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Essie Coffey's *My Survival as an Aboriginal* (1978) and *My life as I live it* (1993): autobiographical documentary and the socio- political struggle of an Aboriginal, Black

Renan Paiva Chaves[a], Gabriel Kitofi Tonelo[b] and Deane Martin Williams[c]

[a] Department of Cinema, University of Campinas, Campinas, Brazil; [b] Department of Cinema, Radio and Television, University of São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil; [c] Film and Screen Studies, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

Abstract

This paper analyzes the autobiographical documentaries *My Survival as an Aboriginal* (1978) and *My life as I live it* (1993), by Essie Coffey. We aim to localize Coffey's work historiographically and theoretically in relation to American, European, Australian and Latin American documentary traditions, pointing out aspects of racial and gender identity and class alterity. Our analysis of these films indicates innovative methodological and thematic intersections between autobiographical narratives and social and race issues as well as highlighting the potential autobiographical narratives have to update both personal issues and issues of collectivity.

Introduction

Essie Coffey (1941–1998), also known as *Bush Queen*, was an Aboriginal activist, filmmaker and songwriter who was recognized for her struggle for the cultural preservation and application of the constitutional rights of her people. She was a member of the Murawarri people – Aboriginal Australian people of Queensland's territorial border with New South Wales. Coffey was raised in the bush and as a teenager worked with her family in ranches until settling down in the Reserve at West Brewarrina where she brought up eight children and ten stepchildren. In the 1960s, Coffey founded the Aboriginal Movement in Brewarrina and in the 1970s established the Western Aboriginal Legal Service. In 1985, Coffey was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for her services to the Aboriginal community. During the 1990s, she co-founded the

Aboriginal Heritage and Culture Museum in Brewarrina and was an inaugural member of the National Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. Coffey also had an active 'commitment to women's issues. She was a co-founder of the Magunya Aboriginal Women's Issue Organisation and helped to create the first women's knock-out football competition in the north- west region' (Ansara 1998, 11).

Her work as filmmaker and as songwriter should be thought of inside this biographical and socio-political context. Coffey's groundbreaking autobiographical film *My Survival as an Aboriginal* (1978), which had a sequel entitled *My life as I live it* (1993)[1], was the first documentary film made by an Aboriginal woman. Concerned about Aboriginal people, both films address issues of land rights, poverty, dislocation, depression, domination, alcohol abuse, and contrasts between White and Black history and education. They carry a strong autobiographical stance as well as establishing a relation of continuity through the Aboriginal social issues exposed by her. The knowledge produced by the films is built from an exploration of the universe experienced by the filmmaker in her daily life – the relationship with her people, acquaintances, and relatives and her professional life.

A key figure for the realization of both Coffey's films was Martha Ansara. They met while working on Australian filmmaker Phillip Noyce's *Backroads* (1977) – a film in which Coffey represents an Aboriginal woman who addresses, speaking and singing, the Aboriginal condition and poverty. Through this context, Ansara, as Debenham (2013, 114) points out, 'became aware of the problems confronting Indigenous female Australians'.

Before moving to Australia, Ansara had been involved in the Californian anti-war film group Newsreel, in a period in which she had started thinking about the necessity of women's participation in the creative and political work and about women being behind the camera (Kenny 2018, 552). According to Fiske (2017), also around this time, Ansara had contact with the cinéma verité style, assisting Chris Tillam on an anti-war documentary. In the late 1960s she became involved in the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op – a cooperative of independent filmmakers funded by

[1] Both films were produced and filmed by renowned American-Australian filmmaker Martha Ansara and funded by Australian Film Commission. *My Survival as an Aboriginal* was awarded around the world in important festivals such as Sydney Film Festival, American Film Festival, Chicago Film Festival, Cinéma du Réel Festival. *My life as I live it* was awarded in important film festivals such as Creteil Film Des Femmes Festival, Margaret Mead Film and Video Festival, Leipzig International Festival of Documentary and Animation Films.

the Australian Film Commission (AFC), which included experimental filmmakers such as Margot Nash, Gillian Leahy, Susan Lambert, David Perry, Albie Thoms and Phillip Noyce (Hughes 2015). During this time, Ansara was also an important figure in the Women's Liberation Movement in Australia, helping to found the Sydney Women's Film Group, a collective interested in fostering films by and about women.

Ansara and other groups springing up in Australia about that time focused on 'consciousness-raising', a form of activism popularized by American feminists in the late 1960s:

> Martha Ansara described it: 'we formed a group and the first thing we did was we followed this consciousness-raising procedure, and we discussed out own lives'. In consciousness-raising groups, participants learned that an isolated problem or an individual misery was neither isolated nor individual. Rather, each was a feature of a structural or systemic organisation of relations of power, of politics, of the politics of what, at that time, Eileen Haley called 'male supremacy'. An individual woman's personal life was, Sue Wills noted, 'political reality in microcosm (Magarey 2013).

Ansara's intellectual and practical background – in a film context in which the anthropological representation of the *other* was changing and autobiographical documentaries were emerging – was pivotal to the conception and realization of Coffey's films. Through the funding from the Creative Development Branch of the AFC, Ansara – along with Alec Morgan – was able to construct an autobiographical documentary film directed by an Aboriginal woman which addresses a very personal and social struggle through a style which encompasses cinema vérite/ direct cinema and experimental passages.

Our intention in this paper is to highlight the ways in which the works of Coffey are related to the worldwide history and theory of documentary film. First, we present an overview of the emergence of personal and autobiographical documentaries in the Southern Hemisphere and its global significance. Second, we discuss the stylistic elements that characterize Coffey's films as autobiographical narratives. Third, we focus on the then innovative methodological and thematic intersections between autobiographical narratives and social and racial issues which *My Survival as an Aboriginal* undertakes. Finally, we discuss *My life as I Live it* thinking especially about how its autobiographical narrative updates issues of collectivity.

