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*Opening Gates and Windows: the Ethics and Aesthetics of Making a Documentary Poem*

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# Opening Gates and Windows: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Making a Documentary-Poem

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In this essay I discuss the ethical and aesthetic issues involved in making a short auto/biographical documentary, *Separation*, about an improvised parenting relationship I had with a young Sudanese-Australian man. I contextualize my discussion through reference to representations of Sudanese-Australians in the media, and the tendency towards reductive allegorical representations. I propose that a poetic approach offers a possible way forward in representing aspects of life stories involving shared privacies and/or sensitive cultural material. This suggests important scholarly consideration of an ethics that is specific to visual representation or video/film methods. Such a consideration is applicable both to contexts in which the central concern is an art product or event, and in which the primary concern is research.

*Keywords:* Auto/biography; Documentary; Poetry; Representations

In this essay I give an account of the representational considerations involved in the making of *Separation* (see Bilbrough “Separate 4”), a four-minute auto/biographical<sup>1</sup> documentary-poem that tells the story of an improvised parenting relationship I had with a fifteen-year-old Sudanese-Australian, Abe,<sup>2</sup> who was in Australia without his parents. In a contemporary context, ethnographic and art/media practice are increasingly combined to arrive at new theoretical and representational insights (Hjorth and Sharp; Rutten, van. Dienderen, and Soetart). As

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such my work sits at the juncture between critical ethnography and art. While my primary intent behind *Separation* was to make a creative work for public viewing, the film also constitutes research via the practical exploration of how to represent emotionally sensitive material in a way that addresses both ethical and aesthetic concerns. As Larissa Hjorth and Kristen Sharp have observed, the ethnographic in art can function as “a type of method and criticality, [and] provide a nuanced space for the audience and artist to reflect” (129). Building on this, I suggest that the representational considerations discussed in this essay have pedagogical relevance for arts practitioners, cultural producers, and researchers who represent other people’s stories in any medium. They may also be relevant to teaching and social work practice(s).

The ethical issues that both the text and context of *Separation* raise are various and complex. The parenting arrangement was not officially sanctioned: in offering shelter to an adolescent, I disregarded the ethical code of the organization for which I worked. Making a film about this situation raised the dilemma of how to articulate a story that felt personally and politically important while respecting Abe’s privacy. His circumstances were (and are) a source of great distress and shame to him and I did not want to do anything that made him feel I had betrayed his trust. However, I had a strong desire to understand better an unresolved situation that had a huge impact on my life. It felt important to make a film that touched on both Abe’s experience of searching for a home, and my professional transgression. Too often there is a polite silence in society about things that may be distressing, unusual, or perhaps a little frightening. From my perspective, many of the responses to my decision to take care of Abe were based on fear. As David L. Altheide has observed: “We experience most of our lives through a lens of fear. Concerns, risks, and dangers are magnified and even distorted by this lens. Caution has given way to avoidance. Rarity has been replaced by typicality” (240–41). Arguably one of the problems with my decision to care for Abe was that it was atypical. This I believed made it particularly worthy of discussion. When I took Abe home, I was vocal about my decision, informing my colleagues, employer, and the government. My intention was to provoke and/or encourage people to think about what was *behind* my boundary transgression: at fifteen Abe was homeless in the country where he had arrived as a refugee. *Separation* and this essay are a continuation of this provocation. In telling the story of my parenting relationship with Abe, I also wanted to critique what I see as

a type of implicit cultural segregation within society; the idea that particular cultural and ethnic groups should stick together.

