory and practice in this account, I hope not only to add something to an understanding of voice in documentary, but also to energise my future practice for, as White says, ‘this is the function of theory in general ... to provide justification of a stance *vis-à-vis* the materials being dealt with that can render it plausible’ (1987 p. 164). Theory and practice, of course, are in a dialectical relationship, such that theory is a kind of collation of multiple perspectives on a topic, and the inducing of general principles from many case studies, whilst filmmakers assume ‘stances’ in relation to their practice, whether or not these have been examined critically or informed by theory.

Another way of thinking about this is to draw on Richard Rorty's (in Guignon 2004 pp. 115-16) philosophy of the contingent self, created out of the field of possibilities surrounding an individual. In this spirit, I would like to begin this chapter with a set of quotes from filmmakers, writers and journalists about their authorial stance. I offer these quotes not as a set of 'truths', but rather as a set of refractions upon a theme, a kind of conferring with the intellectual *zeitgeist* within which I write. One could talk about this as a version of choric voice when applied to the broader academic enterprise, but that's a whole other story ... in the spirit of Rorty's notion of contingency, the sources of these quotations come broadly from the press and from film as well as from cultural theory.

I must not lie about what I know — Dennis O'Rourke, director of *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1991), and *Cunnamulla* (2001), in a pre-publicity profile interview for *Landmines: A Love Story* (2005)

They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented — Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Frontispiece quote and forming the title of Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (1994) and providing an ironic counterpoint to the thesis of the Palestinian intellectual Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978).

'I have complete control' — Geri Halliwell, in *Geri* (1999), speaking to her lawyer in the presence of filmmaker Molly Dineen.

'Why would I spend months following you around if I had no control?' — Dineen in off-screen voice.

'Geri got on the phone to her lawyer, to tell him that I was taking over the film' — Dineen voiceover narration in *Geri* (in Bruzzi 2000 pp. 164-170).

The trouble with questions is that they always elicit answers, and you never know whether the answers only exist because the questions were posed. So when I really need to know, or at least be able to imagine, why people do things, I have to

find out by means other than asking direct questions — Hugh Mackay ‘True Confessions of a Makeup Artist’ (2005 p. 18).

‘In working with Aboriginal people, my most important piece of advice is to spend more time listening than talking’— Personal communication with Anna Haebich, author of *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000* (2000).

‘One of the great pleasures of working on the *Bringing Them Home* report was listening to peoples stories and the honour I felt that they wanted to tell us their stories’ — Paraphrase, Professor Mick Dodson, *Awaye*, ABC Radio National, 11 February 2006.

‘He wants so badly to be esteemed by the world’ — Truman Capote in fictional dialogue with Harper Lee, speaking about the murderer Perry Smith.

‘Do you esteem him?’ — Harper Lee. ‘He’s a goldmine’ — Truman Capote (*Capote*, 2005)

When collocated, the quotes above make it clear that questions of authorship in relation not only to documentary, but also print non-fiction and history, are much more complex than the straightforward expression of any individual’s ‘pure’ subjectivity or voice. They also show that forms of authorship where there is a ‘subject’ separate from the author as ‘speaking subject’ create complex interrelationships, especially where there are significant disjunctions of class, race, gender and life experience between author/s and subject/s. In Chapter 1, I developed some conceptual tools for thinking about these interrelationships that in this chapter I want to apply to the case study of the documentary *Durham Downs: A Pastoral*, part of the *Braided Channels* project submitted for doctoral examination. As part of this account, I will consider not only my own trajectory in relation to this work, but also those of my documentary subjects and the institutions who have enabled me to develop this film. As a longitudinal work that has not yet found its audience, it will not be possible here to consider in detail the impact of the future audience on questions of voice in this documentary. But, following on from my application of Hayden White’s work in *The Content of the Form* (1987) in

earlier chapters, I also want to consider how the form of broadcast documentary shifts the way an audience might receive the work, *vis-à-vis* other forms such as the social history exhibition.

It is a fundamental law of physics that any sound — including the voice — must have a medium in which to resonate if it is not to disappear into a vacuum, and that a medium inevitably and intrinsically inflects the sound that it carries. Having written about Elsie a little in the previous chapter in the context of the *Channels of History* exhibition, I need now to locate her story amidst a myriad of stories about the property on which she lived as a young child: Durham Downs. This will allow me to consider how telling a story in different mediums and contexts might impact on what is communicated to an audience, and about the impact Elsie being dead has on finding a voice for the film.

I write as a practitioner informed by theory in its broadest sense, with Walter Benjamin's quote heading this chapter functioning as a kind of mantra, willing me to find the vehicle to tell the stories that flow out of these images in a way that will allow a wider public to recognise their contemporary relevance. And, just as in Benjamin's quote above the historian (inevitably construed as male) must find the right way to open his mouth if an image standing for the historian's private passion is not to be lost to an audience, so must I find the right voice and medium with which next to articulate this story.

As one for whom documentary filmmaking has been at the heart of both my professional and pedagogical practice for the past 20 years, it is my hope that this voice will be one appropriate for a documentary film broadcast on public television. Questions of documentary voice in this arena are therefore particularly apposite. However, at a moment of shift in relation to forms of historical representation, when new ways of presenting the combination of images, sounds and stories are emerging, it seems important to remain open to possibilities of form and of genre, in order that the dialectical process of engagement between individual curiosity/knowledge generation, institutional interest and (potential) audience/public remains as fecund as possible.

Elsie and Durham Downs

In the previous chapter, I referred to questions of exhibition design flowing out of a wealth of material that I had around a property called Durham Downs, and in particular photos of the young Aboriginal girl called Elsie. Here I will reprise some of this material in greater detail by way of discussing the development of a documentary around this piece of land. In April 2000, I went to the Brisbane headquarters of the Longreach (Outback Queensland) Interpretive Centre known as the Australian Stockman's Hall of Fame to view its photographic archive. This is an institution that — as its name implies — has a particular interest in male accounts of life in the pastoral industry. I went to the Hall of Fame archive to look for material on women. I found that myriad personal photo albums had been donated to the Hall of Fame that had not previously been accessioned or obviously worked with in any way. Flicking through the piles of cracked leather covers and dusty pages, one album in particular caught my attention. It had belonged to a young Anglo woman called Edith McLean (née New), who had gone to the Channel Country in 1922 as a governess to the white children of Durham Downs Station. This is a vast pastoral station in the remote southern corner of Queensland, close to where the ill-fated Australian explorers Burke and Wills perished in 1861.

Edith's album fascinated me for many reasons. For a landscape that I knew to be generally arid, the images of huge lemons, rockmelons and cabbages coming out of its clearly fertile (and in the summer of 1922 at least) well-watered soil fascinated me. And for a region whose pioneer women had mostly appeared in archival library photographs as a wizened and tough breed, baked by a hard sun and hot winds, the imagery of dreamy young women in billowing white dresses and silly shoes standing in a boat celebrating the spreading floodwaters frankly astounded me.

But what really caught my attention — the pictures that seemed to be calling out to me to discover the story behind them — were a series of images in Edith's album of a small Aboriginal girl (aged approximately eighteen months to three in the pages of the album) known just as Elsie. One image portrayed Elsie as a baby in a *coolamon*, another standing naked on an old metal trunk held by a clothed Aboriginal woman with the caption 'The Queen & Elsie, her youngest subject' (see frontispiece to this chapter).

Others indicated her incorporation into the non-Aboriginal station household — for example, smiling broadly, sitting next to a white child on a door stoop. A letter accompanying the album, written by one of Edith's relatives when donating the album to the Hall of Fame, stated that Edith and her husband had built up a friendship with the Aborigines. Faithful Aborigines "Ada" and "Elsie" plus a couple of boys always followed them from station to station.'

The same letter stated that 'Elsie the black girl was reared [sic] at the homestead' (New 1922). This album and its hints of complex underlying social relations captivated me. Who exactly was Elsie? What had the outcome of the long-term relationship with the McLeans been for her? Why were 'Ada' and 'Elsie' accorded the courtesy of names in the letter, unlike male Aboriginal people known simply as 'boys'? Why was Edith New so focused on this particular child? What might the adult Elsie have made of Edith's — and indeed my own — interest in her?

My curiosity was further aroused when I found a set of self-published memoirs, *Land of Contrasts*, by another Edith — Edith McFarlane (née Weidenhöfer) (1996) — who was governess at Durham Downs in 1925–26, immediately following Edith New. This Edith's recollections also contained many references to a small girl who, without being named, sounded like Elsie:

There was one native death during my years on the property — a young woman who died in childbirth, leaving an older child as well as the baby ... the little daughter of the woman who died was a very pretty curly headed child, slender and straight backed. I watched some of the women one day as they instructed her in the art of corroboree movements. Though she could have been no more than three years of age, her response was astounding as she stood, quite naked, and caused a trembling in every portion of her body. Seemingly perfectly still, yet one could see the muscles trembling first at the shoulders and gradually extending to the legs.

The child, after the mother died, was brought each day to the Manager's home, bathed, dressed in clean clothes and eventually educated with her little white companion who was almost the same age. At night, the child would return to her

own people who had a great love for her — as indeed they have for all little children. (pp. 12-13).

Remarkably, further research revealed that Edith McFarlane was still alive, then aged 99, in full possession of her mental faculties and willing and able to talk further. Edith confirmed that this child's name was indeed Elsie, though she did not know her second name. I learned many things from this interview, amongst them that it was most likely rampant venereal disease at Durham Downs that accounted for the paucity of children and the resulting great focus on Elsie.

Durham Downs Before Elsie

This accorded with some evidence in a document that the project's excellent researchers — Jonathan Richards and Andrew Walker — had found in the Queensland State Archives from Durham Downs from 24 years before the first Edith arrived as governess. The previously quoted letter addressed to the Queensland government's 'Protector of Aborigines' and its associated 'action thread' alleged that, in the period before white women were commonplace on the Channel Country frontier, there had been copious sexual contact between non-Aboriginal men and Murri ¹women, with at least some of it non-consensual.

Some of the archival documentation surrounding H. Fisher's letter cast doubt upon his veracity as a witness, other writers supported his account, while yet other documents from the area around the same time (Meston 1901; Meston 1902-03) suggested that this might have been part of a much more general pattern of race relations on the frontier. I did not, at the time of designing the exhibition, undertake the research that could have located this document in a reliable historical matrix. Instead, as discussed in the last chapter, I used this element of the exhibition as a way of making clear to the public the way in which historical research is always an ongoing process, a way of expressing an underlying interest in historiography that was part of the overall exhibition aesthetic. But the material and my interest in it neither went away nor felt 'exhausted' by its expression in the exhibition.

¹ Murri is the word used by Aboriginal people in Queensland to describe themselves.

Elsie — from Exhibition to Documentary

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in the process of the exhibition travelling around and intersecting with the public, further information on Elsie came from the Channel Country itself, from Dot Gorrings's sister-in-law Peggy Mackellar (née Gorrings). Peggy, it turned out, had been friends with Elsie, had known her husband and could tell me that she had had one daughter and several sons and that she had grandchildren in Rockhampton. She also knew that she had died sometime in the 1980s. Peggy indicated that Elsie was 'well spoken and well educated' (Comments book 31 December 2002). In a telephone conversation with Peggy at the time, she said that Elsie had continued to talk fondly of the McCullagh family in whose house she had passed much of her early childhood. In Peggy's knowledge, it was *this* non-Aboriginal family, rather than that of Edith New/McLean, which had been important to Elsie as an adult. At the time this information came to me, I was busy doing other things, including organising for the exhibition to travel outback and then interstate, and a couple of years passed before I was able to return my focus to Elsie.

Theory and 'Coming to Voice' — Linguistics

In my experience, a large proportion of academic writing and other forms of cultural production, including filmmaking, comes about because of a synergy between the goals of an individual filmmaker or scholar and those of an institution. I have talked about this in relation to the interplay of the individual and an 'institutional' voice. Another way of construing this dialectical relationship might be the Saussurean dichotomy, taken up by Roman Jakobson, A.J. Greimas and others, of *langue and parole*, the former a term to describe a linguistic system's underlying rules and structures, the latter a synonym for a particular 'enunciation' of language (Hawkes 1997 p. 20). Greimas in particular explored the relationship of these two categories as a binary opposition (White 1987 pp. 158 - 160; Hawkes 1997 p. 87). But these categories perhaps do not sufficiently account for the generative sources of a particular utterance.

As previously discussed, Mikhail Bakhtin's terminology of 'heteroglossia' and 'dialogism' speak of a world where speech and other expressions of human culture are always the result of the interplay between individuals, an individual and their society, or the competing voices within a subject (1981 pp. 426 - 28). Initially developed by

Bakhtin in the analysis of literature in general and the novel in particular, these concepts can usefully be applied to the analysis of historical documentary. And Bakhtin's work also includes the basis of the concept of 'register' that helps to account for the languages internal to a particular profession:

At any given moment ... a language is stratified not only into dialects in the strict sense of the word — i.e. dialects that are set off according to formal linguistic (especially phonetic) markers — but is stratified as well into languages that are socio-ideological: languages belonging to the professions, to genres, languages peculiar to particular generations, etc. ('Discourse in the Novel' in 1981 pp. 271-72).