The autobiographical documentary and the south hemisphere

The avant-garde films by Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas, the filmic reflexivity of Jean Rouch and Jean-Luc Godard and the reactions to the observational perspectives of Robert Drew,

the Maysles brothers, D.A. Pennebaker and Frederick Wiseman as well as the rise of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s are usually taken as examples of a turning point in the documentary tradition towards the emergence of 'first person documentaries'.

Although this turning point is usually thought of under these European and American examples, similar developments were also taking place in other parts of the world. Since the 1960s, Brazilian filmmakers, for example, have brought their everyday, socio-political contexts, contradictions, struggles, homelife, friends, and family to the center of the filmic narrative. In *A entrevista* (1966) by Helena Solberg, for example, the filmmaker deals with women from the *carioca* (Rio de Janeiro) upper middle class – the same class she comes from. *Lesbian Mother* (1972) and the documentary series *Living in New York City* (1975– 1977) by Brazilian filmmakers Rita Moreira and Norma Bahia Pontes put at stake issues of gender, sexuality, feminism and lesbianism within the New York context of which they were a part. In *Di* (1977), Glauber Rocha puts at stake his social and artistic issues projecting himself through the relation he had with Di Cavalcanti's *persona*. *Twenty years later* (1984), by Eduardo Coutinho, was a project interrupted by the 1964 *coup d'état* and completed only in 1984, a temporal span which deeply informed its treatment of Coutinho's career, life-story, affection and political stance in relation to this history. In *Seams* (1992), the director Karim Aïnouz approaches the macho culture in the north-east Brazilian city of Fortaleza through an intimist lens. He talks with his grandmothers and great-aunts to construct both a family memoir and a social perspective on his hometown.

Nevertheless, autobiographical documentaries, which may be thought of as a category of 'first person documentaries', have become more prominent in the Brazilian (and Latin American) context just in the last few decades. An 'autobiographical turn', analogous to the one which Jim Lane (2002) outlines in relation to the USA, emerged in Brazil from the 2000s, with films such as *Um passaporte húngaro* (Sandra Kogut, 2002), *33* (Kiko Goifman, 2003) *Do luto à luta* (Evaldo Mocarzel, 2005), *Person* (Marina Person, 2006), *Santiago* (João Moreira Salles, 2007), *Otto* (Cao Guimarães, 2012), *Elena* (Petra Costa, 2012), *Mataram meu irmão* (Cristiano Burlan, 2013) and *Já visto, jamais visto* (Andrea Tonacci, 2014).

Issues related to national identity as well as collective historical aspects are always present here, demonstrating the possibility of building experiential knowledge based on the relationship between filmmakers and events related to military dictatorships, in different localities and from different perspectives. Since the year 2000, more than fifty documentaries were released in Brazil,

Argentina, Uruguay, Chile and Paraguay in which filmmakers revisit how dictatorial processes directly affected their own personal lives, as well as the lives of their loved ones around stories of imprisonment, disappearances, torture, kidnapping and the assassination of family members. Some of the most prominent examples can be highlighted: from Brazil, *Diario de Uma Busca* (Flavia Castro, 2010) and *Os Dias com Ele* (*The Days with Him*, Maria Clara Escobar, 2013); from Argentina: *Los Rubios* (Albertina Carri, 2003), *Papá Ivan* (María Inés Roqué, 2004), *M* (Nicolás Prividera, 2007); from Chile: *El eco de las canciones* (Antonia Rossi, 2010), *Allende mi abuelo Allende* (Marcia Tambutti, 2015), *El Pacto de Adriana* (Lissette Orozco, 2017); from Uruguay: *Secretos de Lucha* (Maiana Bidegain, 2007); from Paraguay: *Cuchillo de Palo* (Renate Costa, 2010)[2].

In the Australian context the emergence of more personal documentaries can be traced at least to the late 1960s. Films such as *Ride a White Horse* (Bob Evans, 1968), *Crystal Voyager* (David Elfick, 1973) and *Rolling Home* (David Lourie and Paul Witzig, 1975) are all about surf with (ex-) surfers as filmmakers. Their perspectives as 'insiders', as surfers that film while in/on the waves, as a traveler in search of new waves etc. shows a very personal side of the filmic objects/subjects.

Since the 1970s, some Australian documentaries that deal with gay and lesbian subjects/ issues and some Australian feminist documentaries which bring the personal to the fore- ground can be thought of in a similar way. These films, in which the personal is also a political tool, deal frequently with causes which the filmmakers struggle for in their personal and professional life. Some examples are *Film for Discussion* (Sydney Women's Film Group, 1973), *Homosexuality: a Film for Discussion* (Barbara Creed, 1975), *The Selling of the Female Image* (Carole Kostanich, 1977), *Size 10* (Sarah Gibson, 1978), *Witches, Faggots, Dykes and Poofters* (One in Seven Collective, 1980), *For Love or Money* (Jeni Thornley, 1983), *Snakes and Ladders* (Trish FitzSimons, 1987), *Green Tea and Cherry Pie* (Solrun Hoaas, 1989), *As the mirror burns* (Cristina Pozzan, 1990) and *Silk and Steel* (Sally Ingleton, 1996). Also of remarkable preeminence in the 1970s Australian documentary context is a kind of documentary that could be described as the 'collaborative documentary' (or 'process video', as Australian filmmaker Tom Zubrycki calls it).

[2] Written in Portuguese, author Fernando Seliprandy's Ph.D. dissertation (2018) provides the most extensive list of these documentaries, as well as an in-depth analysis of the generational aspect which seems to encompass these filmographies.