The documentary genre is in itself ethically fraught. In the mid-1970s, Calvin Pryluck observed that its complexity hinges on the fact that unlike other art forms such as painting and writing, it relies on real people's life stories and therefore may also have real-life implications (204). Since then, the problem of possible consequences to documentary participants has been widely acknowledged (see Aufderheide; Chapman; Pryluck; Plantinga; Nichols *Introduction, Representing Reality*; Ruby "Ethics of Image Making."). In addition to this, the fact that Abe is from a Sudanese background added another layer of representational complexity. As Jay Ruby has noted, the question of who can represent another "with what intention, in what 'language' and in what environment" (196) is one of the most significant conundrums of the postmodern era. I was aware that in making something about Abe there was a risk of inadvertently falling into the trap of what Ella Shohat has referred to as "allegorical" representation. According to Shohat, in texts by/about people from minority cultures, the individual "is seen, at least partially, as synecdochically summing up a vast and presumably homogeneous community" (169).<sup>3</sup>

A representation of my own highly subjective auto/biographical experience provided a partial answer to these dilemmas (this is articulated in *Separation* but also via this essay). Drawing on Andrés di Tella, I contend that auto/biography is an "act of *responsibility*." He writes: "I assume responsibility for this story. I answer for it with my life. I answer for my ideas about film and art (and life) with my own life. . . . And of course, in so doing, I confess my limitations" (33–36 original emphasis). However, using auto/biography as a methodology can also involve considerable ethical risks. As Paul John Eakin has observed, "because our own lives never stand free of the lives of others, we are faced with a responsibility to those others whenever we write about ourselves" (159). Notions of responsibility gain *extra* currency in regards to auto/biographical documentary, as it is a narrative, visual, and participatory art form. Alisa Lebow has commented that auto/biographical film "implicates others in its quest to represent the self, implicitly constructing a subject always already in relation—that is the first person plural" (xii). In revealing aspects of my life (via film and writing), I am also revealing aspects of Abe's, and potentially trespassing on his privacy. Although this is not something that can be easily resolved,

I propose here that a poetic approach offers a possible way forward in representing life stories involving shared privacies and/or sensitive cultural material. This suggests important scholarly consideration of an ethics that is specific to visual representation or video/film methods. Such a consideration is applicable both to contexts in which the central concern is an art product or event and to those in which it is primarily research.

In the social sciences, “poetic inquiry” is an increasingly popular qualitative research method. Rich Furman, Cynthia Lietz, and Carol Langer define the “research poem” as “less for expressive and literary means and more for the purpose of generating or presenting data” (3). Yet regardless of the different intentions behind a poem, they can serve a similar purpose. A poem offers a rich, expressive, and immediate way to express an idea that is often difficult to express in another type of text. It can also provide a different insight into an experience or subject for both artist/researcher and reader. Debbie McCullis notes that “the process of writing poetry or thinking poetically” can assist us “to collect the most relevant themes and phrases out of the sea of information available” (88). Poetry can also help “stimulate an empathetic understanding in the reader” (89). Miles Richardson contends that for the ethnographer, poetry is “particularly suited for those special strange, even mysterious moments when bits and pieces suddenly coalesce” (451).

In an art context, Agnès Varda has cited the influence of poetry on her documentaries, commenting that it “opens gates and windows” for the audience “to leave the film and go and vagabond” (cine-fils magazine 5:56–6:31). I suggest that Varda is talking about documentary practice that leaves space for the viewer’s imagination; enabling each of us to take our own journey with possible meaning. It is worth turning to Nicolas Bourriard’s notion of relational aesthetics here. According to Bourriard, meaning is “relational”; created through an “encounter” between “beholder–manipulator” and art-work (20–21). As Hjorth and Sharp have observed, in relational aesthetics it is the viewer/audience who “is a community to be collaborated with to create intersubjective encounters” (128).

The documentary-poem I describe in this essay has a similar intersubjective intention. The observations made by McCullis, Richardson, and Varda are each also of direct relevance to *Separation*, which is a deliberately elliptical narrative about an emotionally charged experience. In the next section, I tell the story of my contact with Abe and link

it to contextual media representations of young Sudanese-Australians, which contributed to my representational decision making in regards to *Separation*. In the final section, I discuss the film itself, and how both ethical and aesthetic considerations function together and separately in the construction of poetic documentary production within qualitative arts-based research contexts.