This concept is useful to understanding the way in which a particular individual (myself for instance), when their working identity straddles several occupational groupings, will have a variant 'authorial voice' according to a particular context. Just as any human learning to talk requires contact with others who speak the same language, so institutional events and directions provide a medium through which an individual author is able to 'come to voice'. In this sense, voice — by its very nature — has collective as well as individual dimensions to it.

Elsie and the Discipline of Academic History

The next stage of the development of Elsie's story is perhaps a good example of this process. Her story had stayed with me, and I retained an oxymoronic 'vague determination' to see whether a broadcast documentary could be made from this material, without having taken any concrete steps to realise this goal. In August 2004, a colleague passed on an email announcing that the Australian National University's Centre for Indigenous History, together with the National Museum of Australia and Yale University's Centre for the Study of Borders and Frontiers, was holding a symposium entitled *Narrating Frontier Families*. I planned to attend, keen to place the Elsie story and others that I had come across in researching *Channels of History* into a broader historical context. The day before flying to Canberra, I was rung and asked if I might have some material to present to the symposium because one of the Aboriginal speakers — Frances Peters Little (see citation above) — had had an accident and may

not be able to attend or present. It was immediately clear that this conference might provide the ‘conditions of possibility’, to use Fredric Jameson’s phrase, to present the Elsie story to an audience of professional historians and to seek their perspectives on its wider resonances. Up until an hour before presenting, it was possible that Frances would arrive, and clear that if she did so the stage would be hers, as both the nominated speaker and an Aboriginal woman at an international conference in Australia on race relations.

Frances’s injury precluded her arrival, however, and I presented the photos and documents about Elsie as a kind of personal historical quest, under the overall rubric of *Children as Channels of History*. Following on from the exhibition, I linked Elsie’s story to others from the Channel Country where close relationships between white women and Aboriginal children and Aboriginal women and white children created a kind of permeable membrane of race. In discussing both versions of this trope (Aboriginal women/non-Aboriginal children and non-Aboriginal women/Aboriginal kids), my presentation explicitly stayed within the ‘shared histories’ paradigm that I had established for myself in producing the exhibition.

This conference and its associated presentation were very useful to the project. I discovered others in the audience — both Australians and delegates from North America — who were researching cognate topics. Talking with Ann Curthoys, for instance, about the possibility that venereal disease might have accounted for the apparent paucity of children at Durham Downs, and having her affirm that this was indeed a distinct possibility based on her national knowledge of this issue, strengthened my sense of resolution to ‘solve the Elsie puzzle’. Having discussions with and subsequently reading the work of Ann McGrath (1987), an Australian expert on Aboriginal people and the pastoral industry, especially in the Northern Territory, made me aware of many patterns that I had observed arising from my Oral History archive having resonances in geographies adjacent to the Channel Country. Tim Rowse, from the ANU, gave me a copy of a paper he wrote in the late 1980s on the concept of the Aboriginal ‘insider’, a structural intermediary in race relations on the Kimberley frontier, raised to maintain the hegemony of the pastoralists by being aligned with the

‘inside’ world centred on the homestead, against the danger represented by ‘outside’ blacks (Rowse 1987 page unknown, first of article).

Interestingly, Jack Sullivan — the Aboriginal man who was Rowse’s primary source for this article — was associated with the Durack family, pastoralist pioneers in the Kimberley who had come from the Channel Country, bringing a number of Aboriginal people with them. This article, and talking with Rowse about his subsequent research in this area, gave a broader socio-political context to Elsie’s story, making it clear that the ‘faithful Aborigine’ category of Edith’s original letter could be construed as going beyond a simple affective relationship or idiosyncratic example to broader economic structures. Having literally and figuratively offered me a ‘place from which to speak’, and what felt like an expert and appreciative audience, the conference also greatly increased my determination to ‘do something’ with Elsie’s story.

Using Greimas’s linguistic theory, it could be considered that this conference gave Elsie’s story a ‘phonemic’ as opposed to a ‘phonetic’ status. Greimas wrote (in Hawkes 1997 p. 88): ‘We perceive difference ... and thanks to that perception, the world “takes shape” in front of us and for our purposes.’ In practice, when indeed this perception is felt to have collective resonance as well as individual features, a ‘coming to voice’ is more likely to occur.

With a couple of exceptions, the participants in this conference were print-based historians, familiar therefore with questions of historical form and ‘voice’ almost exclusively from a ‘words only’ perspective, although with an evident openness to new forms of historical narrative. In the period immediately after the conference I toyed with the possibility of a print-based version of Elsie’s story, alongside or even instead of a broadcast documentary. I swapped emails with Rowse, asking him whether he thought I could usefully publish a journal article on the theme of *Children as Channels of History*, with Elsie as a particular example. He suggested that I could profitably contribute to a broader historical discussion about the nature of Australian ‘frontier households ... and thus go beyond telling stories (and I don’t mean to imply that stories are not good in themselves)’ (Rowse 18 August 2004). This interchange raises intriguing questions about the historical voice common in print-based academic history.

With the metonymic impulse to explore specific stories in the marrow of my documentary filmmaker's bones, not to mention employment within a *film* school, I have not so far pursued this option.²

Angels, Ventriloquists and Finding the Past through the Present: Negotiating the Documentary Synopsis

Early in 2005, in the buildup to my attendance at the Australian International Documentary Conference (AIDC) in Adelaide, I worked with a graphic artist to develop a flyer for a proposed broadcast documentary I was then calling 'Elsie's Story'. AIDC has been going biennially since 1987 and annually since 2004, and has come to be the key Australian event at which broadcasters and funding bodies meet with independent producers to develop the future production 'slate' for documentary in Australia, and Australian material for overseas purchase. This conference, and its critical role in deciding which documentaries will receive funding to be produced and broadcast in Australia and by Australians, is fundamental to understanding my choices around voice as a documentary filmmaker in pre-production.

This detailed example is intended to provide specific evidence of my general claim in Chapter 1 that, in order to understand voice in contemporary documentary, we need a concept of institutional voice as a vehicle for thinking about the forms of voice that 'sit' most happily within any particular institutional frame, Australian broadcast documentary being one example. It is a truism of documentary filmmaking that the question of how to 'treat' one's research material is often perplexing, and that with historical topics, finding a contemporary angle is vital if an expository mode with a great deal of narration is to be avoided. Paula Rabinowitz, in an essay entitled 'Wreckage upon Wreckage: History, Documentary and the Ruins of Memory' (1994 p.16) has drawn on another image from Walter Benjamin's *On the Concept of History* (1939) to describe the problem:

² Alberto Cavalcanti's famous dictum in his *Notes to Young Filmmakers*: 'You can write a book about the postal service, but if you make a documentary film it should be about one particular postage stamp' is one that I apply both pedagogically and professionally. See *Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television*, Summer 1955, pp. 341-58.

His figure of the Angel of History whose face turns toward the past as he is blown into the wreckage of the future might also represent the documentary filmmaker, who can only make a film within the historical present, even as it evokes the historical past.

I knew I had a plethora of archival photographs and some relevant archival film footage, but with not only Edith New but also Elsie probably dead, finding a contemporary ‘angle’ to my treatment was vital if I was to develop synopsis saleable to a broadcaster.

As I considered the question of the most effective voice and treatment for *Elsie’s Story*, I was influenced by films such as *Sadness* (Yang and Ayres 1999), *Lucy* (Rudolf 1987) and *Grandfathers and Revolutions* (Hegedüs 1999)³ and *The Trouble with Merle* (Delofski 2002), where the quest of the living to piece together the life of the dead, or the very old, structures the documentary. These films could all form part of a sub-genre of documentary which Bill Nichols (1994 p. 132) has identified within North American cinema:

Put at their centre an absent subject. The traces that remain (photographs, archival footage, testimony from others, letters, and other documents) lack the ‘grit’ that could contain a life ... multiple interpretations and meanings seem to explode outward.

Very often in such films, the physical journey of the filmmaker becomes a metaphor for the intellectual journey that the audience is asked to take, at the same time providing a contemporary dimension to the compilation form. In framing my synopsis for AIDC, I was initially attracted to writing a film fundamentally structured by my quest to piece together Elsie’s story and its wider meanings. The many gaps in her life story were a

³ Bringing this footnote in from the bibliographical software Endnote, I noted that under the category author it had put not only Peter Hegedüs, but also his grandfather Andras Hegedüs — the key subject of his film, SBS Television, the Australian Film Commission and the Pacific Film and Television Commission, an unintended but implicit challenge to the notion of authorship in documentary as unitary and individual! I altered the automatic import so that Hegedüs, Peter becomes the sole nominated author of *Grandfathers and Revolutions*.

barrier to structuring the film as a ‘biopic’ and, like the filmmakers mentioned above, it was in many ways the absences and fragmentary nature of the story that attracted me. There were, however, several impediments to this approach.

In what Paul Gillen (2004) describes as ‘the conversational turn’, and notwithstanding Tim Rowse’s views on history-making quoted above, there has been a movement in historiography toward a persuasive rather than a declamatory tone or voice in which the personal story is a recurring theme. An example of this trend is Henry Reynolds’ *Why Weren’t We Told: A Personal Search for the Truth About our History* (2000). Documentary film form has shown similar tendencies, and a recent book by Michael Renov (2004) has detailed the international rise of the subjective and autobiographical documentary film. With the exception of Maree Delofski’s film *The Trouble with Merle* (2002), all of the above films are both structured and voiced by the filmmaker exploring dimensions of their personal history, or William Yang as the performer and subject of the film in the case of *Sadness*. In the words of one of Michael Renov’s chapter subheadings, this provides for an audience ‘everything you never knew you would know about someone you will probably never meet’ (Renov 2004). By contrast, the filmmaker/historian, especially of the academic variety on a quest, has a much less obvious phonemic status in the language of contemporary popular culture. Brief conversations with two local documentary producers before AIDC 2005 confirmed that such an approach would be unlikely to find favour in the current production climate.

Besides, the cultural politics of me as the sole overt author of a documentary film about an Aboriginal woman who could not herself have any physical voice in the film felt uncomfortable. Only later did it strike me that my struggle to develop the ‘voice’ of this synopsis based on the story of an Aboriginal woman was the obverse of the reticence I had felt about undertaking a creative research project on women, land, inheritance and history, until I had found a physical place where the Aboriginal dimension to the topic was easy to incorporate. At the time, I was too busy thinking about alternative contemporary characters through whom I could tell Elsie’s story.

As I was writing the synopsis/selling document for AIDC, I rang Peggy Gorringe, and found that since we had last talked she had heard from a relative that an Aboriginal man

who thought that he might be Elsie's grandson was interested in tracing Elsie's history and that of other members of his family. I was immediately attracted to this as a possible 'way in' to telling Elsie's story. A succession of wrong phone numbers, missed messages and mobile phones no longer in range or service meant that I went to the documentary conference having only just got this man's name and not having spoken to him. I had therefore to be very clear with the producers and commissioning editors I met with that the presented synopsis was conditional upon this man — Norman Hodge's — willingness to participate.

In the 'pitch' and backup documentation I took to AIDC (2005 p. 3) I used Norman's proposed physical and emotional journey to understand his and his family's history as the program's structural spine, using my discovery of the photo albums just as the 'hook' that brought my and Norman's quests together. 'Elsie's grandson's journey will start from his home in Echuca in rural Victoria as he heads north into Queensland and his family's past' ran the illustrated pamphlet. I then had Norman meeting Edith McFarlane and Peggy Gorringer to hear stories of his grandmother, before going on to Longreach (where the original photo album was now), Durham Downs and Mitchell, where Peggy had told me she thought Elsie's grave was located.

This potential use of Elsie's grandson to tell her story, and the possible use of his quest as a way of representing something of the hold her story had over me, raises the issue of the notion of 'ventriloquism' as a trope to represent the potential discursive relationship between Norman and I. As discussed in Chapter 1, I had often been aware as a documentary filmmaker that one of the distinctive elements of our form was the need to find others through whom to explore one's own questions and issues. Michael Rabiger (2004 p. 374), the filmmaker and writer of many well-known 'how to' books about producing both documentary and drama, expressed this process thus:

As a documentarian, you search the world for the freestanding counterparts to your own experience. Finding them, you can communicate how life really is — without any need for self-portraiture.

Ventriloquic is probably indeed an apt description for that relationship as I wrote the synopsis for the conference: without having met Norman, there was no way I could adequately represent his voice. But, as previously argued, the real problem with such terminology is the offensive implication of the term ‘dummy’. Had ventriloquic continued to be an apt word to describe our relationship as a film moved through to production and to reaching an audience, ethical issues would have been raised. But I’m getting ahead of the story, a story that was shaping up to be a complex negotiation between my own voice, the voice of potential subjects in the Durham Downs history, and the institutional voices of those on whom I depend for funding and access to a broadcast audience.