This encompasses films in which the filmmaking process and the filmic issues/themes/perspectives are intensively negotiated between filmmaker and filmic subjects. This is the case in Tom Zubrycki's early works *The Inner City Tape* (1974), *Fig St Fiasco* (1974), *We Have To Live With It* (1974), and *Addison Road Drop-In* (1977), as well as *Whatever Happened to Green Valley* (Peter Weir, 1973), and *Waiting for Harry* (Kim McKenzie, 1980). The appearance of Australian documentaries in which the filmmaker deals with an existing relationship of their own has also been of significance. Some prominent examples are *The Man Who Can't Stop* (Michael Rubbo, 1973), *Someone Looks at Something* (Philip Tyndall, 1986), *All the World to See* (Pat Fiske, 1992), *A Memory* (Donna Ives, 1999), *Hephzibah* (Curtis Levy, 1998), *Least Said, Soonest Mended* (Steve Thomas, 1999) and *Ports of Destiny* (Mitzi Goldman, 1999).

In Australia, the 'autobiographical turn' started taking place more consistently during the 1990s, even though, as we have seen, prominent examples have appeared since the late 1970s. Coffey's *My Survival as an Aboriginal* (1978) is the most relevant example from that period. *Maidens* (1978), by Jeni Thornley, is another which uses personal archives and excerpts from feminist movies to deal with women's experience in Australian society through the feelings, thoughts and life story of the filmmaker and family members. Thorn- ley also made another pertinent autobiographical documentary called *To the other shore* (1996), which took ten years to complete, addressing the issue of motherhood with a deeply personal approach. *A Personal history of the Australian surf: being the confessions of a straight poofter* (1981), by Michael Blakemore focuses on the director's relationship with his father during his childhood and adolescence and how this shaped his own life. The film takes an autobiographical approach to the early days of surfing in Australia through reenactment, stock footage and original takes. In 1983, Lee Whitmore released *Ned Wethered*, an animated autobiographical documentary that addresses the filmmaker's childhood memories. Whitmore released three other animated autobiographical documentaries of her memories: *On a full moon* (1997), *Ada* (2002) and *The Safe House* (2006). In 1984, Corinne Cantrill released *In This Life's Body*, an autobiographical documentary constructed from photographs, home movies, sections of other films, her voice- over and sections of silence, to interlace the personal and the political. *A Song of Air* (1988), by Merilee Bennett, is an autobiographical documentary constructed from home movies and a first-person voiceover, in which she speaks about her father. *The Darra Dogs* (1993), by Dennis Tupicoff, is an animated short inspired by 'his daughter's wish to own a dog' in which Tupicoff deals with his memories

and feelings involving the dogs of his childhood. *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1991), by Dennis O'Rourke, depicts O'Rourke's journey into prostitution in Thailand. Through his interest in and relationship with Aoi, a Thai prostitute, the film reveals their life over some months (after O'Rourke have gotten divorced and decided to go to Thailand 'with fantasies of exotic sex and love without pain'). *Hatred* (1995), by Mitzi Goldman, is a personal/ political journey into hate and racism. Goldman addresses her father's and her own experience of being, somehow, always a foreign person, even when living in their 'own' country. In *Exile in Sarajevo* (1996), the Bosnian-Australian director Tahir Cambis addresses the daily struggle of the inhabitants of Sarajevo during the 'Siege of Sarajevo' (1992–1995). The film takes the shape of an audiovisual diary in which Cambis visits different people and places over the last six months of the 'siege' trying to understand the impacts of the war on himself and on the inhabitants of Sarajevo. In 1996, Alan Carter produced a six-part documentary series called *First Person*. Each episode is an autobiographical documentary directed by filmmakers each in the middle of a deep personal crisis. Robert Gibson's *Video Fool for Love* (1996), an autobiographical documentary in which the filmmaker recorded the own love life for ten years using a hand-held video camera, took up this theme at the same time.

The Australian autobiographical documentary encompasses many of the trends highlighted by Jim Lane (2002) in relation to the autobiographical documentary in the US. One of them is related to the chronological narratives that put at stake the masculine filmmaker's subjectivity to explore the politics of masculinity from the perspective of a father, husband, son or lover. Another tendency is related to the narratives in which the filmmakers represent themselves in relation to their family, identity, politics and art. The other remarkable tendency is related to women documentarists that use their personal and life experience to discuss broader political issues and to represent a misrepresented history.

In the following discussion, we will see how Essie Coffey's films may be thought of in relation to this broader autobiographical documentary history, highlighting especially the pioneering aspects of *My Survival as an Aboriginal*.

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My Survival as an Aboriginal: personal expression towards collective matters of the Black Aboriginal[3] people

Released in 1978, Coffey's *My Survival as an Aboriginal*, the first documentary directed by an Australian Aboriginal woman, is an important component in the history of both Australian and global documentary film culture. In the following discussion we examine the development of Coffey's first-person approach on the film analyzing stylistic and narrative elements such as voiceover narration, the filmmaker's bodily inscription on the filmic take and the film's soundtrack. We first compare the director's first-person narrative and stylistic choices with those of other cutting-edge autobiographical documentaries at that moment, especially from the US context. We then address how Coffey's autobiographical endeavor stands as a pioneering example regarding the use of an autobiographical perspective in representing issues of race and class alterity.

The film's narrative is personified by Coffey's individual figure in many ways. On a primary, artistic level, Coffey provided the rationale behind the stylistic choices of the film: choices of *mise-en-scène*, of narrative construction, montage and other elements. But Coffey's individual figure is also central to the thematic content provided by the film, directly through her voiceover narration. Presented in the opening sequence and reappearing in various moments throughout the documentary, Coffey's embodied voice-over gives us access to her individual analytical and meditative interiority, especially regarding her thoughts and feelings about the then current history of Aboriginal people in the Australian territory.