### Improvised Parenting

My first contact with Abe was as the coordinator of a youth center that he visited daily over the course of a year, and his interactions with me and my colleagues were one of the few constants in his life. Conversations with Abe included typical teenage topics such as unfair treatment at school and budding relationships with girls, but they also touched on the question of how to feel at home in a foreign culture without family or much acceptance from either the Sudanese or mainstream Australian community. Abe becoming literally homeless coincided with my decision to resign from my job; I had bought a house away from the city and it was too far to commute. One evening, after hours of unsuccessfully trying to find Abe accommodation for that night, I took him home. He had been sleeping rough and had lost his wallet and a bag containing his school uniform. My organization's code of ethics forbade non-professional contact with clients. Such boundaries are in place to protect the client from exploitation and prevent workers from burning out. Theoretically I had no argument with this. However, the shocking nature of Abe's situation and his distress combined with my personal ethos of children being everyone's responsibility overrode a rule that, in this instance, seemed related to negligence and a lack of humanity. Abe did not have adult support after 5:00 p.m. and I knew he was not an isolated case. I was prepared to weather the consequences of my decision.

Ultimately, Abe only stayed with me half a dozen times or fewer over a three-month period. While Abe badly wanted the love and care of a parent, he was also used to living independently. From what he told me, I gathered that he had suffered neglect and violence from those who were supposed to be caring for him, and as a result found it difficult to trust adults. Although he was a sophisticated verbal storyteller, he was barely literate in written English, which meant that school was a struggle. Abe also had the beginnings of a serious alcohol problem.

Abe spent most nights out with friends, which was something over which I had little control. I spent countless evenings worrying about how much he was drinking and with whom, and about the possibility of him being seriously injured or killed. Sometimes he would call in the middle of the night and I would go and pick him up. Sometimes I drove around the streets for hours, searching for him, nauseas with apprehension. When Abe was at home he worked hard at building our connection. He did not want to watch television or spend time in his room. He wanted me to teach him to cook and tell him about my actual family. He was puzzled and saddened by the fact that they were not close by. He hoped that I would marry my partner as soon as possible and asked if he could give a speech at the wedding. However, he also expressed distress at the possibility of me having a child and replacing him.

During the day, I had heated conversations with government employees who warned me that Abe was extremely violent and I was putting myself and my career at risk by continuing to care for him. A point constantly raised by those working with Abe was that his “own cultural community need[ed] to take care of him,” and as such it was not my “responsibility.” This disregarded the fact that no one had actually stepped forward. Arguably, many people in Abe’s own community did not have the resources to take on a traumatized adolescent when they were experiencing enough difficulties parenting their own children in a new cultural context. While I could not deny Abe’s need for support and acknowledgement from fellow Sudanese-Australians, I believed equally that this should not become an excuse for non-Sudanese-Australians to remain uninvolved and uninterested.

Although many disapproved of my actions, my insistence on continuing to talk about both Abe’s situation and my non-sanctioned involvement in his life also garnered some support. I was able to secure funding for a pilot program aimed at connecting unaccompanied refugee minors to adult mentors in the broader Australian community. However, this did not assist Abe as an individual. He needed much more than a mentor. When I eventually moved into the house I had bought outside the city, Abe decided to stay in the area where most of his friends lived. We saw each other less and less as Abe did not have a phone and did not live at any fixed address. When we did see one another, we exchanged significant emotional details from our lives, and, whenever possible, an absurdist anecdote or observation. If other people were present, Abe told them the story of our connection with what

I perceived to be pride and affection. But each time I was left with the awful realization that there was little I could do to contribute practically to his life. However, what I *could* do was continue talking about the situation he was in, one that I was on the periphery of, but which was often uppermost in my mind.

### **Underlying Social Risk: Representations of Young Sudanese-Australian Men**

Chimamanda Aidichie has noted, “power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person” (3 of 5). Arguably, definitive representations are always a danger, and I suggest that it is the responsibility of both the artist and the researcher to find a way to resolve or bypass them. When I first met Abe in 2007, the dominant media narrative of Sudanese-Australians was of young men as gang members (Windle 558–59; Nolan, et al. 656). Joel Windle argues that racialization of African refugees in the Australian media draws on “a history of racism, on wider colonial narratives about primitive Africa, on the perennial discourse of dangerous youth, and even on fears about American cultural imperialism (in the form of Black ‘gang culture’)” (563). Drawing on the work of Kerry McCallum, Windle has observed that “as with Indigenous Australians, the dominant frame is one of underlying social risk” (563).