Pitch and Punt: Talking to Broadcasters and Production Houses

Film Australia was my first port of call at the conference, because of its reputation, backed by suitable budgets, for being able to produce long-form documentary with an extensive research and archival component — for example, *The Diplomat* (Zubrycki, Browning *et al.* 2000) and *A Calcutta Christmas* (Delofski, 2000). The head of production was enthusiastic about the project, though his interest was not nearly so much in Elsie’s story *per se* as in the contribution that my wealth of Channel Country research material might make to a big-budget historical series encompassing the whole history of Australia, for which Film Australia was about to receive substantial funding from the federal government. This, of course, would imply a documentary voice quite other than the one adopted in my synopsis. I was pleased about his interest, of course, and tempted to agree that my data might form part of the raw material for one or other episode. But Michael Rabiger’s aphorism (2004 p. 72) about big-budget documentary history series rang in my ears:

Powered from the resources of large corporations, and using an army of production workers, the history series gravitates towards omniscience as naturally as royalty to saying ‘we’.

After the conference, I wrote to Film Australia about ‘Elsie’s Story’, but I will come to that later.

While Film Australia can and does develop projects independently, getting them to air still depends on the support of broadcasters. I needed to use the AIDC conference to gauge the interest of broadcasters in my concept. Early in the conference, at a general information session for producers, the new head of documentaries at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation emphasised his personal interest in Australian history, said that the ABC ‘could not afford to be risk averse’ and commented that he was particularly interested in documentaries that had an ‘observational flavour with a thesis’ (ABC Information Session, AIDC, 22 February 2005). This was cheering, even though others lower in the ABC hierarchy — who had expressed considerable interest in the project — warned me that this individual would be a hard person to whom to sell an Indigenous concept, even though he was the key decision-maker. Making a scheduled meeting to discuss the project proved impossible, so on the advice of his staff I literally ‘bailed him up’ and asked his permission to pitch my concept.

Dear Reader, it didn’t go well. He indicated that he could not imagine this material working well for a prime-time audience and that he could not see the source of emotional engagement. He said that ‘Australian audiences turn off in droves from Indigenous stories’ (paraphrase), citing a then-recent example of a biopic about singer Jimmy Little — Frances Peters Little’s father — where the audience had been ‘two hundred thousand instead of a usual audience of a million in prime time’ (Personal communication, 23 February 2005). I mooted an alternate treatment of the material, that would focus on Durham Downs as a place and weave in the stories of Elsie and the two Ediths, with Burke and Wills thrown in for good measure, but he resolutely wasn’t ‘biting’.

With this negative response, and with Film Australia potentially interested but dependent upon output deals with broadcasters, I did not approach SBS executives at AIDC. I felt that I could not risk being knocked back by the only two major commissioners of Australian documentary, as it might impact negatively on Film Australia’s future interest. Besides, it was getting late into the conference by then, when ‘pitch fatigue’ was clearly setting in for both commissioning editors and filmmakers.

The whole phenomenon of the ‘pitch’ as the meeting point between funding bodies, broadcasters and filmmakers is relatively new in the political economy of Australian documentary production, and it is interesting to consider what impact this predominantly verbal method of project selection may have on the voice, in Nichols’ sense of the term, of the documentaries finally produced as a result. While, of course, processes of ‘sounding out’ project officers and commissioning editors have probably ‘always’ been intrinsic to the economic and cultural system of documentary production, formal and especially public or semi-public pitches were rare in Australia until the early 1990s, with a much higher reliance on longer and more formal written documents. The *Macquarie Dictionary* (1981) has no reference to pitch in relation to verbal selling or persuasion of any product or concept, let alone documentary film, other than to ‘pitch a line ... a boastful and sometimes untruthful speech as a means of winning sexual favours from a woman’ and ‘pitch a tale ... to tell a story, especially one that is exaggerated or untrue’. But by the end of the 1980s the Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS) was introducing students to the term in relation to drama, as a way to prepare them for an increasingly globally integrated market. By 1995, a kind of gladiatorial public pitching contest — the Documart — had been introduced into AIDC, with video and various forms of competitive performance (including on several occasions public nudity) a standard part of the event. Currently I teach a course in Screen Producing at Griffith University, in which all students are taught and practise the art of the ‘pitch’ and compete to do so in front of representatives of the AFC and the PFTC, because without it they are unlikely to get financial support to make their films.

This increasing ubiquity of pitches has had the effect that filmmakers not only ‘second guess’ what particular commissioning editors are likely to ‘go for’, but also learn from each other the forms of discourse that are most likely to result in a prized presale. In relation to my tools to describe different vocal relations of documentary, one could probably portray filmmakers as playing ventriloquists’ dummies to commissioning editors who potentially wield power without their voices ever actually being heard in the finished films. Frank Rijavec (2005 p. 15) has characterized the relation between filmmakers and commissioning editors on these occasions not in terms of ventriloquism but using similar performance metaphors with negative connotations: ‘filmmakers become beggars and contortionists, hacks and mules’. But it is probably more useful to

say that, as a filmmaker develops their particular treatment, they are inevitably engaged in dialogic processes with commissioning editors, production houses and funding bodies, and that at best this dialogue is ‘full and frank’.

Without being conclusive about the impact of this form of choosing which documentary projects go into production, I believe that for the kind of highly researched, reflective documentaries that easily form part of my own repertoire of cultural production, a performative pitch before a large audience of both local and international commissioning editors was unlikely to be successful. Greimas’s work (in Hawkes, 1997) applying the tools of structural linguistics — as refined by Levi Strauss in the analysis of whole societies — to the deep structure of a culture’s storytelling is instructive here. Greimas identified ‘a narrational *combinatoire*, or story-generating mechanism’ as a kind of *langue* from which the *parole* or in his terms the ‘enunciation spectacle’ of particular stories would arise (in Hawkes 1997 p.95). The whole infrastructure of the Documart pitching session can be seen as a narrational *combinatoire*, in which subtle stories are likely to get lost in the merely phonetic background noise in favour of stories where the binary oppositions are obvious, the characters larger than life, the filmmaker’s voice generically familiar.

A couple of weeks later, I met the head of SBS Independent at an industry event in my home city of Brisbane, and talked briefly with her about the project. She strongly encouraged me to bring a developed synopsis to them. She also told me that neither *Elsie’s Story* nor *Channels of History* was a suitable name for a documentary on this topic because then new programming systems for digital television required titles that were simple and descriptive in nature if ratings were to be maximised. In this conversation I was also able to establish that what I was planning to do did not cross over the content areas of a big-budget series that her network was producing on Aboriginal history. So from AIDC and its immediate aftermath I developed a kind of map of how the relevant institutions were interested in ‘speaking’ as a basis upon which to continue to develop the voice of my documentary.

Developing the Documentary Treatment

After AIDC, I also got back to Film Australia to say that I didn't want *Elsie's Story* or other of my research material to be considered as part of the big-budget History Initiative, that I wanted time and some research development money from the Brisbane-based Pacific Film and Television Commission to do some preliminary filming and develop a more fully worked up synopsis for consideration in Film Australia's National Interest Program. I didn't say to Film Australia's head of production that I was concerned about losing my own voice if my material became part of the 'background noise' of a big series and that instead I wanted to find a more personal voice for the stories that came out of my Durham Downs material, but communicated the equivalent in a more 'industry' register. He acceded to my request and gave me a letter of interest from Film Australia. While such letters do not *commit* an institution to anything, they are an important way for filmmakers in Australia to access development funding from government film bureaucracies. With this letter in hand, I applied to the Pacific Film and Television Commission for \$5,000 funding to develop *Elsie's Story* further, including funding part of a trip out to Durham Downs.

While waiting for the outcome of this application, I continued developing a treatment. I was able to talk at length by telephone with Norman's wife. It emerged that Norman had left his family and home in Victoria around eighteen months before, and had been living in Gladstone, about 500 kilometres north of Brisbane, with no fixed address. About a month after I'd first talked to his wife, the phone rang and it was Norman, ringing from a public telephone box into which he was slotting coins. He didn't want to ring me back reverse charges but wanted to talk at length. When I'd talked to Peggy and written the synopsis for AIDC, I had imagined that Norman was in his twenties. In fact I discovered that, as a member of the 'Stolen Generation', Norman had little knowledge of exactly how old he was but undoubtedly his twenties were long gone. The date of birth he grew up with would have made him now 59; the date that emerged from documents he recently found as part of his quest to understand who he really is indicates that he is 67. His wife reckons he is around 64. Knowing that Elsie would be around 89 if she were alive, it was obvious that she could not be his grandmother. Norman was fairly certain of the identity of his mother, did not ever remember meeting Elsie, but knew that Arthur Lumley, the man to whom Elsie was married in the late

1950s and whose name she carried until her death, ‘came and got him’ when he was around six years of age.

Discovering that Norman could not be Elsie’s grandson was, of course, a blow to my hopes that his journey might become the structure and primary subject’s voice of a documentary called *Elsie’s Story*. Norman, however, felt fairly certain of his own connection to Elsie’s husband, Arthur. Any hopes I might have had that there was a likely close family connection to Elsie were further dashed around two weeks later when I met Paul Gorecki and Karen McFadden, anthropologists who work for the Queensland South Representative Body, advising Aboriginal people from Southwestern Queensland on the preparation of their native title claims. I had contacted them in the hope that the case histories supporting the native title claims for Durham Downs could shed some light on either Elsie’s or Norman’s history. In an extraordinary afternoon, I discovered that Paul Gorecki had amassed a genealogical database of 55,000 Aboriginal people. If Paul’s database is accurate, Norman is neither Elsie’s grandson, nor directly related to her, but they do share country and perhaps some relatives in common. And Paul had information about Norman’s family that seemed likely to fill in lots of gaps for Norman of his knowledge of his own and his family’s past. The other thing I discovered from Paul was that, since seeing my *Channels of History* exhibition two years ago with its call for any information from the public about Elsie, he has taken a particular interest in her and has considerable information about her and a little about her mother, Emily.

Following up Norman’s story as a way to shed further light on Elsie’s story, while largely it would seem a ‘red herring’, in other ways seems to me to say more about Aboriginal history in Australia than a neat biography with all facts ‘present and correct’ could have. And having begun as a puzzle, I had never expected the Elsie story to resolve itself into a neat linear narrative. Norman being part of the ‘Stolen Generation’, and thereby losing certain links back to his family history — even his birthdate — seems emblematic of what the ongoing process of colonisation has meant for many Aboriginal individuals and families. And, of course, it ties in with the ‘Braided Channel’ metaphor of my whole project and is an example of what Michael Joyce (1995 p. 14) has called ‘the capillary flow of interaction’. But it didn’t leave me with a central structure for my intended documentary because the ontological voice of contemporary

broadcast documentary would not sit well with a quest comprising so many blind alleys, especially given that the quest was in some sense an academic rather than a personal one.

Alternate Treatments: Peggy Gorringe

Meanwhile, another possible narrative thread to structure my documentary was developing as I several times saw Peggy Gorringe, on an extended trip away from the Channel Country and moving around a lot but periodically staying with her younger sister Betty in Brisbane. The phone would ring out of the blue and they would come over for afternoon tea. I discovered that Betty too had Durham Downs connections, having worked there in the kitchens in the late 1960s, but Peggy was the main focus of my inquiries, as it was she who had known Elsie and was in a better position to give me further information. Elsie and Peggy had met in the 1950s when Elsie and Arthur Lumley were living at a bore near Bourke in Northwestern New South Wales. Peggy told me that this was a traditional Aboriginal marriage where Elsie had been promised to her husband-to-be from birth, a common pattern that ensured that a younger person cared for the elderly. Peggy spent much of her life as a drover in Far Western Queensland and once went droving with Elsie down the Diamantina River. She and Elsie exchanged occasional letters and later, when Elsie was living in Winton, Peggy stayed with her. She remembers Elsie serving her goanna cooked in the coals, but giving her a knife and fork to eat it with, until Peggy said that she was used to eating goanna with her fingers and Elsie laughed and said she was too. Elsie ended up living in Windorah where most of Peggy's family is based, but she didn't see a lot of Elsie later in life. Peggy told that when she first met Elsie she never drank alcohol, but that as she last remembers her she was a 'funny old thing. She drank a lot in the finish.'

The last time I saw Peggy, she had been north to Townsville, where Elsie once lived, and had tried but failed to track down some of Elsie's friends on my behalf. She didn't therefore have anything fresh to impart about Elsie, but Peggy that day wanted to talk about her own life. As she left, clutching a pot-plant and some cuttings of succulents I'd given her, I found myself mumbling something about how it was perhaps strange that I was trying so hard to trace the biography of a woman whose story seemed constantly to disappear when before me was Peggy, with a fascinating life and a wealth of

knowledge. Ross Gibson titled a recent lecture 'Imagination and the Historical Impulse in Response to a Past Full of Disappearance' (published as 'Place Past Disappearance' Gibson 2006) which talks of the way that he and many other writers and historians tend to be particularly attracted to historical subjects with gaps and fissures. Stubbornly perhaps (but not alone), I remained attracted to the idea of a film telling Elsie's story and thought that I could do that, while still along the way telling parts of Peggy's story and alluding to a wider Aboriginal history. I had resolved, and Peggy had agreed, that the next time she was in Brisbane I would film an interview with her, about Elsie but also about her own life.