In her voiceover narration, Coffey frequently posits her individual figure within the larger social group of Black Aboriginal people through the use of personal and possessive pronouns, such as 'My' 'People' and 'We', which point to an enunciative condition of plurality. Coffey's voiceover in *My Survival as an Aboriginal*, then, seeks to produce a filmic knowledge which is both individual and collective. This kind of double-function production of knowledge is

[3] We use the term Black Aboriginal here following Coffey's lead. The term also indicates a set of complexities for authors across the South-South imaginary. For Australians, Aboriginal peoples have used and been subjected to a shifting terminology since white settlement began with the term 'Black' remerging amongst Aboriginal people and resonating with American hip-hop identity and the Black Lives Matter movement. In Brazil, African descendants may identify and are subject to the designation Black, in distinction to Brazilian Indigenous peoples, often understood as Indian. Brazilian national mythology relies on the notion of racial integration despite enormous racially based inequalities and prejudices.

manifested through the use of different voiceover strategies. In one of these, a collective sense is emphasized when Coffey talks about the intimate feelings Black Aboriginal people have, as a whole, in relation to white people:

> My people, they might look stupid. But they don't feel it. They just say anything and let the white man think that they on his side. But in the Black fellow's heart, he got his own opinion about a white man. He never tell a white fellow what he's thinking. Never. He never even tell him what's in his heart. So we just let them think what they want to think.

In other moments of the film, Coffey's voiceovers seem to address her own reflections and meditations, bringing a more confessional tone to her arguments. In these passages she still refers to a collective Black Aboriginal experience, although her speech points to personal choices which may or may not approximate those of other individuals within her group. For example, during the final moments of *My Survival as an Aboriginal* Coffey speaks about herself in contrast to a phenomenon she recognizes as common within the Aboriginal community: the brainwashing of Aboriginal people by white settler culture and lifestyle. This is a strong thematic addressed throughout the film. In one of her final testimonials, Coffey argues she is not going to be tricked or misled by white people, as other people of her group seem to have been:

> There's one thing I want to tell youse now. No white man has turned my head. No white person gonna brainwash me. I'm gonna lead my own life, me and my family, and live off the land. I will not live a white man way and that's straight from me, Essie Coffey.

Even though Essie Coffey's arguments, through her voiceover, are an important part of the enunciation of *My Survival as an Aboriginal*, other stylistic procedures play pivotal roles in the thematic development of the film and its autobiographical proposal. One of them concerns following Coffey both in her everyday domestic universe and also in her public work as a community advisor and activist. Her bodily presence consists not only of a transposition of her voice through narration but also through the way she is portrayed in front of the camera, interacting with other people and with the material environment around her.

It is interesting to note that the variety of Coffey's bodily inscriptions on the film

exceeds simple stylistic matters. Her interactions with other people in the film present themselves as a vivid metaphor for the urgency of the preservation of traditional Aboriginal knowledge and of bringing people from her social group together. In one of the most important scenes in this sense, viewers watch the filmmaker teaching her children several survival techniques for life in the bush. We witness Coffey teaching a traditional knowledge class, in which she interrogates and explains to her offspring ways of obtaining nourishment (bumbles), water (from the leaves of a specific tree) and ointment (a toothache medicine made from leaves) from the bush terrain. Coffey also teaches them the uses of melee and range weapons made for hunting (the *bundi* and the *boomerang*) and how to use an Aboriginal musical instrument (the *didgeridoo*).

It could be argued that this scene, in consonance with the already mentioned overall epistemological quality of the film, also serves the production of both a personal and collective knowledge. On one hand, viewers are able to watch a demonstration of the filmmaker's concerns with the education of her children – which actually exists in the everyday life lived by Coffey, away from the camera and from the filmic environment – through her fear that they might be superexposed to formal white education and leave behind traditional knowledge and Aboriginal culture. On the other hand, the personal pre- occupation Coffey has in *her* life and with *her* children also highlights the macrocosm of the Brewarrina Aboriginal. The message Coffey delivers to her children in this scene articulates the conjunction of personal and collective concerns which seem to be at the core of *My Survival as an Aboriginal*'s epistemology:

> Now just remember what I taught you. Cause today is the only chance you got of coming out in this bush and learning how to survive. When you start school again, tomorrow, you gonna do a white man education. You not gonna learn about Aboriginal culture. And Aboriginal culture, it should be taught in all schools to Aboriginal kids. Because our Aboriginal kids are getting too much white education in their brains, that they are completely forgetting about their own tribe, their own culture and their tradition and their heritage. And that is most important: that you kids just remember what you are. That you stand tall and you stand proud on your land, what you're standing on now and that's land: Aboriginal land. Black land.

By exploring Essie Coffey's bodily presence in front of the camera, the autobiographical knowledge provided by *My Survival as an Aboriginal* also stresses her activities as advisor for the Aboriginal community in Brewarrina. In this sense, the commingling of a personal exploration with a collective aspect is situated in Coffey's decision to be por- trayed as a figure who plays an important role towards a sense of empowerment of other Aboriginal individuals, as well as someone who elucidates the social and political nuances of the relations between Black and White people in her region.

Two scenes of the film exemplify these concerns. In one of them, we watch Coffey during an episode of her work at the Aboriginal Legal Service. Inside an office, she talks to Smiley, a young man who was recently fined by the police for not having *p-plates* (probationary plates) on his car, thus having to pay a significant amount of money in order to avoid imprisonment. In the scene, Coffey explains that the Aboriginal Legal Service will be able to designate a lawyer to take care of his case and also that the organization maintains a fund dedicated to bailing Aboriginal individuals out of prison in cases such as these. Smiley reveals he had already been incarcerated some time before that incident and that he would not like to go back to prison, given the exceedingly rough treatment he received. The scene points to the issues regarding Aboriginal incarceration both in a literal and in a figurative sense, which also appears in the next scene of the film. Here, Essie Coffey's activity in front of the camera consists of her dialogue with a man who claims that the money received in his pension cheque ends up destined for the region's pub owners. The dialogue between them reaffirms the filmmaker's intention of being por- trayed through a denunciative posture about the different facets of the domination of Aboriginal people by the white community, which also manifests itself in the financial exploitation by the supply of alcohol (*grog*) as a factor of marginalization, impoverishment, alcoholism and, ultimately, imprisonment. Coffey herself struggled with alcohol, as she related in a number of interviews following the release of the film.