A couple of years later, when I began working out what I wanted to articulate in *Separation*, young Sudanese-Australian men were still predominantly represented as “Other” in the media. Particularly relevant in terms of my project was “How the West was Lost” (Oakes), an article published in June 2012 in *The Age* (Melbourne’s principal daily broadsheet) about Abe’s friends and peers. While Abe is not quoted in the article, it is likely that he was present when the young men were interviewed. The central focus of the piece is young “African” men as a social problem. “Before long,” Dan Oakes writes, “stories began emerging of violent robberies . . . carried out by youths of African appearance” (2 of 4). Oakes visits a public park in the “early afternoon” after being told that at that time “the boys and men who hang around there are likely to be more sober and less aggressive.” According to Oakes: “The advice, however well meaning, was incorrect. Six or seven African migrants aged between 17 and 25 sat on benches in varying states of drunkenness, some openly swigging from bottles and casks of alcohol” (2 of 4). In a country



where there is significant binge drinking across ethnic backgrounds, it seems odd that the focus should be turned on a group of young “African” men, as if their drinking is an isolated or ethnically based problem. The individuals are largely invisible in this story—over-determined by, and reduced to, their ethnicity and alcohol usage.

I was aware that the story I wanted to tell involved a young man who, in many ways, ostensibly conformed to media stereotypes about the demographic to which he belonged. Abe hung out with a large group of male friends, he favored an American rapper look, and, like numerous other Australian teenagers, he drank heavily. However these details said little about Abe as an individual. As David MacDougall has asserted, the innate vulnerability of participants in documentary film is due to the “crime” of representation: “By freezing life, every film to some degree offends against the complexity of people and the destiny that awaits them” (37–38). I did not want to portray Abe in a way that reduced and oversimplified his life. This posed a significant ethical issue. Given that any representation is highly problematic, what gave me any more right than the journalist to represent Abe at a particularly vulnerable juncture in his life?

During happier times, Abe had sometimes inquired about the documentary and oral history work that I did, and hinted that he would like me to focus on *his* story. Abe is a compelling storyteller himself, with an ear for dialogue and a talent for recalling intriguing detail. However, when I broached the topic of making a film about our experiences as an improvised “family,” Abe was clear that he did not want to participate. When I asked him why, he tapped the side of his head and then mine. “It’s here already. Why do you need to make a film when it’s here?”

It is impossible to know exactly what Abe meant by this. He did not say he did not want me to make a film, but perhaps he was suggesting that our experiences should remain private. Or perhaps he was commenting on the impossibility of replicating the past. He may have wanted to convey that actually memory, feeling, and imagination are enough. Whatever the case, it was clear that making a film was about my own need to articulate the situation, not Abe’s, and that it would not improve his circumstances. In telling Abe’s story, I was aware I would be exerting a type of power and authority that was not present in Abe’s current life. There is no easy ethical answer. The only solution (and it is partial) was a reflexive acknowledgment of my involvement in Abe’s life and my subjectivity. Without Abe’s participation, all I felt I could

actually do was frame my own experience on film, making it abundantly clear to the viewer that this was my perspective. James Clifford has described ethnographic texts as “constructed domains of truth, serious fictions” (10). This is the basis of *Separation*, which forms a partial truth from fragments of a story and runs four minutes in total. There is nothing in this film that could identify Abe, except to those who already knew us both well. I now turn to the details of how I constructed a “serious fiction” about Abe and me.

### Turning Personal Experience into a Documentary-Poem

In relation to Abe, I had a hoard of vivid mental images and snatches of conversation. In combination with some strong feelings about what had happened, this gave me a dozen possible beginnings for a narrative. Searching for a way to represent the story of my improvised parent-child relationship with Abe I wrote the following poem:

#### *Shifty Fruit*

Come four o'clock, back to a full room  
he'd sing his day across my desk:

the locker he couldn't open, two-finger typing,  
mouth dry with the harsh newness of everything.