It was therefore a huge shock in May 2005 when Peggy died instantly in a head-on car smash, travelling back to the Channel Country from Brisbane. Apparently the plants I'd given her were amongst the car full of belongings strewn about the Warrego Highway near Roma at the spot where she died. This felt like more 'disappearance' than I wanted to bear, primarily of Peggy herself, of whom I had become very fond, but also of what I had come to think of as the likely structure of my documentary. The purpose of this extended discussion of what were in some senses blind alleys is to point out the inadequacy of voice as a label affixed at the end of a production process, and to emphasise the complex processes and negotiations that lead to the final voice of a given documentary.

Peggy's death was a turning point in the emerging voice of my film. In June 2005, with encouraging noises from the PFTC but no definite answer to my funding application, an opportunity to get to Durham Downs arose, and I took it, going without a film crew but with a prosumer digital camera. Since the advent of this category of digital cameras — in my case, a Sony PD 170 — documentaries with modest production values but long-term and personal treatments have become more common — for example, *Wings to Fly* (Hegedüs, 2007) and *Donkey in Lahore* (K-Rabher, 2007). This kind of production model, however, does not sit neatly within the main structure for broadcast documentary production. This was a trip with both personal and professional dimensions. I camped there with my family for three days as guests of S. Kidman and Co., the long-term holders of the Durham Downs pastoral lease.

Just before I left Brisbane in June 2005, Durham Downs was in the national news because Santos — a company that has mining leases over much of South Australia and Queensland, known collectively as the Cooper Basin, including Durham Downs — had found skeletons suggestive of a past Aboriginal massacre in the sand hills at Durham. This reminded me of a part of Edith McFarlane's interview with me where she'd remembered finding evidence of what appeared to have been a massacre back in the 1920s:

There was a place on Durham, right beside the river, which Mr McCullagh found one day and he came in and he said I just found a place in a sand hill that I'll take you to have a look at. So we went up with him and these skeletons had been unearthed with a storm. A wind had come and blown the sand away from them and as far as I know, that was the first time it had been found and the skeletons were laying at all angles. Obviously they'd been shot. Legs this way. Arms that way. Bodies every which way. If it had been a natural cemetery, which they don't as a rule have, they would've all been laid out in reasonably straight lines. But these had obviously been shot and it's a terrible reflection on our early pioneers. (FitzSimons 2002).

Santos had commissioned a report to inquire into the provenance of the skeletons found in 2005 but, according to ABC Television's *7.30 Report*, had failed to alert the traditional owners of Durham Downs to their presence, or to take any special steps for their protection (McCutcheon 2005). My letter of invitation from S. Kidman and Co. warned me against filming in this area, and I agreed.

With one hundred miles north to south of Cooper Creek frontage, broken into innumerable 'braids', and an unexpected burst of winter water in the system in the weeks before we arrived, the 3 million acres of Durham Downs were beautiful. Many of the Cooper's myriad channels were running, and the manager John Ferguson told us that if we listened closely we would be able to hear the water travelling underground a couple of days before it was visible on the surface. I seemed deaf to this voice of the land, but perhaps it needed to be a bigger pulse of water for it to be easily audible.

Crossing Cooper Creek west to east, flowers carpeted the ground between the channels. We camped beside one of the Cooper's permanent waterholes, close to the homestead.

Our hosts were John and Jasaleen Ferguson, who have managed Durham Downs for the Kidman Company for more than 30 years. John was born on a neighbouring Kidman property, Naryilco, which his father also managed for around 30 years. When he soon retires, John will be living for the first time in his life off 'Kidman land'. By chance, Will Abel-Smith, one of the scions of the Kidman family-dominated company that has had the Durham lease for close to a century, was also visiting at the time, camping just down the river waterhole from us. Working casually on the property while we were there was Mandy Shirvington, a descendant of one of the families prominent in a native title claim currently before the Federal Court of Australia in relation to Durham Downs. Mandy is also periodically employed by the Santos mining company as a 'monitor' to check for Aboriginal sites as the mining company goes through the land making seismic lines, looking for oil and gas. The Federal Court had sat at Durham Downs in 2003 to try to determine which of two rival native title groups had greatest legitimacy. Questions of what it might mean to own in some way or have connection to land suffused the air and the water of this place.

If I went to Durham Downs at least partly to look for more detail about Elsie's life, this hope was simply not to be realised. The homestead itself, which figures prominently in the photo albums of the 'two Ediths' burned down in 1952, incinerating its then manager. And apparently all the station records were removed to Kidman headquarters in Adelaide many years back where a fire also destroyed them, although this needs further and specific investigation. This manager's grave is marked by a fence and headstone, and next to it are a couple of graves that are said to be those of Aboriginal people. Edith McFarlane describes the funeral of Elsie's mother Emily in some detail, but it was not possible for me to determine now where this grave was. Next to the manager's grave were a couple of Aboriginal graves, without names or histories attached but with the same protective fencing. At the back of the station homestead, next to the rubbish dump, were some other unmarked Aboriginal graves, a simple wire fence broken down and the fresh tracks of a motorbike having recently ridden through them.

Unsurprisingly, John and Jasaleen knew nothing of a small Aboriginal girl who lived there 85 years ago. I had taken many photos of Elsie with me, but my sense was that there was not great interest in Elsie — I supposed from their perspective of her being one of countless people who had moved through this tract of land before them. When a few days before, in the settlement of Innamincka that is 200 kilometres to the West, I had asked several Aboriginal elders if they knew an Elsie Thompson/Lumley, the response was similarly blank. Instead, from these Aboriginal conversants I heard a lot about an Aboriginal woman of around 60, still alive, called Elsie Peabody. She was the Aboriginal ‘Elsie’ now known in connection to Durham Downs and the Channel Country more broadly. Innamincka has a stone seat to commemorate four of Elsie Peabody’s children who died in two separate tragedies, the second of which was her son Gary who drowned in a well at Durham Downs while she was working there.

This Elsie, I learned in Innamincka, had also had a child born under a tree at Durham. John and Jasaleen knew this Elsie: as they told it, her husband came back to their outstation cottage one day to discover that his wife had just given birth, not having known she was pregnant. Elsie Peabody lives in outback South Australia and I hope eventually to meet and interview her. From the same Aboriginal people in Innamincka, I discovered that John Ferguson was well known and highly respected by them.

And what traces were there of the physical world into which Elsie was born: the thatched room cottages, intricate garden landscaping, and the extensive Aboriginal community that Edith McFarlane describes? Only a few fragments remain. Although Jasaleen is a keen gardener, all the current plants are ornamental, with vegetables coming in fortnightly from the nearest Queensland town, 300 kilometres away. Almost nothing remains of the elaborate fruit and vegetable garden maintained by a Chinese gardener that Edith’s photos and stories depict, though I did film some remnants of his elaborate watering system. Edith McFarlane describes the stones used by Aboriginal women at Durham Downs to grind seeds and a selection of such stones has been concreted into a garden bed with a concrete lizard statue. The rusted metal detritus of pastoral industry machinery provides the most obvious traces of history at Durham, and Jasaleen has gathered many fine examples into an area in the garden next to the station

homestead. These include a huge metal vat used to wash wool dating from when Durham was a sheep property, prior to 1905. The women described in Fisher's letter (Fisher and Meston 1900, with the key document describing events from 1898) as subject to routine sexual exploitation by shearers would have been drying the wool washed in this vat on the flat between the shearing shed and the creek. The station rubbish dump is an obvious feature of the landscape, passed daily between our campsite and the homestead, filled with detritus of the material culture and history of non-Aboriginal tenure at Durham Downs.

At Durham, Jasaleen was our primary guide to the property, a role she apparently regularly assumes with visitors. Interestingly, however, she appeared not to know the station especially well, with house and garden very clearly her primary locus. She needed directions to take us to the remains of the stone shearing shed described by Fisher in his letter to Meston, just 3 kilometres from the homestead, right beside a channel of Cooper Creek. Jasaleen also took us to the remains of an Aboriginal sacred site of obvious significance, with many stones laid on top of each other, presumably the same one Edith McFarlane had photographed in the 1920s, though now much reduced in size and open to cattle to wander through. John and Jasaleen, however, appeared to know very little of Durham's early history, although they did know that Kidman and Co. had changed it from a sheep to a cattle property in response to the predations of dingos upon sheep. From Jasaleen, I discovered that their 33-year-old daughter, Fiona, was in the early stages of writing a book about her parents' history and the history of Durham more broadly, with some financial support from the local council.

I came back to Brisbane in July 2005 to confirmation of \$5,000 funding from the Queensland Pacific Film and Television Commission to develop the treatment of *Elsie's Story* for submission to Film Australia and broadcasters.

From Norman and Peggy to Fiona as the Central Subject of My Documentary

With neither Norman nor Peggy as an obvious way into the Elsie story, my plan was to return to the 'shared histories' approach that I had pursued in curating the *Channels* exhibition, with a particular focus on the impulse to create a history. My first synopsis used the separate but related 'quests' of Mandy Shirvington to understand something of

her people's country through her work in the mining and pastoral industries, Edith McFarlane's desire at 102 to remain connected to living by piecing together her past, Fiona Ferguson's history-making, which I expected to be a version of pioneer triumphalism (with the particular inflection of focusing on employees rather than 'owners') and my own quest to tell the stories of Durham Downs in general and Elsie in particular. Becoming aware of some of the complexities of native title in relation to Durham Downs, with two rival groups of native title claimants, made me somewhat wary of this approach in relation to Mandy, which in turn seemed to make the absence of an Indigenous dimension to this history-making theme problematic.

I developed another synopsis that used most of these characters, but was centred on the 'shearing shed document' and my exploration of all its meanings. This proposed film had the working title of 'Painfully Common', which is how Meston described the kind of abuse of Aboriginal women depicted in the document (Fisher and Meston 1900, with the key document describing events from 1898). Although I received cautious support for this approach from several Murri women to whom I spoke, this did not feel like a comfortable speaking position for me as a white, middle-class and urban filmmaker. Whilst undoubtedly the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women is an ongoing theme of Australian history, it was hard to put this at the centre of the documentary treatment without feeling that I was entrenching stereotypes and engaging in 'victimology/demonology'. I also found that this stage of my research led to difficult negotiations with my key documentary subjects. Interviewing Edith McFarlane again, she confirmed that the scenes Fisher described at Durham were indeed very likely to have been 'painfully common' throughout colonial and early twentieth century Queensland, but repeatedly seemed to want to return the conversation to her husband's managerial achievements rather than discussing this proposition in any depth.

This interview certainly felt like a 'dialogic' process as I verbally fenced with a by then 102-year-old who wanted to talk about quite different things than those in which her interviewer was primarily interested, and who had lost the capacity to recognise that she was repeating herself. Possibly seeing voice tropes all around me, I found myself saying to a friend that developing this documentary treatment was making me feel 'breathless'. In practice, it felt like a kind of voicelessness, because neither my written materials nor

the planning of verbal ‘pitches’ to commissioning editors would flow. As a kind of confirmation of Bakhtin’s analysis of different professions developing separate registers, the final nail in the coffin of this synopsis was giving it to a colleague whose work traverses both documentary production and academe and having him describe it as written within and for ‘a theoretical cul-de-sac’ and finding myself agreeing with him.

And then I talked with John and Jasaleen’s daughter, Fiona. I rang her to get the transcript of the Federal Court native title hearing held at Durham Downs in 2003. Fiona told me her mother had had a copy, but that Jasaleen wanted to engineer me ringing Fiona. Somewhat to my initial amazement, given what I had understood to be her parents’ social and ethnic identity as ‘whites’ in their community, I discovered that in the past two to three years Fiona had heard many unconfirmed reports that her family (like a number of others I came across in my Channel Country research) had an Aboriginal dimension to it. In our first conversation, Fiona told me that her great-grandfather was perhaps ‘Afghan or Maori’ and that her grandfather’s name had appeared on a list recently as being eligible to apply for native title rights. Fiona also indicated, however, that there was uncertainty and puzzle around this history, and that both her father and other elderly relatives were reluctant to speak openly about it. In this first conversation, Fiona told me of her deep and abiding love for her pugnacious father, with this a key driver for her history-making. But she also spoke as one with her own quest to understand her family’s history and the place that they had called their own for at least decades, with a preparedness to confront her parents if necessary to achieve this. And she indicated an interest in the broader traditions of Durham Downs’ history, a key question being ‘who has lived here and where have they gone?’

The immediate impetus to her impulse to ‘make history’ would seem to be her parents’ forthcoming retirement from the Kidman Company, and therefore their and her planned/required departure from Durham Downs, leaving no future en/tile/ment to the land. As a 33-year-old single woman, once Charity Princess of the Queen of the Outback Quest, who has worked in the pastoral and mining industries her whole adult life and who cannot envisage ‘marrying a manager, but would like to marry an owner’ of land, many questions around Fiona’s future immediately struck me as the basis of a classic narrative. During the initial long phone call, a possible documentary treatment

based on *her* historical quest to understand Durham Downs took hold of my brain. Like my own, and Norman's at least imagined one, Fiona's would seem to be a historical quest likely to contain many gaps and obstacles to definitive understanding and expression.