The intertwining of personal and collective matters in *My Survival as an Aboriginal* is

embedded further with the film through the theme song, composed and sung by Coffey[4]. The song's title, 'Bush Queen', carries the name by which Coffey designates herself and by which she is known in the community. Even though it is a reference to the filmmaker herself, the first stanza of the song is written in the third person singular (*she*). In this first part, Coffey defines herself by three different aspects. One of them regards matters of identity, both of gender and race: 'Bush Queen, Bush Queen / She's a woman, a beautiful Black woman'. Secondly, Coffey writes about the irrevocable posture of affection and respect she holds for her people and for their cultural and territorial heritages: 'She loves her people, she loves her land'. Finally, the filmmaker sings about her work as an activist and as an advocate for her people: 'She's a fighter / She's a voice of her people'.

The second part of the song takes on the first person plural in its structure (we / you and I): 'This is our land / This is our body / This land is our love / This land is our soul / And you and I will be as king and queen'. The verses here assume, therefore, the function of presenting the person who is pronouncing the song. In a more strictly musical level, the change of enunciative voice is manifested by an inflection occurring in the recitative character: the second part takes on a prosody that is closer to ordinary speech. The following stanza – maintained in the first person plural and in the same recitative tone – points directly toward the alterity of class and race addressed in the film:

> The white man came / And took our land / Where once we lived so free / He used his guns / His jails, his grog / As poison weaponries / But did we die? / Did we forget or leave the land we love? No! / We have stayed / We have survived / And we will never move.

As a result of all of these parts, the film's theme song brings in itself a synthesis of the auto-biographical inflection seen in its narrative: the context of the engendering of personal and collective matters, both in what concerns the past and present of her people, as well as the expectations regarding its future.

[4] The song, in the film, is heard in four different ways: as a non-diegetic instrumental version; as a diegetic appearance in which Coffey is seen humming and playing the guitar (even though the sound and image had not been captured at the same moment), as a diegetic version that is supposed to come from a radio; and as an non-diegetic version that accompanies images of the 'bush' and Essie Coffey.

Essie Coffey's pioneering role in global documentary culture

Some further considerations can be made regarding the film's strategies in the construction of an autobiographical or self reflexive approach. First perceived in the development of an embodied voiceover narration, which gives us access to Coffey's analytical and rational expertise, the film also visualizes the filmmaker's activities in front of the camera, in different facets of her everyday relation to other individuals and to the environment around her. *My Survival as an Aboriginal* was shot in 16 mm color film and presents an emphatic use of sync-sound in many of its most important scenes, such as the ones described above. The film's educational material notes that 'documentaries like this one often consist of material which is gathered on the spot, as things happen' and that after- wards, in the process of editing, 'it is necessary to give the film a narrative and ensure that it communicates clearly'. This material also suggests that the film's autobiographical approach can be considered an epistemological innovation which separates it from documentaries commonly distributed on television. There is an emphasis in perceiving the film as the personalized point-of-view of the filmmaker/protagonist. As director, her control of the film is inscribed in the artistic choices employed as well as the balance of her own individual exposure throughout the narrative – *what*, *how* and *how much* we will know, as viewers, about her life and about the issues that permeate the social group she belongs to:

> *My Survival as an Aboriginal* differs from many television documentaries which rely on experts and outsiders to explain what we are seeing about other people and places. In this film Essie tells her own story. She is the only person who address[es] us, the viewers. (…) As the director, Essie controls what we see and what we know about her own life and her own community and this control is revealed within the film itself (Ballad Film's Study Guide).

The strategies mentioned above seem to position *My Survival as an Aboriginal* within the context of 1970s Documentary Film culture, and especially within Direct Cinema as we discuss below[5].

[5] While the claim here is that *My Survival as an Aboriginal* relates predominantly to sync- sound dialogical methodologies, Coffey's film displays a few moments in which an experimental autobiographical approach also comes to mind. The most important part of the film in that sense is the 'White Dream / Nightmare' sequence. While standing in the same room as Aboriginal kids as they are watching an all-white TV show, Coffey launches a sort of epiphany starring herself. In a dreamlike collage of events accompanied by a non-diegetic soundtrack, viewers watch Coffey repeatedly serving herself of industrialized orange juice, gazing at the camera lens and, later, punching the card at a production line, also repeatedly. As it is known, Dreaming is crucial to Aboriginal culture and disclosing dream stories is an important feature to the passing on of knowledge. It can be inferred from that sequence that Coffey's epiphany tends to point out to her concerns about how white culture was dominating and oppressing traditional Aboriginal knowledge, but also underlining the filmmaker's intention in delivering a word of resistance to her people.

Central to this history is the work undertaken by filmmakers, professors and students based in the Boston/Cambridge region and at institutions such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University. These suggest that in the 1970s Direct Cinema there was less interest in constructing and offering filmic knowledge about the history of public individuals or prominent characters than in the previous decade. Films made at the MIT Film Section[6] sought to portray situations which were closely linked to the filmmakers' own individual, private figures. The ideological circumstance which dominated the moment fostered the exploration of themes related to the development of individual freedoms. In particular, 1970s American feminism put into vogue a notion that the addressing of issues of a private scope could also refer to the collective and the political.