Ironing his Friday night outfit on the office floor, he said,  
*I'm good at this. Bring in all your dresses.*

He ate chip-dinners at the Laundromat,  
slept outdoors, dreamed of finding his mother

I put apples in his bag and he called them *shifty fruit*,  
*Steal me*, he said, *the government isn't looking.*

At my house he swept each room, stood beneath paintings  
held objects in his gaze, intent on understanding.

He wouldn't go to school without clean socks so I loaned mine.

That evening he said, *Why did your mother leave you?*

Throat full, I couldn't answer. This question I had never asked him.

Silently he washed my socks by hand and hung them out. (Bilbrough, *Porous* 20)

However, when I paired the text with video images to illustrate the words, the result was overly explanatory. Eventually, my partner interviewed me about Abe, and I cut two sixty-minute interviews down to approximately four minutes to form an elliptical narrative, the content of which loosely mirrored what I had articulated in the poem. The film begins with pieces of black coral against a white cloth that evoke tiny, intricate (family) trees. For me they indicate the complexity of relationships. A red-and-white dollhouse is positioned in front of a real house of the same colors. In another shot a collection of old chairs are clustered in a group. My intention was to suggest a longed-for domesticity and a family situation that was out of Abe's reach during the period I looked after him. My own life at the time was far from conventional, and I wanted to convey the idea that in a sense Abe and I were *playing* house. A shot of floral dresses moving in the wind on a washing-line confers layers of "family" meaning for *me*. It references the commonality between an aspect of my life and Abe's—the fact that each of us was separated from our respective mothers as small children. It recalls Abe's offer to iron my dresses when he first became homeless; a gesture of care, which could also be read as a way of requesting care from me.

Exactly what constitutes family is variable. I wanted there to be space within the text of the film for the viewer to play or "vagabond" with meaning. As such these images are intended to evoke a rich array of different feelings, associations, and possible narratives beyond the frame. I hoped they would inspire an empathetic response that perhaps recalled something of significance in the viewer's own life.

### Representing Intimate Others

Abe's actual voice is absent from *Separation* yet it is his voice—or my *interpretation* of his voice that informs the piece. Abe's individual manner of articulating things felt problematic to represent. I could not

reproduce the improvised rap poems he performed for me after school as his method of telling me about his day. I could only speak of my experience of receiving them. Although struck by the linguistic verve of Abe's "shifty fruit" and his connection between my secretly putting food in his bag and "stealing" him, I could not use either detail in the film.

I felt that quoting him in the written poem only barely worked, and in spoken form, in my voice rather than his, it sounded cloying and sentimental—an embarrassing imitation of a fifteen-year-old's unself-conscious wit. There was also no way to evoke the idea contained in "shifty fruit" visually—as a metaphor it has layers of connotation, which in itself is "shifty." These are aesthetic concerns, but what lies beneath them is awareness of not wanting to appropriate Abe's voice or style, a fear of losing Abe's multidimensionality as a human being.

The gaps in the narrative of *Separation* and prioritization of feeling and suggestion over "fact" aim to protect Abe's privacy and guard against possible essentialist notions of culture. I aimed for the film to be a universal story, independent of culture or ethnicity, about the longing for a stable physical and psychological home in the face of a harsher reality. For these reasons I did not focus on Abe's background; the only allusion is my statement: "sometimes I wished that I was Sudanese, so I could be more like his mother." My admission in the film that "my mother left my father and me when I was five" is an integral part of this universality, a link between my personal history and Abe's.

Despite my intention, discourses around cultural homogeneity still potentially intrude in an analysis of *Separation*. Given the film is about a relationship, I felt that it needed a figure apart from me. I wanted to show glimpses of a visual presence based on Abe—a shot of him putting on socks and later, hand-washing them. But the subject matter also felt so personal that I could not bear to explain it to a stranger. My partner, Budi, was already invested in the narrative: he had met Abe, and in addition to listening to my distress and frustration about the situation over a period of years, he had interviewed me for the film. Consequently, it was not such a stretch for him to volunteer to re-present Abe. This added extra, unplanned layers of meaning to the film—stories and resonances beyond the frame. There was a sense of identification in Budi's choice. His background is Indonesian, and although resident in Australia for over fifteen years, at the time of filming he was experiencing feelings of cultural displacement. More than once he had commented that aspects of Abe's situation had resonance for him. *Separation*

was made prior to Budi's return to Indonesia for an extended period. The trip meant a long separation, not only from me but also from his two children, who arranged the rooms of the dollhouse I filmed.