Within a couple of weeks of this first conversation, I and a cinematographer had travelled for some eight hours north to film Fiona, who herself travelled four to five hours south from her then residence in North Central Queensland. Predictably less revealing on camera than over the telephone, Fiona was nevertheless 'good talent' for a character-based documentary: complex, loquacious, engaging, and racing to grab hold of a future she can't yet see. And I found that her historical project seemed far more developed and professionally planned than I had initially imagined, albeit without any detailed knowledge of archives, government records, etc., and with an intention to write for a popular 'bush literature' audience. I wrote a new synopsis, titled *Durham Downs: A Pastorale*, based on Fiona's quest to understand the history of Durham and to find a pathway to her own future. A part of this was her attempt to understand her own ethnic background and specifically to resolve whether or not there is Aboriginality in her family tree. I also filmed Fiona visiting the Queensland State Archives and meeting Paul Gorecki to investigate his genealogical database. Paul gave her preliminary indications that her family had appeared in a genealogy he had done for an Aboriginal family in Cunnamulla, but sent her off to gather more information.

This stage of the project threw up some new 'puzzles of voice'. As a 'character-based' documentary — a form that has found great favour with Australian broadcasters in the past decade or so — the synopsis picked out details such as that Fiona had only one ovary, to emphasise what was at stake for her:

Fiona is 33 and single. She loves pastoralism but mining pays better. And her parents will soon leave Durham Downs to retire near the coast. She has grown up as part of the Anglo settler community but has recently heard stories of Maori, Afghan, Aboriginal and Chinese strands to her family. She is starting to write a history of her parents and Durham Downs and wants to know 'who has lived there

and where they went?’ And along the way to find her own future. She finds a history as tangled as the braids of Cooper Creek. (FitzSimons 2005).

The use of fictional tropes to frame documentary material has been ubiquitous in the era that has also seen the ‘wobbly-cam’ of observational cinema a commonly adopted aesthetic for television and cinema drama. Clearly, because Fiona herself is making a history of Durham Downs, themes such as what happened at the shearing shed in 1898 and Elsie’s life could be relevant to her. But if Fiona’s quest to write her book became the central narrative spine of the documentary, these may or may not be vital issues for her and therefore for a film ‘about’ her. If I imposed these themes upon her story as a filmmaker, it could constitute a kind of violence to her voice as a documentary subject and indeed be a form of ‘ventriloquism’. And yet to entirely leave them out could be a suppression of my own voice in a manner that would appear to have been the impetus for Nichols’ original essay on voice. There *are* complex questions and — at least potentially — tensions in the relation of a documentary filmmaker’s voice and their subject voices that theory can shed light upon but never simply resolve.

Remarkably, Fiona’s collection of Durham Downs images included a third collection of photos (Milkin Brothers undated, c. mid 1920’s) that also included several images of children from Durham under the rubric ‘Black and White ... South of West, Queensland’ and clearly show both Elsie and Jean McCullagh, the manager’s daughter. And on being shown the photo of Elsie as a child standing on a metal trunk with Ada ‘The Queen & Elsie, Her Youngest Subject’, Fiona’s sister Trish was confident that she still had the actual trunk, retrieved from Durham’s capacious garbage dump. But if these were coincidences that brought tears to my eyes, for Fiona they were not details with such obvious phonemic status to *her* history of Durham. I gave her the ‘shearing shed’ document (Fisher and Meston 1900, with the key document describing events from 1898) to read the night after our first filmed interview, expecting to find her the next morning shell-shocked, but instead found her phlegmatic, interested but not obviously surprised. These differences between Fiona and I could, of course, make for a productive tension in the realisation of the voice of the documentary. Fiona and I have the capacity to offer each other reciprocal assistance in the completion of our respective projects: her book and my film. Through her, issues such as access to Durham Downs

as a Kidman property and the S. Kidman and Co. archives become much easier, just I am similarly able to make it easier for her to access archives and archival researchers than might otherwise be the case. But we also wrote a letter of understanding with each other that confirmed that each of us would acknowledge the research input of the other if only one of the two separate projects ('the book' and 'the film') were realised. And that Fiona was clear that it was possible I would make a film about Durham Downs in which she was not the central character ... because any potential broadcaster or production house would want input into the treatment.

Meanwhile, I worked with an editor to cut together a fifteen-minute show-reel to accompany the Durham synopsis (Item Four), based on Fiona but also introducing Edith McFarlane's and Elsie's stories. As a piece designed to have a broadcaster 'wanting more', the cut finished with Fiona tantalised by what Paul Gorecki had told her, determined to get her previously recalcitrant aunts to 'spill the beans' on her family history.

From Person to 'Place' as the Central Structuring Device of the Film

In March 2006, I took this 'cut' to both Trevor Graham, a commissioning editor with SBS Television, and Mark Hamlyn, head of production at Film Australia, hoping on its basis to secure a presale. Trevor was cautiously interested in the concept (his final words to me were 'we're talking') but did not believe that Fiona was a sufficiently compelling character to form the narrative spine of the film. Mark was of a similar opinion, but responded much more strongly to the notion of the land of Durham Downs itself as the central character, within which the stories of Elsie, the Ediths, Fiona and others could be located.

In my past experience, documentaries often come to fruition when a central filming event or opportunity is taking place that galvanises thematic interest into narrative compulsion. I told both Trevor and Mark that day that Fiona's sister Trish was getting married at Durham Downs in April 2006, a big 'bush bash' that would bring together much of the surrounding community, and that I wanted to be there to film it. Trevor was interested to see the rushes, but offered no financial support to realise this aim. Mark

was enthusiastic and in a short space of time I had joint funding from Film Australia and the PFTC to attend this event with a crew.

The wedding was a wonderful filming opportunity. Flies of almost unbelievable proportions, dust, heat, one broken videotape, rain threatening to close roads and distance notwithstanding, it was a cinematic gift: Fiona was the chief caterer (as well as chief bridesmaid) for the event, assisted by two (part-) Aboriginal women with whom she had grown up: Tracey White, daughter of the itinerant Durham fencing contractor, and Mandy Shirvington, a Wangkumurra woman and now a prospective native title claimant to Durham, who I had first met the previous July. We filmed the two-day build-up to the event — complete with failing generator just before the ceremony — as well as the wedding itself and a little of the aftermath. From the bride arriving side-saddle on a white horse to meet her dark-skinned husband-to-be, and the groomsmen dousing themselves and their dinner suits in Aerogard, to a plague of locusts that descended on the house that night, the event had the specific sense of place that I wanted. And, as the pioneers of North American direct cinema discovered long ago, there's nothing like a big event, with a built-in narrative and the likelihood of obstacles and conflict, to provide a rich canvas for observational filmmaking. The crew and I also filmed different aspects of the land in considerable detail, and used the collocation of many people with long connection to Durham as an opportunity to undertake brief interviews. Fiona, of course, was the key person we talked to, but we were able to film conversations with several others as well.

The most striking interview was with three of Fiona's cousins: John 'Tractor' Ferguson, the mayor of Bulloo Shire Council, based in Thargomindah; his brother 'Rusty' Ferguson, who flies gyrocopters for S. Kidman & Co. and other pastoral companies; and their cousin David Brown, manager for S. Kidman & Co. of the adjacent Naryilco station. All three had grown up in and around Durham Downs as 'Kidman men', though in Tractor's case his elected role has latterly detached him from this status. After parrying early questions and some debate amongst themselves as to what could be said, Tractor confirmed that their family was indeed part-Aboriginal. He talked about the Kidman Company still refusing to employ both Aboriginal people and women as managers, and about the fact that, after generations of Fergusons being managers for

Kidman, the younger generation was no longer interested in this career. I also formally interviewed John ‘Bindy’ Ferguson — Fiona’s father and an uncle to John ‘Tractor’ Ferguson — for the first time. I found him much more receptive to my questions and the camera’s gaze than he had been the previous July. I did not press this John with questions of his family’s ethnicity, however, because I felt I could not risk offending my host and losing access to the central site of my documentary. This again underlines a filmmaker’s voice in documentary as intrinsically a negotiated (but not necessarily compromised) enunciation. I also interviewed Tracey and Mandy, and the wife and daughter of Brendan, the current head stockman, who may well take over managing Durham from the Fergusons when John retires.

I came away from this trip excited by the concept of a treatment based on the land of Durham as the central character, using Fiona’s history-making as a pathway back into earlier chapters of its history and with the wedding and John’s forthcoming retirement as key narrative events. In a way that had not seemed possible in mid-2005, I could see that a greater focus on John Ferguson than his daughter might widen the address of the film and open me to new (largely male) perspectives on Channel Country history. John ‘Tractor’ Ferguson rang a couple of days after the end of the shoot, concerned that he had ‘said too much’ on tape in regard to his family’s ethnicity. I assured him that I would move carefully in developing my treatment and that I was not aiming to ‘cause trouble’, but stopped short of saying that I would not use his interview material. This trip also made me more aware of conflicts over who were the legitimate claimants to the native title of Durham Downs, without clarifying how best to handle this issue. Both of these elements gave cause for caution but not despair, reminding me yet again of the way in which the voice of any given documentary is necessarily a negotiated category. Mark Hamlyn was very impressed by the rushes of this shoot (see Item 4) and encouraged me to come back by the end of financial year 2005/06 with a large Brisbane-based production company on board and a full treatment.

Dear Reader, I haven’t yet done it. June last year found me ironically diagnosed with the same health problem that had resulted in Fiona having only one ovary, albeit without the same resonances of it threatening my unexpressed fertility. With that to recover from, this doctorate to write as a report on knowledge generated and

synthesised throughout a braided research process, a full-time teaching and administration load, and the knowledge that once a production company and pre-sale are in place the trajectory of documentaries tends to become fixed, I've held off. I spoke to John intermittently and he seemed keen to have his life observed in the period in which he retires, but that date was never clear, seeming repeatedly to be 'in twelve to eighteen months'. I planned to submit this doctorate and then fully turn my attention to getting the film completed. With previous experience in making a partly observational documentary over several years as my university work and developments in my subject's lives allowed and encouraged,⁴ I know that such projects can form a valuable element of the overall production slate of broadcasters, even though more usually documentaries are shot and post-produced in tight time frames, their slot in the schedule having been determined almost from the point of pre-sale (FitzSimons 2002). So I am counting on the quality of my material and the rarity of longitudinal stories from remote areas to ensure that my film finds its audience over the next couple of years, believing that the length of its production process and therefore its following of characters over a period of years will become a strength.

This reference to the 'overall production slate of broadcasters' again raises the issue of 'institutional voice' that has been discussed in the two previous chapters. In Chapter 1, when first discussing Nichols' theories of voice, I noted that this rubric had served documentary theory and practice well, with its implicit acknowledgement of timbre, tone and individual inflection, compared with a world of journalism where notions such as 'objectivity', 'balance' and 'bias' tend to preclude a strong individual stamp on work. In March 2007, the Australian Broadcasting Commission — the most important institution in Australia by which contemporary documentaries find their audience — instituted a new policy to ensure the balance of its overall programming under the aegis of a new director of editorial policies (Meade and Salusinszky 17th October 2006). In the same article about the new initiative, the managing director of the ABC, Mark Scott, used the language of 'voice' to justify the initiative:

⁴ As an example, I produced and directed an hour-long documentary, *Another Way?*, over four years in the mid-1990s, with funding from the Criminology Research Council, and sold it to SBS Independent when I was ready to undertake final post-production prior to broadcast.

We will look to see whether, on our staff, or among those we recruit as contributors, we have the breadth and diversity of voices to be able to deliver what we want to deliver.

Different sections of the media and the documentary community responded variously to the inception of this new policy: a common fear was that ‘diversity’ in the above sentence would be code for ‘management-directed political even handedness’ of the kind that for many years has governed election campaigns. The policy would appear to have been an initiative of an ABC Board now entirely composed of members appointed by the Howard federal government. This board includes three members — Keith Windschuttle, Janet Albrechtson and Ron Brunton — who have been outspoken ‘warriors’ in the ‘History Wars’ discussed in Chapter 2.

There is no suggestion that this policy is mainly targeting documentary. Indeed, Courtney Gibson, head of arts and entertainment at the ABC, used a public forum at the November 2006 SPAA Fringe conference (2006) to explicitly exhort documentary filmmakers to *stop* altering the voice of their synopses to try and second guess the application of the new policy. Paul Chadwick, the first director of editorial policies at the ABC, in an article that described his new role (Chadwick 2007), was at pains to reject any suggestion that the policy meant the ABC was merely the mouthpiece of the government:

Commercial media owners may want to make their media outlets sing with one voice, or just quieten the sounds they find discordant ... Governments lack this power in relation to the ABC.

The new editorial guidelines commit all ABC programs to ‘Honesty, fairness, independence and respect’. There is no section specific to documentary but a section headed ‘Opinion Content’ makes explicit that objectivity is not a requirement for ‘point of view documentaries’. Rather, this section of the guidelines commits to ‘impartiality ... across a network or platform’ and gives an example of how this might be achieved: ‘by presenting a discussion program after a point-of-view documentary’ (ABC-TV(Australia) 2007Sect. 6.3, p. 40).