These works sought to build and deliver knowledge from the private life of each director and from what the interaction with the people closest to him/her could offer, often in their family sphere. That is why, methodologically, the 'fly-on-the-wall' filmmaking stance, as well as the subtraction of narrative elements that revealed the presence of the filmmaker and the crew – two important axioms for the development of 1960s Direct Cinema – gave rise here to an emphasis on the participation of and the interaction with the filmed subjects. Parry (1979, 6) notes that if 1960s Direct Cinema could be understood through the 'fly on the wall' metaphor, 1970s production could be metaphorized as the 'fly in the mirror'. Parry states that in that moment 'subjective truth has become the noblest of specimens for examination, and autobiography almost a calling card'. It is important to highlight that even if these films resorted to strategies such as reflexivity and participation – often culminating thematically in an autobiographical perspective – they were still inserted in an American Direct Cinema tradition and these elements were seen as a development of that notion and not necessarily as its rupture. The imperious use of sync-sound and a dialogical narrative distanced these films, for instance, from the *avant-garde* auto- biographical production by filmmakers such as Brakhage, Mekas and Carolee Schneemann. Besides, a respect for maintaining referential structures regarding situations not so deviated from the everyday life of the filmmakers distanced US autobiographical Direct Cinema from other modern documentary propositions such as the French Cinema-*Verité*, best represented by Jean Rouch's *Chronique d'un*

[6] The MIT Film Section was the department of filmic research, teaching, production and innovation of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Founded in 1967, the department was led by Direct Cinema filmmakers Ed Pincus and Richard Leacock, both responsible for the center's main teaching and advising activities.

été (1961)[7].

A comparison between Coffey's and US documentary of the 1970s is important for our discussion. Methodologically, *My Survival as an Aboriginal* can be related to the autobio- graphical endeavor seen in films such as *Joyce at 34* (Joyce Chopra, 1973), *Nana, Mom and Me* (Amalie Rothschild, 1974) or *Joe and Maxi* (Maxi Cohen and Joel Gold, 1978). In those three female-directed documentaries, there is an emphasis on filming situations in which we see the director-protagonists in front of the lens of the camera, interacting with people who were part of their individual, personal and private environments, in scenes fundamentally shot using sync-sound[8].

In *Joyce at 34*, viewers witness filmmaker Joyce Chopra quarrel with family and relatives after the birth of her first daughter in the face of her desire to keep working during that period. The film touches issues of gender, motherhood and working relations, both in and outside the household environment. A focus on gender/work relations is also part of *Nana, Mom and Me*. Here an inter-generational confrontation is also witnessed during director Amalie Rothschild's interactions with her mother and grandmother, as matters of women's health, pregnancy, abortion and motherhood come to the fore. In *Joe and Maxi*, an analogous methodological procedure manifests in the attempts by filmmaker Maxi Cohen to engage with an evasive and absent father after her mother's death.

Even though methodological and stylistically relations between *My Survival as an Aboriginal* and the above-mentioned films can be made, it can be claimed that Coffey's documentary presents a distinct thematic focus when compared to such examples of US autobiographical documentary production of the period. These films evidence thematically the influence of 1970s second-wave feminism, supplying the growing demand to address politics and power relations in private, domestic and family environments and presenting a strong link between issues of gender and representation.

Watching *My Survival as an Aboriginal* viewers can, indeed, get in touch with a

[7] For debates over the relationship between 1970s direct cinema and autobiography, see Peña (1978), Moss (1979) Rance (1986), Rothman (1996) and Tonelo (2018).

[8] It is important to mention that the notion of a Direct/*Verité* style incorporated into autobio- graphical optics has configured itself through different ways in 1970s American filmography. Filmmaker Ed Pincus has addressed this possibility first in a 1972 article, as well as other researchers who have written about Cambridge autobiographical documentary filmmaking, such as Jim Lane (1996, 1997, 2002) and Macdonald (2013).

representation of the director/protagonist Coffey as a powerful woman. We see her strong performance as a leader both in her community and in her household and family life. However, it is possible to claim that Coffey's concerns in the film seem less oriented towards matters of gender and the female status within society, compared to her US counterparts. Coffey's autobiographical endeavor in the film is decidedly more connected to her representation as part of a group which recognizes itself as a target of historical oppression and social exclusion. Far from the position of a middle-class filmmaker/individual observed in the vast majority of the autobiographical documentaries made by US filmmakers at that time, *My Survival as an Aboriginal* stands as a pioneering example of an autobiographical documentary production aligned to the perspective of an individual experience in the face of matters of racial and class alterity. In the case of *My Survival as an Aboriginal*, Coffey recurrently seeks to provide an embodied knowledge of her condition as Black and Aboriginal within the Australian society throughout the narrative.

In the realm of American literature, autobiographical narratives have been one of the most important means for the expression of African American people around collective and social matters, as Robert F. Sayre points out (1980, 165). An analogous endeavor can also be found in the field of cinema, as the notion of African American autobiography in American documentary film culture started taking shape in the late 1980s. Jim Lane takes two contemporary autobiographical documentaries here as his case studies: Marco Williams' *In Search of our Fathers* (1992) and Camile Billops and James Hatch's *Finding Christa* (1991). Williams' film consists of the filmmaker's personal journey searching for the father he never met, shot over 10 years (from 1982 to 1992). Personal and collective issues around the 'African-American experience' in the US connect themselves. As the director outlines in the film, there's an absence of a fatherly figure in 47% of African- American families. In that sense, the film's title is symptomatically addressing a collective experience and Williams' search for his father stands allegorically as the search by many other African American children for their own – the search for *our* fathers. Similarly, Camille Billops' *Finding Christa* consists of her reunion with a daughter that the filmmaker left for adoption thirty years earlier. The film, as Lane (1996) points out,

> offers another view of the African American family as seen through the lens of a mother who was criticized for 'abandoning' her daughter and pursuing her career in art and a new life with her husband, who is not Christa's father.