However, Budi's presence in *Separation* adds some dissonance. On a personal level I felt a twinge of discomfort due to the power dynamic that could be construed by my partner playing my "child." Additionally, he is playing a young man who is not my *actual* son and whose relationship with me, during the period he stayed at my house, was sometimes questioned or misconstrued by others. The other uncomfortable issue is one of ethnicity. Budi is roughly the same height and build as Abe, and as his face is never visible in the film, it is possible that he could be a number of ethnicities and ages. Budi's "Asian" hair may be jarring for some viewers, who have noted the "Sudanese" detail. I allowed this incongruity, as the film obliquely referenced events and feelings at the time it was made it. This "mistake" also fits with the film's form, which is evocative rather than literal—a documentary-*poem*. Although it is not my intention, there is also a risk of the type of "allegorical" reading described by Shohat, a danger of viewers extrapolating that my inference is that all people who are not white are a homogenous group (169). It is worth noting here that what was more salient than Budi's ethnicity in regards to his involvement in *Separation* was our relationship. Although there was a discomfort in my partner playing my "child," there was a certain emotional "truth" to it. Children, parents, and partners are *all* intimate others and aspects of each relationship are mirrored or find expression in one another.

### **Conclusion: The Expansive Power of Poetry**

In concluding I want to return to auto/biographical practice and poetry in terms of what both contribute to the politics of representation. This has a creative pedagogical function for arts and media practitioners as well as scholars, social workers, and anthropologists working with other people's stories, as well as with their own. Reductive, allegorical, and definitive representations, which Other individuals and marginalized cultural communities, are one of the dangers of representation across mediums. With this in mind, I have suggested that auto/biography as critical methodology and genre can be a strategy for taking "responsibility" (di Tella 33) and offering oneself as a flawed, vulnerable subject.

However auto/biography tends to bring up uncomfortable questions around what is “acceptable” to express. Without intending to cause hurt, the auto/biographer may inadvertently do just that. Nancy K. Miller has articulated the dilemma this way: “I am forced to acknowledge that I may well cause pain—or embarrassment to others—if I also believe, as I do, in my right to tell my story” (157). Like Miller, I believe in this right, but not at all costs. I have proposed that the creation of an auto/biographical work requires the careful weighing of aesthetics with the possible consequences to close others and relationships with those others. In the case of *Separation*, my relationship with Abe, and his vulnerability, were the most important considerations. This is what shaped the final form of the film.

Shohat uses “allegorical” to refer to a reductive understanding of re-presentations, which point to a paucity of imagination, an inability to accept individuals and culture as multidimensional (169). In this essay I have argued for the value of poetic strategies (in order to avoid definitive or allegorical representations) in communicating highly emotional events and potentially divisive subjects. Metaphor in a work of art has the power to create wide-ranging associations requiring the viewer to delve below the surface and draw upon sensual, emotional, and non-literal understanding. Attempting to pin meaning to a *literal* visual signifier (such as Budi’s hair) and reduce meaning to that signifier is, arguably, an interpretive cul-de-sac. Poetic representations offer a different variety of “truth,” and can be more expansive in terms of possible meanings for makers, participants, and viewers. This is of both aesthetic and ethical significance.

### Coda

I hope to be able to show *Separation* to Abe one day. It is about the length of the improvised rap poems he used to perform for me after school. And although I am telling a story to Abe, I am also telling a story *to* him.

### Notes

1. I use Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s definition of auto/biography as signalling the “interrelatedness of autobiographical narrative and biography with the slash marking their fluid boundary” (256).
2. Abe and the names of other young people in this essay are pseudonyms.

3. The *Collins English Dictionary* defines synecdochically as “a figure of speech in which a part is substituted for a whole or a whole for a part” (“Synecdochically”).

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