But the current constitution of the board and ongoing debates as to its power and role do raise questions in regard to the fate of strongly authored documentary. If, for instance, *Durham Downs: A Pastoral* attains a broadcast pre-sale or post-production sale in the future, what pressure might be brought to bear on the way that the alleged massacre at Durham Downs is treated? If the primary evidence for this, as for so many other conflicts between Aboriginal people and settlers on the Australian frontier, is full of ‘gaps and absences’, does this mean it cannot be recounted in the way that Keith Windschuttle (2002) has argued such events should not be ‘counted’ in the tallies of frontier deaths in print-based history? Here it seems to me that a treatment that aims for *independence* and *solidly researched assertions*, but allows for doubt about that which may never be fully clear, is vital. So a treatment based on the land as the central character, with Fiona and John’s journeys providing a necessary source of contemporary resonance, is the direction I am pursuing.

Latest Developments

At the SPAA Fringe Conference in Sydney in late October 2007, I met up with one of ‘my’ graduates, Grania Kelly, and was amazed to hear that she too had recently been filming out at Durham Downs. She had done this at the behest of Mandy Shirvington’s uncle, Hope Ebsworth, with funding from the Federal Department of Communication, Information and the Arts and the task of producing an educational DVD on the importance of land to Aboriginal culture. Hope’s family was forcibly removed from Durham to Northwestern New South Wales in the 1930s with most now living around Dubbo, Bourke and Tibbooburra. I subsequently met with Grania and with Hope and heard that John Ferguson was retiring in February 2008. I marvelled at my good fortune in relation to having time to finish this doctorate and arrange for the resources to be there in February. And then I rang John and Jasaleen to discover that his retirement had been brought forward to late December 2007, with a farewell event in the town of Eromanga. There was not time or budget to organise a crew to be there for this event, but I was able to get a prosumer level camera to the event and get home-video style coverage of both the event and the Ferguson’s last days at Durham.

Meeting Hope has raised many new angles to the *Durham Downs: A Pastoral* treatment. Hope is currently applying for further funding from the Federal Government for he and Mandy Shirvington to lead groups of male and female young Wangkummara people to go back to their ancestral lands, including Durham Downs, in August 2008 and to film the experience. Hope has welcomed the concept of this event being filmed for broadcast as well as educational purposes. Through Hope I have also become much more familiar with Santos' huge expansion plans for the oil and gas reserves of the Cooper Basin and their hopes of signing an 'Indigenous Land Use Agreement' (ILUA) with the Wangkummara late in 2008. So February 2008 finds me completing this doctorate for submission but also producing a new synopsis and trailer (See Item Four) to go with a new production company specializing in historical documentary to the 2008 AIDC in Fremantle at the end of February.

Elsie's Voice: A Conclusion

All this discussion of different possible treatments of the story of Durham Downs Station and human relationship to its land and waters raises questions about Elsie and her 'voice' in this story. Having retrieved the images of Elsie from the metaphoric dark corners of an archive, I feel a real responsibility to her, to the people who have helped me to shed light upon her life, and to myself and my own labour around her story, to ensure that in some way or another I bring that story into the public domain. Whatever the complexity of finding a speaking position from which to tell her story, not doing so at all would seem the greatest insult of all. Writing this thesis, of course, partly achieves this aim.

Given that my passion for Durham Downs and its history began with her image, and as a filmmaker with some institutional support to tell her story, I find myself still wrestling with the best way to build her into the documentary as a whole. It could, of course, be the case that the 'content of the form' of broadcast documentary is not the best medium to render this particular instance of visible evidence, bearing in mind Michael Rabiger's previously quoted statement of the difficulties of working with 'fragile and transient moments of (historical) significance' in documentary *vis-à-vis* writing (2004 p. 93).

The underlying ‘work’ that this chapter has allowed me to do is to consider my position as an Anglo middle-class filmmaker in relation to an Indigenous story, as well as the practicalities of how to bring a project to fruition in the current production context. In Australia in 2008, the simplest response would be to say that it is just ‘too hard’ for a white filmmaker to tell stories around an Aboriginal subject right now. And in the course of developing the *Channels of History* exhibition, I have met several non-Aboriginal historians and filmmakers who have taken just such a position, choosing to move out of their established primary expertise in the area of Australian Indigenous history because they no longer found the cultural politics conducive to their own productivity. But as reflections on my conversation with ABC Television’s head of documentary suggest, I don’t think that non-Aboriginal Australians not telling Indigenous stories is any answer. I agree with Marcia Langton’s (1993 p. 25) previously cited opinion that ‘the easiest and most “natural” form of racism in representation is the act of making the other invisible’, and believe therefore that there is no future in white filmmakers abandoning Indigenous topics, or topics with an Indigenous dimension.

The black British filmmaker and artist Isaac Julien, in interviewing the Vietnamese/American filmmaker Trinh Ti Minh Ha, referred to the:

extra ... burden of representation — making films about subjects that have not been given voice — that you face in relationship to trying to give that subject in some way its own voice without it being the ‘authentic’ voice (Trinh, Julien et al. 1992 p. 193).

It is possible of course that, in the Realpolitic of documentary production in Australia in 2008, a film about a ‘dead Aboriginal woman’ is not the ‘right’ subject for documentary, and that in writing this piece I am exorcising something of my fascination for Elsie’s story, and the grip on my imagination that it has exercised for half a decade now. I am developing a treatment based on ‘shared history’ within which some of the story of Elsie and other Aboriginal people associated with Durham Downs will take their place. And the new connection to Hope Ebsworth, his long-time connection and deep respect for John Ferguson, and his medium-term plans to write a book about Wangkummura perspectives on their land, including Durham Downs, is currently

making me itchy to put down my metaphoric ‘pen’ and again take up ‘camera and microphones’. The rise of the Rudd Labor government also makes me optimistic that the kind of documentary I want to make is more likely to find a place within the institutional voices of the Australian public broadcasters.

As I have considered many different forms of the interrelation of my own and other individuals’ and institution’s voices in relation to this case study, I have often employed the adjectives ‘dialogic’ and ‘ventriloquic’. Yet the best term overall to describe the voice of *Durham Downs: A Pastoral* as it emerges is ‘choric’. This is *not* an additional category in the typologies of Nichols or Bruzzi, Corner or Plantinga that began this chapter. Rather, this is an overall description of the *process* by which meaning is negotiated and *created* by filmmaker, film crew and film subjects, commissioning editors and funding bodies.

In my concluding chapter, I want to locate this and other elements of the *Braided Channels* project again with its broader cultural matrix. But before I finish, one more note. Do I detect, Dear Reader, a note of ‘the lady doth procrastinate too much, why doesn’t she just go and make the bloody film instead of agonizing about it?’ Well, quite. But when placed in relation to the statistic (AFC 2007) that 63 per cent of those Australians who identified as documentary filmmakers in the past census had made just one film in the previous fifteen years, and less than ten per cent had made five or more, I am by no means ‘Robinson Crusoe’. And as this theorising has generated knowledge of more general application about documentary making in this place and time, and has assisted me to refine my stance on and to my practice, along the way assisting me to overcome personal and institutional discursive impediments, it is indeed worth it.

Elsie’s Story and Durham Downs — A Pastoral — Key Credits

Writer, Producer, Director, Additional Camera, Additional Sound — Trish FitzSimons
Co –producers, from February 2008 – Sue Swinburne and Mick Angus, Jerrycan Films
Some footage in 2008 trailer, viz: additional camera, sound, photographs – Grania Kelly
Editors — Rebecca Richardson, Ingunn Jordansen
Cinematographers — Jo Erskine, Bruce Redman, Julie Hornsey
Sound — Bruce Redman

Trish FitzSimons — *Braided Channels* — Doctorate of Creative Arts — UTS

Graphics — Anar Schuklar, Tani Budini

Investment — Pacific Film and Television Commission, Film Australia

Material Support — Griffith Film School

Conclusion: On the Voice (of Documentary) — A Stream of Consciousness

account, address — both direct and indirect, advocacy, advocate, anecdote (from the Greek for unpublished, historically meant gossip), announce, argue, argument, articulate, *avaaz.org* (name means voice or song in Hindi, Urdu and Farsi), avow, benediction, call, called, calling, chat, choir, choric, chorus, confess, conversation, converse, diachronic and synchronic voices, dialect, dialectic, dialogic, dialogue, diatribe, discourse, discursive, discuss, dotage (garrulous old age), dumb, dummy, echo, edict, enunciate, enunciation, equivocal, euphony, evocative, gloss, gorgon, harangue, hetero-glossic, hoarse, indict, indictment, interdiction, invocation, invoke, iterate, iterative, linguist, linguistics, logic (from the Greek word *logikos*, pertaining to speaking or reasoning), mimicry, monologic, monologue, moot, mouthpiece, multi-lingual, multi-vocal, mute, mute, narrate, narration, narrative, narrator, oral, orality, parlance, parliament, parliamentary, parlour, phoney, phonic, polyphony, poly-vocal, profess, pronounce, provocative, provoke, recitation, recite, recount, reiterate, renounce, revoke, rhetoric, say, siren, soliloquy, *sotto voce*, speaking, speech, stutter, telephone, telephonic, testify, testimony, tone, utter, utterance, ventriloquic, ventriloquism, ventriloquist, vocal, vocalize, vocation, vocative, vociferous, voice, voiceless, voiceover, vow, vox, wag (as a noun), witness, ‘a conversation piece’, ‘called up’, ‘lip service’, ‘coming to voice’, ‘dumbed/ing down’, ‘getting it off your chest’, ‘giving voice to’, ‘inner voice’, ‘invocatory drive’, ‘it’s not over until the fat lady sings’, ‘polyphonic interlacing’, ‘singing from the same song/hymn sheet’, ‘speak with one voice’, ‘speaking in tongues’, ‘speaking position’, ‘still, small voice’, ‘talking heads’, ‘tongues wagging’, ‘vox pops’, ‘*vox populi*’, ‘a lone voice in the wilderness’. (A selection of words and expressions in English — including foreign borrowings — referring to the mode and mechanics of speech and the voice, either directly, metaphorically or metonymically)

In a dissertation that has pursued many separate but related channels of inquiry, or ‘braids’, my framing research question has been: ‘How should we now think about the concept of

“voice” in documentary filmmaking, taking into account its myriad contemporary forms, of which the *Braided Channels* project is one example?’ The aim of this concluding chapter is to bring together, but also to exceed, the flow of discussion of the previous chapters and to indicate future directions for debate: this, then, is the main ‘channel ’or ‘stream’ of my argument, showing the ways that its various (con)tributary braids can be bound into questions of larger resonance and considering where future work in the area may tend. It aims also to clearly state the basis of my claim for my ‘contribution to knowledge’, through both my creative practice and this textual component of my Doctorate of Creative Arts.

In the paragraph above, I primarily use language derived from the over-arching metaphor underpinning my creative practice in *Braided Channels*, in which the behaviour of water on a largely flat surface is metaphorically connected to the way that various opinions can be seen in relation to each other to form an entity that, while tending in a particular direction, continues to have various component parts. This is the metaphor that has largely underpinned the structuring of this dissertation, while within its content a separate figure of speech — the metonym of voice as a way to speak of human creative agency — has been central. Rather than attempting to torture the braided channels and the vocal figures of speech into a single trope — tracks anyone? — I will now return to voice and to a statement of my central argument in a manner that draws on the smaller sub-arguments of previous chapters.

The power of speech is one of the things that quintessentially makes us human and differentiates us from the rest of the biota. And, even though it is often said that ours is a culture that privileges our sense of sight over our sense of hearing — ‘I see’ as a synonym for ‘I understand’, going ‘to see a picture’ that also has a soundtrack, etc. — it is unsurprising that English contains many words that equate this capacity for speech with the expression of human intellect and creativity, either directly or in its metonymic application. The biblical equation of Elijah’s ‘still small voice’ with his conscience is both an example and a precursor to words derived from ‘the voice’ that are not talking about a physical phenomenon comprised of sound waves: the list above contains many others. In a common form of anthropomorphism, the intrinsic capacity to speak is attributed to many of the products of human creativity — examples of this rubric being applied to films, buildings,

exhibitions, novels, jewellery and paintings have been given in this dissertation — and to human constructions of the natural world, such as particular landscapes.

Having begun with the broader context of the way that the term is used in my Introduction, my last three chapters have in various ways considered the way that ‘voice’ as a trope has been used to discuss questions of authorship and subjectivity in relation to documentary film. I have explored the theoretical debates around voice within media studies and also incorporated an exegesis of both the exhibition and the broadcast documentary components of the *Braided Channels* project: *Channels of History* and *Durham Downs: A Pastoral* respectively. While I have drawn extensively on the literature of historiography, ethnography and museology, in keeping with my argument that one’s voice develops partly in response to the surrounding zeitgeist, I have also drawn from educated common parlance — predominantly newspapers, movies, television, literary supplements and ABC Radio National — which is my cultural milieu. The primary discourse to which this dissertation contributes is documentary theory, although my conclusions may have implications for other discourses.