As pointed out by Aufderheide (1997), personal/subjective expressions of race and class alterity were one of the most poignant aspects of the documentary film epistemology from the 1990s on. The use of autobiography for the expression of personal concerns but within a larger social group seems to remain an important trend in contemporary documentary. An example is Yance Ford's 2017 documentary *Strong Island*. Ford's meditation on the murder of his brother in 1992, in a Long Island predominantly white neighborhood, which went on to receive widespread popular and critical attention (it was nominated for the 2018 Academy Awards for Best Documentary). All of these films – to which we could also add Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* (1989) – show that autobiography continues to offer a powerful path, both for creative expression and for audience identification, towards the thematization of many of the distinct facets of the African-American experience.

However, as Lane points out, African American filmmakers have been conspicuously absent from the 1970s autobiographical documentary movement (Lane 1996). As already noted, he argues that it was not until the late 1980s that autobiographical narratives made by African American filmmakers started to emerge.

In that sense, Essie Coffey's examination of the Australian Black Aboriginal condition from a personal perspective, even if it is best understood in relation to the specific Australian context, makes it possible to claim that *My Survival as An Aboriginal*, released in 1978, stands as a precursor to the use of autobiographical narratives as a means of exploring racial and class alterity in global documentary film culture at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s.

My life as I live it (1993): an autobiographical portrait of the past, present, and future of a people

The last verse of *My Survival as an Aboriginal*'s theme song – 'And we will never move', which also corresponds to the last phrase we hear in the film – establishes itself as a presage to its 1993 sequel, *My life as I live it*. In this second film, the main issues raised and exposed by Coffey in the 1978 film are resumed, having as an implicit axis the resistance of her people through time. As much as in *My Survival as an Aboriginal*, Coffey's personal perspective and her own life are at the epicenter of the narrative of the film. What its sequel brings anew is the implication of a collective past of resistance and struggle – which temporally separates the releases of the films – that becomes concrete in a 'present tense', in the face of Coffey's *persona* and her activities in this new situation.

While we are reintroduced to the Coffey 'of the present', to members of her community, to her acquaintances, friends and family members, the sociopolitical and institutional developments of her people and community are put into debate – and as in the first film, this debate carries a strong notion of race and class alterity. Through the narrative developed by Coffey, we enter the meandering of a biographical and non-official (non-white) history, marked and figured by the life and the personal experience of someone who represents collective and institutionally her people. Once again, Coffey's self and the collective voice which she emanates, crossed by meditations about segregation and race-class struggles, are inter- twined in an unavoidable way.

Even though the narrative of *My Life as I live it* is founded in a present tense, pointed towards the social, political and personal trajectories of the people portrayed (as Coffey herself), this film again implicates on a future yet to come. The outcome of this future is projected from the hereditary and social legacy established by Coffey. Although the film draws on perspectives about the past, the present and the future of its characters, it also marks, narratively, the closure of a personal and political cycle of the filmmaker-protagonist. Coffey's sons and daughters, her grandchildren and the other people she's acquainted with, previously marked by white domination and education, are reintroduced as autonomous beings and as survivors of the 'white brainwashing' addressed in the earlier film. These are members of her community, provided with Aboriginal cultural heritage, conscious of their right to live as they please ('self-determined' individuals) and aware of the duty to keep on struggling for themselves and their people. As an outcome of both films, Coffey points, in her filmic-autobiographical narrative, to the fulfillment of a cycle as a woman, as a mother and as an activist.

The film's present tense is constructed by synchronous image-sound recordings usually also accompanied by Coffey's voiceover. By filming people and places that had been introduced to us in her earlier work, the main thematic subject of *My life as I live it* is the process of securing Coffey's nomination – as well as the nomination of other members of the community – before the deadline for the local shire elections. Even though the film is not configured with a *crisis structure* in the manner defined by Mamber (1974), tones of a dramatic structure are introduced to the narrative in its first minutes by Coffey's own voice: 'Today is the closing day for nominations. We have got to put our money and forms in by five o'clock'. During the unfolding of this narrative, other elements are incorporated, such as archive material accompanied by Coffey's narration, interviews and conversations with members of the community which were present in the earlier film, as well as

other recordings in direct/*vérité* style that bring knowledge about the passing of time in the community.

By the end of the film, the accomplishment of the nomination concludes the dramatic tension of its 'present tense' whilst prefiguring future outcomes, as the final on-screen text points out: 'The A-Team got Dallas Skuthorpe [who is present in *My Survival as an Aboriginal* still as a child] and Steve Gordon elected to Brewarrina Shire Council. This is only the start of us being involved in Local Government'. As Coffey explains throughout the film, 'Some things have changed and some haven't'. Racism and prejudice, according to Coffey, still exist. The insertion of community members into the Local Government points toward issues that remain present, while still demonstrating advancements in socio- political action since the 1978 film. This action had in its center the Aboriginal Legal Service, an institution which watched over the legal rights of its people. During the temporal span which separates the films, the Community Development Employment Project (CDEP), as explains Coffey in the film, had also started playing a pivotal role for the social advancements of the community:

> Self determination is the Aboriginal peoples of today making their own decision and managing their own affairs. We never, ever been given the chance; because they been controlled by management here on mission stations. They've been managed. They've been told what to do and when to do it. But now, people are making their own decisions because they are the grass roots people. […] We are starting to be recognised here in Brewarrina though it's taken a long time. The attitude have changed. The progress of the Aboriginal people have changed and it changed for the better. They are independent people now and they believe in self-esteem, self management and the only way they can do that is through CDEP.