This is a very particular area for applying the concept of voice because, especially since synchronised sound became commonly available to documentary filmmakers as a tool from the 1960s onwards — allowing speaking subjects¹ other than the filmmaker to exist within the frame — it has raised the issue for documentary of the relationship of the subject’s *actual* voice and the filmmaker’s potentially physical but definitely *metonymic* voice. My discussion uses Bill Nichols’ (1983) essay ‘The Voice of Documentary’ as its initial point of reference, and also draws on Jeffrey Youdelman’s (1988) essay ‘Narration, Invention, History’ as a starting point. Both of these essays were first written in the early 1980s, a period of rapid shift in the technologies, forms and social relations of documentary when filmmakers, having first responded to the ubiquitous capacity for synchronised sound by developing the observational mode, were turning to the interview-based — often oral history — documentary as the predominant mode, and when access to video as a widespread medium was changing shooting ratios and the degree to which the interviewer shaped interchanges — in turn giving rise to new versions of ‘voice’. These

¹ In relation to this discussion about various forms of voice, ‘subject’ in this sentence carries with it the many complex nuances of ‘agency’ and ‘not agency’ discussed in Raymond Williams’ (1988) account of the etymology of this word.

essays were written as strategic interventions into problems the authors identified in the then contemporary culture of documentary practice, most obviously a tendency for the filmmaker's overt voice to be subjugated by the voice/s of their subjects.

We are now amidst another period of fundamental shift in documentary practice, which in turn requires new iterations of theory. From an Australian perspective, there are also many current structural shifts in institutional support and enabling technologies for documentary, including the development of revised funding structures leading up to the inception of Screen Australia in mid-2008, new forms of regulation after the inception of digital television (already delayed a couple of times, now slated for 2012) a new federal Labor government, and newly instituted systems designed to counter allegations of systemic bias at the ABC.

More significant than all of these largely Australian phenomena is the emergence of the so-called Web 2.0,² with its various manifestations of user-generated content, and a concomitant democratisation of the means of production and distribution of documentary. Little more than a decade ago, in *Claiming the Real* (1995), Brian Winston wrote:

It is not hard to imagine that every documentarist will shortly (that is in the next fifty years) have to hand, in the form of a desktop personal video-image-manipulating computer, the wherewithal for complete fakery (p.6).

In a world of AfterFX, YouTube, desktop versions of Final Cut Pro and iMovie, that timetable has been radically shortened. What has also shifted is the exponentially increased capacity of digital technologies to facilitate the transfer and linking of data across various media. This is not, however, a determinist argument about the technologies themselves having agency, because underlying cultural tendencies towards multimedia go back much further and have critically shaped the ways that these digital technologies have both evolved and been used.

² Web 2.0 is a term coined by O'Reilly Media in 2003 that refers to a perceived second generation of the World Wide Web that emphasises two-way communication — or, in one relevant definitional aphorism, 'The market as a conversation' (wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2, accessed 11/07/2007).

These changes in relation to documentary have not happened in isolation, but as part of what may well come in hindsight to be seen as part of a seismic shift in economic and cultural formations. An online ‘wiki’³ world of user-generated content in the form of chatrooms, collectively authored encyclopaedias, email newsletters, shared video servers and political campaigns and blogs has emerged to change notions of and relations around authorship, production and audience. Many of these sites include versions of documentary as one component of a multimedia array of elements. The rhetoric surrounding much of this media draws more on notions of participatory than representative democracy, and in many instances aims to harness the collective will of a citizenry often construed globally. ‘Voice’ rhetoric is commonly deployed in this online universe. One of the latest examples of this is the ‘internet *advocacy*’ (my italics) site Avaaz.org (2006), described in its ‘About Us’ as:

An online community for global citizens to take action on urgent global issues, from climate change to global poverty to the crisis in the Middle East. (Our name means ‘voice’ or ‘song’ in several languages.)

Associated with this kind of site has been a renewed focus on the possibility of cinema and broadcast documentaries as catalysts for social change, *An Inconvenient Truth* (Gore and Guggenheim 2006) is the key example regularly quoted in 2006 and 2007 (e.g. *Movieshow*, ABC-TV, 14 February 2007). Not all of these recent developments, however, have been about ‘new’ media. If there was a time when the notion of documentary being exhibited in a cinema outside of film festivals seemed in danger of becoming an anachronism, films like *An Inconvenient Truth*⁴ have shifted the discourse again, although in a context when digital forms of exhibition are truly taking hold. And one of the most interesting new audience formations is that of the documentary viewing ‘house party’: while it may rely on ‘new’ technologies for its advertising and establishment, in its actual form is decidedly ‘old media’.

³ From the Hawaiian word for quick, ‘A collaborative website whose content can be edited by anyone who has access to it’ (Dictionary.com). *Wikipedia* is a primary example of this.

⁴ The main resurgence in cinema documentary has come from North American work. With notable exceptions, few Australian documentaries have been widely released in cinemas in the past decade.

Little more than a decade ago, Winston asserted (1995 p. 236) that ‘the underlying assumption of most social documentaries — that they shall act as agents of reform and change — is almost never demonstrated’ in critique of the social action agenda implicit in the Griersonian tradition of documentary. In 2006, this debate is again open. At the Visible Evidence conference held in Brazil in 2006 — the largest international conference in the field of documentary theory — no less than four of the 22 plenary panels took up questions of documentary and its capacity to influence social change (www.itsalltrue.com.br/visibleevidence). If, when Nichols and Youdelman were writing, a key contemporary issue for documentary voice theory was how to handle the voice of the subject in relation to the voice of the filmmaker, currently it is the cultural politics of these issues and questions around the filmmaker’s voice in relation to broadcasters and to audiences that have particular resonance.

In contradistinction to what can sometimes seem like the discursive utopia enabled by the emerging online universe, there are plenty of examples to suggest that, as the dominant site for documentary production in the quarter-century since Nichols’ essay, both the institutional and generic ‘voices’ of broadcast television in relation to documentary have allowed for fewer idiosyncratic documentary voices to reach a general audience than in earlier periods when cinema exhibition of documentaries was the dominant mode of distribution. Albert Moran and colleagues have done some important work — in relation to television as a whole, but with relevance to its documentary subset — analysing the way in which *formats* and *brands* have increasingly become central to the global political economy of broadcasting (Moran 1998; Keane, Moran et al. 2003).

With *Big Brother* as the standout example, reality television — a kind of ‘cousin once-removed’ to documentary — has been at the heart of format television, but there are a number of mainstream documentary examples to show that documentary has not been immune to this trend. So, for instance, *Grey Nomads* (1997), an award winning one-off documentary produced by December Films in Melbourne, gave rise to a series *Grey Voyagers* (2000), produced by the same company, which extends the concept beyond

Australia and the outback to international stories of adventure travel by elderly people.⁵ Inevitably, in series or previously formatted work, there is less space for individual idiosyncrasy of form and therefore of voice. This is clearly not solely an Australian phenomenon in a week when my public broadcaster is offering me *Grumpy Old Holidays* (Prebble 2006) and the commercial television stations are running advertisements for *Grumpy Old Women — The Stage Show* (2005). These examples suggest that, in the dialectical relationship of *institutional* and *individual* voices within contemporary English language television, the former have increasingly become dominant.

Like Nichols and Youdelman when they wrote their essays, I am interested in a strategic and contemporary conception of voice that responds not only to the cross-media versions of documentary of which the *Braided Channels* project is an example, but also to the shifts in technology and in cultural and institutional politics that make a simple assertion of the filmmaker's voice needing to be pre-eminent no longer sustainable — especially where there are significant disjunctions of race, class and power between filmmaker and subjects.

Several reflective practitioners in Australia have used the trope of voice derived from Nichols (Porter 1998; Leahy and Gibson 2003; Rijavec 2005) to complain of the contemporary positioning of documentary filmmakers, especially in relation to television, and in various ways to allege that filmmakers' voices have been muted, not by their subjects but by the supporting institutions — most obviously broadcast television. And this usage has been echoed in two recent books by prominent Australian public intellectuals (Hamilton and Maddison 2007; Marr June 2007), using the trope of voice to discuss the stifling of public debate under the Howard government in the past decade. I acknowledge that the issues these authors raise are real. In at least one recent documentary case study that I'm aware of, but feel it impolitic to *voice*, a filmmaker has described to me being censored by both the broadcaster and a Commonwealth film funding body to avoid causing offence to the former Coalition federal government. And it has become commonplace for filmmakers to complain of commissioning editors' overly narrative lines and styles, endings and address. I have not, however, found these authors' use of the voice metaphor sufficiently complex to be satisfying. I am no longer

⁵ See FitzSimons, T. (2002). 'Accords, Slots, Slates and Series: Australian Television Takes on Documentary.' *Metro* 132/2: pp.63 -73. for an account of the recent history and underlying political economy of such a shift.

persuaded that the implicitly unitary notion of authorship of documentary underlying Nichols' theory can be sustained, because in the ontology of documentary — especially in versions with an online or audience input component — there are so many contributors to the form of a final text.

A classic broadcast documentary, just to take an example, will have the underlying 'voice' of its filmmaker, the voice of its narrator (possibly but not usually these last two categories congruent) and the voice of its subjects, in the physical but also possibly metaphoric/metonymic sense of the word. I have then argued that it will also reflect something of the 'voice' of its enabling institution, the 'voice' of its particular medium and genre, and that if, as is becoming increasingly likely, it is linked to a website, activist events, blogs, etc., it will also be a medium of communication for various publics, who themselves have 'voice' of a kind. In this dissertation, rather than a focus on voice as a label affixed when a film is complete or voice as an intrinsic and unitary attribute of an individual filmmaker, I have treated documentary voice as a process.

When the final voice of any documentary is understood as an inevitably dialectical process, then one is more likely to be alive to the many case studies where filmmakers describe positive interactions with broadcasters, funding bodies and production houses,⁶ and to see that a film does not have to be auterist or outside a televisual paradigm to be strong work that makes an authentic cultural contribution in the sense in which Charles Guignon (2004) uses the term. This is not to say either, however, that voice can just be broken down into a function or conceived of as a juncture simply contained by a set of coordinates representing other inputs. Nor is the notion of 'sharing' the discursive space — literally the equi/vocal — between filmmakers and subjects or filmmakers and audiences sufficient. These could be simplistic responses to the need to revise Nichols. And in relation to form, the narration that Nichols and Youdelman feared was disappearing has well and truly returned, not always with the individual inflection they were hoping for. It may well mean that the cutting edge for documentary voice has moved away from broadcast, and indeed from cinema, making it vital that documentary

⁶ In an interview I did with Andrew Ogilvie of Electric Pictures in Perth in March 2001, as part of a research project on the Contemporary History of Australian Documentary that I share with Pat Laughren and Dugald Williamson, he explained a business model almost entirely predicated on meeting the slots of various international broadcasters.

theory opens itself and becomes applicable to new forms, including online and cross-media examples.

The essence of my work in this dissertation has been to consider the interrelationships of the forms of voice in relation to documentary and to use words derived from a broader vocal rubric to describe and analyse them, including the concepts of institutional and ontological voice. I have devoted considerable attention to the categories ‘ventriloquic’ and ‘dialogic’, and the contexts in which they are useful. I have also developed the term ‘choric’ in application to documentary theory. Of the three concepts, choric is the most useful term to think about emerging forms of exhibition and film in which a filmmaker structures action and associated reaction from an audience as much as presenting a closed linear text for consumption (Henkel 2002; Cattoni 2006; Gore and Guggenheim 2006). If, to reprise Hayden White (1987 p. 163), ‘the function of theory in general ... [is] to provide justification of a stance *vis-à-vis* the materials being dealt with that can render it plausible’, my fundamental position of speech as reflected in this dissertation is as a reflective practitioner; the purpose of this theory, then, is to energise my own ongoing practice and hopefully that of other practitioners.

In saying I aim to contribute to documentary theory as applied by practitioners, the point is not to create an alternate taxonomy to those extant in documentary theory, or a warp to the weft of existing typologies — which, as previously discussed, have been the dominant project of this field. Picture if you will what an *expository ventriloquic* documentary might look and sound like. Perhaps Madam would like to view a *choric interactive* piece? No don’t — the concept is too horrible! The point is for filmmakers to have words to describe and analyse the *processes* they are engaged as part of a fruitful reflective practice.

Vocal interrelations of necessity need to shift according to context so that, for instance, the interrelationships of a filmmaker in an art installation with documentary elements will be quite different than a filmmaker employed by a community to express their collective voice. If one is trying to engage an audience in a process of social change, history-making or consciousness-raising, and ask them in some way to provide the *choric* ‘fears, hopes, questions and judgements and feelings of the spectators who make up the civic community’ incorporated as part of the text in its broadest definition, that

input needs in some way to be incorporated into the work itself to avoid an audience feeling *muted*, being ‘given voice’ and then having it muffled without reference. And if a broadcaster wants a vibrant relationship with an independent production community, they need the relation to have more the nature of the dialogic than the ventriloquic. As discussed in the previous chapter, some broadcasters themselves are aware of this — for instance, Courtney Gibson, the ABC’s head of arts and entertainment, spoke publicly at the Screen Producers’ Association of Australia (SPAA) Fringe in November 2006 of noticing established documentary filmmakers responding to the ABC’s then forthcoming policy on ‘balance’ by suppressing their own voice to try to fit their notion of what the broadcaster wants, resulting in work without resonance or cogency. There are many contemporary instances where a film only comes into being because a subject initiates the process — for example, *Sadness* (Yang and Ayres 1999), *After Maeve* (Cattoni 2006) *Donkey in Lahore* (K-Rahber and Chapman 2007) — and from its inception authorship is explicitly shared in a necessarily dialogic fashion. This is especially the case where the key subject themselves has an established persona as an artist or performer.

While I would agree with Nichols that it is neither possible nor desirable for a filmmaker to entirely mute their own voice in a work of cultural production, nor does it any longer (if ever it did) seem reasonable to simply assert that the filmmaker’s voice must always be of a ‘higher controlling type than the voices of interviewees’. In the ABC broadcast around *The Great Global Warming Swindle* convened by Tony Jones (2007), several documentary subjects expressed the view that their words had been edited in a manner that reflected the film’s but not their own position on the question of the role of carbon in global warming. Carl Wunsch’s⁷ disquiet, for instance, made clear that he felt Martin Durkin had treated him like a ventriloquist’s dummy, although these were not the explicit terms he used. In a sponsored community video, the filmmaker is often necessarily a kind of mouthpiece for a pre-existing position or interests, and something of the ventriloquic goes with the territory. A privileging of the filmmaker’s voice is to be expected in an essay-style documentary, and this is probably the closest to the monologic mode of voice advocated by Nichols’ essay. But as this dissertation has

⁷ Carl Wunsch is Professor of Oceanography at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

detailed, especially when the subject is historical, there is a contemporary cross-media tendency, powerfully embodied in such previously quoted documentaries as *Tracing the Decay of Fiction* (Kinder 2002), for the author's voice to emphasise gaps and contradictions in their subject-matter rather than to argue for a definitive position. It is my contention that the specific vocabulary and set of conceptual technologies developed in this dissertation can assist filmmakers in the process of managing these gradations of role.

Whilst choric is an especially useful concept to understand voice in some emerging forms of documentary, the terms do not form their own hierarchy with choric at the 'top of the tree'. The three years that I've worked on this doctorate have really been the years in which user-generated content has 'taken off' (e.g. in 2006 *Time* magazine made 'You' the 'Person of the Year' in recognition of this trend: www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1569514,00). But to say, for instance, that *Channels of History* has a less strong *choric* voice than some other work that I have named is not to denigrate it from any kind of perspective that as filmmakers we might wish to be 'more choric than thou'. If the categories are thought of as descriptive and analytical rather than aspirational, the terms can be applied as required. A key practical and ethical task of the documentary filmmaker is to clarify questions of voice for themselves and others, perhaps most especially the subjects of their documentaries. For instance, one of the hardest moments of the whole *Braided Channels* project for me was when one of my interviewees introduced my film crew to her neighbour by way of saying that 'they are making a film about me and my work' and I had to delicately explain that this was not entirely the case. So partly these terms are useful concepts for a filmmaker's negotiation toolkit.

I would hope that reflections on my own case study would also have exemplified that managing vocal interrelationships becomes more complex when there is cultural difference between filmmaker/s, subjects and audiences. As previously discussed, a key impetus to voice as the central rubric of this dissertation was my own need to understand the conundrum of how it was that I could not make *Channels of History* until I found an Aboriginal dimension, but to find a suitable treatment for *Durham Downs: A Pastoral* it felt necessary to also find a non-Aboriginal dimension to my

topic. Here more than anywhere else, the need to find a ‘plausible stance’ in theory to underpin practice was critical.

This flows into the ‘main channel’ of the inter-cultural elements of my argument. In Chapter 3, I discussed the cultural politics of my own ‘coming to voice’ in a documentary work that at least in its inception focused on histories of Aboriginal people. I want briefly here to consider the issue of Indigenous voice more generally. In Chapter 1, I quoted Marcia Langton (1993) saying that she wanted to make it easier for filmmakers — Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal — ‘to say and do what they would like to say and do’. Seen individually, this might seem quite straightforward, albeit as Chapter 3 has shown, it can be ‘easier said than done’. But when an institutional understanding of voice is applied, it is clear that a certain quarantining of institutional support can be a vital strategy to empower groups that have been discursively absent to collectively ‘have voice’. This, of course, does not just apply to Indigenous people. It is clear to me that my own privilege in becoming a filmmaker was crucially enabled by Mitzi Goldman and myself getting our first production funding for *Snakes and Ladders* (1987) from the Women’s Film Fund of the Australian Film Commission (AFC). That entity, explicitly established to give women equal say in the emerging independent filmmaking arena, ceased to be a production funding body in 1989, continuing a small funding line for professional development for women until 1992 (FitzSimons 2002).

In 1993, the AFC set up what was then called the Aboriginal Unit (now known as the Indigenous Unit) after a report recommended this in 1992 (www.afc.gov.au/funding/indigenous). One can only hope that a time will come when specific funding for Aboriginal filmmakers can no longer be politically justified because of their evident equal representation in the film industry, and that other groups will have their chance – Muslim citizens and refugees perhaps. Refugees in Australian detention camps sewing their lips together in 2002, and periodically subsequently, is a powerful visual symbol that, at a collective level, certain groups in our community are still ‘denied voice’ and could benefit from special strategies to collectively be ‘given voice’.⁸

⁸ ‘I am sewing my lips together./ That which you are denying us/ we should never have/ had to ask for.’ Anonymous, excerpt from poem entitled ‘Asylum’, first published in *The Age*, 12 May 2002 (www.refugeebuddies.com, accessed 16/07/2007).

A conception of voice that includes an institutional component is potentially of tactical value in achieving this, and the concept is widely deployed in the community as well as in the federal government sector.⁹ Similarly, as discussed in Chapter 1, analysing voice from institutional perspective can be an important tool in valuing vocal diversity. As an example of this, while I would argue that the documentary *The Great Global Warming Swindle* itself represented anything but authenticity in Guignon's terms, because it was produced by Wag TV explicitly and from its inception as a 'spoiler' to emerging orthodoxies as to the causes of global warming, the whole framing of this documentary in a poly-vocal discussion on ABC Television, including an ongoing online discussion thread that could be considered a model of an open institutional voice (Jones 2007).

Meanwhile, while sensitivity to a cultural politics of voice is vital, I would endorse Marcia Langton's (1993) and Frances Peters-Little's (2003) arguments about the importance of encouraging discursive freedom balanced by respect, rather than an exaggerated emphasis on permissions and protocols. The 'shared histories' approach that underpins both *Channels of History* and *Durham Downs: A Pastoral* is a good example of what Nicholas Bourriaud (2002 p. 45) terms a 'relational aesthetic' that creates a 'social interstice' concerned with 'negotiations, bonds and coexistences'. At a time when the study of history is declining dramatically in Australian schools and universities, to the extent that John Howard made redressing the situation a key priority of his fourth government, well researched but accessible versions of history have never been more important — and that certainly includes histories that put Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people into the same frame. A real strength of my work is its capacity to translate complex concepts into visual form, and to express large themes as metonymic human stories. Social history exhibitions and broadcast documentaries are an increasingly important form of dissemination of historical knowledge to a variety of publics, and my work has contributed significantly to a variety of regional, national and international publics in a manner that could be defined as authentic in Guignon's terms.

⁹ For example, in the Logan City area of Brisbane, a small company known as Plan C describes itself as 'a collaboration of planning, landscape architecture, creative industries, event production and community cultural development' whose mission statement is simply "voice, space, activate" (www.planc.com.au). The organisation works with a variety of groups civically under-represented, such as the disabled, Indigenous and unemployed youth.

And so part of what I've aimed to do in this thesis is to go beyond Nichols' fairly tightly prescribed world of documentary to a broader definition of documentary practice that has helped me to find a theoretical frame to my own creative arts practice. And in the spirit of the increasingly convergent interconnections between previously separate media forms, I have in this thesis looked not just beyond existing categories to new sites for documentary work, but also begun to consider the voice of work that emits in multiple formats. To do this I have of necessity drawn on and developed interdisciplinary analytical tools, and it is my hope that these same tools are useful to fields beyond documentary production and theory.

And voice considered with regard to its cross-media resonances? As discussed above, the notion of choric voice is useful to link together various elements of cultural phenomena of which documentary is a part. But this dissertation has also applied Hayden White's (1987) notion that a particular cultural form has an implicit content to consider the ontologic voice of documentary in different genres and media. The *Braided Channels* project has so far emitted in oral history (written and audio-visual), exhibition, linear documentary, radio and written expressions. In discussion pending future funding, and existing as a very basic prototype, is an online version. And bearing no relation to the Channel Country that otherwise links all its elements, but taking an attunement to the politics of water that arose from the *Channels of History* project and applying it to the land that surrounded me in childhood and that is still part of who I am, is 'Peats Ridge: Fluid Memories and the Politics of Groundwater' and its online equivalent. This is my first published exploration of creative non-fiction brought to fruition by this doctoral exploration of voice (FitzSimons 2006; 2007). Each of these iterations raises the question of the specific ontology of particular versions of documentary. Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation have explored this in relation to various examples in great detail. In conclusion, suffice to say that looking at the notion of voice exclusively from a documentary perspective, as in the Nichols essay on voice, misses insights that arise from considering these questions across media and disciplines.

I come to the end of this dissertation not as a full stop but more as an ellipsis ... looking forward to further iterations of *Braided Channels* creative practice and to taking some of the theory developed within this dissertation once more to an inter/national audience

through journal publication. In the period of producing this dissertation, I have had the privilege of attending the Visible Evidence documentary theory conferences in both Montreal (2005) and Sao Paulo/Rio de Janeiro (2006), the latter with funding from both UTS and Griffith University. In both instances, I found participating in this conference to be both energising and productive of the emerging voice of this thesis through the process of establishing a position from which to speak and having that position both endorsed but also modified through dialogue with my peers and a subsequent process of reflection.

Before closing, I need to answer the question of the Argentinean filmmaker in the audience of the *Visible Evidence* conference session where I presented a draft of Chapter 1 in Sao Paulo, Brazil in August 2006. He said that he found my presentation extremely interesting, but that it made him wonder whether, in using the concept and metaphor of voice to speak about so many related questions, I was not in danger of obscuring rather than illuminating my subject — that in defining voice so broadly I was at risk of a kind of phase cancellation (my analogy). In thinking of this dissertation and its ontologic, monologic, ventriloquic, dialogic, choric and institutional versions of voice, it is a reasonable point to raise and to respond to. To the Argentinean whose name I never caught:

Earlier in this dissertation it was established that metaphor and metonymy as figures of speech depend upon shared reference points and the capacity to create communicative sense images for an audience. The previously cited example of *Avaaz* as the name for an exponentially expanding advocacy website suggests that the vocal metaphor still has great power and that, as James Clifford reminded us in my Introduction, we may still be moving from the eye to the ear as our primary sense from which to derive metaphoric meanings. The titles of Clive Hamilton's and David Marr's previously cited books could be further adduced as evidence of this point. I also, however, accept that all metaphors eventually break down. One could have had the same discussion using the visual metaphors of perspective and point of view. And the *Braided Channels* metaphor underpinning my creative practice is a topographical trope that is another way of speaking about forms of stranded singularity.

Probably the most significant contribution of this dissertation to documentary theory is the concept of the ‘choric’, particularly as applied to emerging forms of documentary, both online and in exhibitions. Implicit in this terminology is the documentary filmmaker as the *protagonist* in counterpoint to a range of other voices that collectively become the *chorus* but do not individually have as much weight as the former category. There is an alternate paradigm for thinking about (especially) the online versions of new work with a documentary component that would dissolve all these categories into one that is essentially a notion of a form of collective intelligence that is a synergy of various simple elements. This is known as ‘stigmergy’ or ‘swarm intelligence’, metaphorically applying the behaviour of social insects to complex but distributed human systems whose components are nevertheless simple (Bonabeau, Dorigo et al. 1999). This kind of work draws on the earlier insights of Albert Lord and other scholars, who analysed oral traditions of epic poetry to find older forms of collective intelligence where notions of individual authorship were not sensible because of the constant reversioning of earlier forms, but specific utterances and performances could be identified. There may well be projects for which terms such as ‘swarm intelligence’ could be apt, although following the logic of this dissertation one could also describe this as a ‘demologic’¹⁰ voice! Certainly these seem useful concepts to understand a phenomenon such as Wikipedia. And as documentary is a form that continues to shift and adapt to new contexts, it may well be that from the perspective of a couple of decades hence these are critical categories. But both for my own work and for the key examples I have drawn on herein, a concept that allows of a central actor shaping the work, for all that there are then multiple contributing inputs, is more useful.

I have found voice and its subsets a capacious trope to think through a set of issues arising from my practice which have long puzzled me and which have broader resonance. It is useful in having both individual and collective parameters and a set of words derived from the central concept that can be applied to talk about the interrelationship of these dimensions. For this reason, I want to sincerely thank Bill Nichols for so prominently deploying the term in relation to documentary and for putting forward a strong argument against which I have felt stimulated and continuously

¹⁰ Another neologism that I put forward only semi-seriously by way of suggesting some directions for further work.

challenged to develop my own position. My Griffith University colleague Amanda Howell defines the process of dissertation writing to her students as ‘to engage in academic conversation’. I offer this dissertation for examination and response in that spirit, and in the hope that colleagues — certainly in documentary production and theory but potentially in journalism, museology, historiography and cultural studies — may feel impelled to add to this conversation.

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