Among the problems reported by Coffey in her first film, two of them are updated in an accentuated and personal manner. The first one concerns the abuse of alcohol and the other, the imprisonment of the Aboriginal population. These two issues are addressed by Coffey, in both of her films, as a means of control and sanctioned murder, as she herself explains in *My Survival as an Aboriginal*:

> They're very depressed and frustrated. The white man forcing them to live in a whiteman's world. They want to live like they always lived, and they can't. The white man is poisoning them all the time. They don't have to shoot em down. They just killing them by alcoholic, grog and the jails.

In that same sense, Coffey also addresses the issue, narrating over footage taken out of the first film:

> My people were so depressed and frustrated. That's why they got to the pub drinking and fighting, brawling in the street, because they have nothing else to do. […] And they end up in the white man gaol. Now my people are starting to wake up to theirself and look

around them and see what happening.

The issue of alcoholism is updated in a very personal way through Essie's daughter and grandson's testimony about their struggle. Matters of incarceration and deaths in custody of Aboriginal people are updated through the contextualization of the death of Coffey's cousin (Priscilla Boney) son, Lloyd Boney. In one of the passages of the film, we watch Priscilla Boney visiting her son Lloyd's grave. She talks about how his death – which occurred five years earlier (1987) while he was incarcerated – still brings a profound sadness to the family and to the community. In that sequence, Dallas, who would win the local shire elections and who was also in prison in the night of Lloyd's death, reports his own version of the episode declaring the unfeasibility of the story told by the police, in which Lloyd was deemed to have committed suicide. After this sequence, the film shows us footage from *My Survival as an Aboriginal* around the relations between Aboriginal individuals and the police, followed by another scene representing the kind of advancement which took place during the span of both films. This sequence evidences the presence of police-community liaisons, intended to provide a fairer treatment in the relationship between both groups.

The description of these episodes in both *My Survival as an Aboriginal* and *My Life as I live it* are important for their demonstration of how a two-piece autobiographical narrative, separated by the temporal span of fifteen years, engenders a strong enunciative position for the production of knowledge around the Aboriginal situation in specific circumstances. Coffey's endeavor reveals an ability of autobiographical documentaries for the extrapolation of the 'personal' towards the addressing of matters regarding collectivity, in this case, of the Aboriginal people – a group in which the filmmaker is also embedded and the protection of which plays the most important role in her life. The temporal closure accomplished by the end of *My Life as I live it* reveals the particularity of Coffey's work as a filmmaker. Coffey's words in the end of the film reveal how her work engenders the past, the present and the future of a people and the struggle for their survival – literally, culturally and institutionally:

> The childrens of yesterday are now the childrens of the future, the future generation of our time, cause they are in the position to fight for their people. Because I seen what happened to my people. They been talked down to and put away. They been living in the conditions they had to live in. Now, it's starting to turn back on them. We don't have to have a spear and a boomerang to fight 'em with, no way in the world, we don't have to fire one shot. All we need is a pen and paper and a strong voice and a powerful voice to fight with.

Conclusion

In order to historically and theoretically understand Coffey's films, her work has been presented here within the global context of the emergence of autobiographical documentary film. A brief overview of the personal/autobiographical documentary in some countries of the Southern Hemisphere has been provided, in order to disseminate an autobiographical production still less known in comparison to those championed in the North American and European literature.

Considering *My Survival as an Aboriginal* an important example of the developments regarding 1970s documentary film production, the intention here has been to identify the ways through which Coffey's work could relate to new documentary perspectives and pre- occupations taking place in different countries. First, her film shares stylistic and meth- odological aspects – such as reflexivity and participation – which can be observed in the autobiographical film production derived from Direct Cinema, while also presenting connections with the political concerns of women/feminist filmmaking from the same period.

In addition, Coffey's films could also be seen as presenting pioneering characteristics which would define later global documentary work. In this sense, we emphasize how *My Survival as an Aboriginal* shows a usage of a personal/autobiographical narrative for the addressing of matters of class and race alterity. Released in 1978, Coffey's film can be understood as a predecessor of this type of documentary epistemology, which would be more meaningfully and prominently addressed only toward the end of the 1980s.

We have shown how the sequel *My Live as I Live It* updates issues presented by Coffey in the first film, and how it addresses how the Aboriginal struggle and resistance evolved in the span between the two films. Watching both films it is possible to claim that Coffey completes a narrative about herself and her people, as she is telling a history both of her individual existence – as a social leader, woman, and mother – and of her people, by portraying situations that point to a collective and public approach.

Our effort here is to properly situate Coffey within the history of documentary film – from Australia, the Southern Hemisphere and the world. Coffey's *ouevre* remains largely unknown within global documentary film culture and literature and we hope this article serves to further disseminate her cinematic legacy.

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Notes on contributors

Renan Paiva Chaves is a researcher supported by São Paulo Research Foundation, a member of the Research Center for Documentary Film and of the Research Group in Music and Sound Design Applied to Dramaturgy and Audiovisual at Unicamp. He was visiting researcher at Monash University (2017–2018) and at Indiana University (2019) and is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Cinema at University of Campinas.

*Gabriel Kito*fi *Tonelo* is a researcher supported by the São Paulo Research Foundation. He currently works as a Post-Doc for the Department of Cinema, Radio and Television at the University of São Paulo. He holds a Ph.D. degree in Film Studies from the University of Campinas (2017) and was visiting researcher at the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard University (2015–2016). Member of the Research Center for Documentary Film at Unicamp.

Deane Martin Williams is Associate Professor in Film and Screen Studies, Monash University, Australia. He was Editor of *Studies in Documentary Film* 2007–2016 and author of *The Cinema*

of Sean Penn: In and Out of Place (2015), editor (with Zoë Druick) of *The Grierson Effect* (2014), and editor (with Noel King and Con Verevis) of *Australian Film Theory and Criticism* (3 vols.) (2013–2016). His new collection, edited with Julia Vassilieva, is entitled *Beyond the Essay Film: Subjectivity, Textuality, Technology*.

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