

Reframing Women: Gender and Film in Aotearoa New Zealand 1999–2014

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Abstract

When my book *Reframing Women: A history of New Zealand cinema* (Harper Collins) was published in 2000 New Zealand women's film was flourishing. There had been an explosion of filmmaking following the upsurge of twentieth century feminism in the 1970s beginning with the international women's year film *Some of My Best Friends are Women* (1975) and the subsequent production of nine feminist documentary films. The energy generated by these films and the international feminist history projects that uncovered the formerly invisible contribution of women across every sphere of creative was contagious. There was a feeling of optimism that anything was possible. Women were using the camera to focus the lens on themselves and their issues. Between 1980 and 1990 dramas and features dealing with gender issues increased dramatically while the formerly marginalised were gaining access to the technology to explore sexuality and identity politics. There were powerful films about identity by Maori, Pacific, Asian, Yugoslavian, Greek ... and increasing experimentation with film form.

Since 2000 women have lost ground and film production and experimentation has declined, knocked back by the backlash against feminism, by recession and fiscal cutbacks caused by the global financial meltdown of 2008–9 and a change in political parties to a conservative, misogynist, right wing, capitalist government. I propose to investigate the situation and the changes in the film climate with reference to the global situation through a series of interviews with key creatives: leading feminist film director Gaylene Preston, academic documentary film director Annie Goldson, feature film directors Christine Jeffs (*Rain* and *Sylvia* about Sylvia Plath) and Fiona Samuel (*Bliss* about the life of Katherine Mansfield), the Greek feminist academic film director Athina Tsoulis, Maori screenwriter Riwia Brown (*Once Were Warriors*), Samoan director Justine Simeu-Barton, Indian academic Schuchi Kotari and the cinematographer Mairi Gunn, along with a younger feminist director Brita McVeigh.

The paper will compare my historical findings in *reframing women* with the current situation in a blend of history, current opinion and analysis and reflection.

This enquiry begins where my book *Reframing Women: A History of New Zealand Film* (2000) left off. It explores a 15-year period from 1999, when women's film in Aotearoa appeared to be flourishing, fuelled by the energy and momentum of the 1970s women's liberation movement

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which had inspired a stream of provocative political documentaries ‘by women, about women and for women’, and by the surge in dramas, shorts, experimental and feature films in the 1980s and 1990s that produced more complex female characters and pushed at the boundaries, unpicking inequities in society, exploring taboo subjects, investigating sexuality, dreams and revenge fantasies. At that time Maori women’s film had emerged as a vibrant and powerful voice, with origins in the 1950s, when the culture was outrageously racist. Against this tide, pioneer Ramai Hayward had begun filming her people. In 1988 *Merata Mita* was the first Maori woman to direct a feature, *Mauri* (1988): by, about and for Maori, with a Maori kuia as the central figure played by a famous lands right activist, Eva Rickard. And women were beginning to cause ripples in the international arena. In 1994 Jane Campion won the Palme d’or for *The Piano* (1993), her brilliant and audacious historical drama set on a wild North Island coast. This film paved the way for younger New Zealand filmmakers to follow.¹

On completion of *Reframing Women*, I established a career as a biographer and teacher of memoir. Over the following fifteen years I continued viewing women’s cinema in Aotearoa, but did not analyse developments. And so it is from this position that I am re-entering the subject, aiming to examine the continuities and disruptions, the transformations and new directions and to discover whether the filmmaking remains in good health.

My answers are based on film viewing and primary participant-based research. I went directly to the key filmmakers with my questions. I wanted to know whether it is any easier for women to make films today and whether the arrival of the newer, more affordable, lighter to carry digital cameras and editing technologies had stimulated activity. I wondered about the influence of academic film schools and greater access to training opportunities. I invited their views on the breakdown of gender ratios on production statistics. I was curious about the subject matter and whether any new trends were emerging. I wanted to discover how motherhood impacts upon a filmography and how women negotiate their many gendered roles in the era of the Internet. I asked about funding challenges, disappointments and shelved projects. I was curious, now that feminism no longer legitimately fuels and inspires the projects (because we are *supposed* to be emancipated), where the filmmaking derives its energy and radicalism. I asked about film and social responsibility and how non-indigenous women engage with Maori. I interrogated identity politics and the plurality of identities. I asked finally about the satisfactions of the filmmaking life and how to nurture resilience.

I cannot claim that this coverage is definitive or representative. Rather it provides a particular and partial snapshot of the subject, one that is framed by my own subjectivities and access to information over a short, intensive research timeframe. Sometimes a figure is missed because she was in the middle of a film shoot, or overseas filming – or perhaps my email never reached her. The essay also reflects my diffidence, because of previous and legitimate theoretical challenges from Maori concerning my position as a Pakeha² researcher representing the stories of Maori. Sadly for this essay, the Maori women declined to answer my questions. Instead I have explored how non-indigenous filmmakers negotiate the territory and have indicated some positive projects and solutions.

There has been a revolution in women’s lives, but – is it any easier for women to make films today? This question provoked an ambivalent response suggesting that it is both easier, because of the development of academic film schools, training facilities, and the availability of cheaper and more accessible technologies, but also harder because more people are competing for a shrinking pool of funding. The decline in funding for local films from the state broadcaster has hit documentary makers hard along with shifts in emphasis at the New Zealand Film Commission (NZFC) that are less supportive of women-centred projects. Recently the NZFC, MPI/Dark Sky Films and Timpon Films have financed two schemes: *Make My Movie* and *Make My Horror Movie*. The winner of the first round was *How to Meet Girls From a Distance* (2012) by Dean Hewison, described as a ‘kiwi peeping-tom rom-com’. There is also an emphasis on big budget, international co-productions to try and raise the profile of New Zealand film internationally.

Gaylene Preston is a living legend. She is New Zealand's most prodigious and longstanding film director, with 25 films over 37 years. Since 1985, when she directed *Mr Wrong*, a confronting interrogation of the thriller genre, her work has consistently placed women and their concerns at the centre of the frame. Gaylene is also a political filmmaker with a strong sense of social responsibility. Her films offer a voice to the marginalised, the dispossessed and most silenced in our land. Over her career Gaylene has developed sound working relationships with Maori using a collaborative and respectful methodology.

We are fortunate that Gaylene chose to stay in Aotearoa and make films that are rooted in this country about the people and issues that she feels passionate about. This illustrates the possibilities when artists make films that are firmly grounded in personal experience from within the country of origin. From that place the films will transcend national boundaries and have universal resonance.

Filmmaker Andrea Bosshard and her partner Shane Loader make films that are determinedly 'local'. Their feature *Hook, Line and Sinker* (2011) is about authentic working people from their own community in Island Bay, Wellington. It portrays complex personalities caught up in uncontrollable situations and struggling with emotional and financial stresses. Andrea wrote: 'The predominance and idealisation of the Hollywood approach to filmmaking as exemplified by Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* model, is not helpful to a very small country, which has more in common with some of the smaller burgeoning European and Scandinavian film industries. ... It doesn't leave room for a NZ Susanne Bier!'³

The impact of the new digital technologies

Overall the arrival of the cheaper and lighter digital equipment has been liberating, particularly for documentary makers. It offers more freedom to explore subjects of particular interest without the compromises that arise when funding agencies become involved. Being able to edit on computers at home is a huge advance. Mairi Gunn is New Zealand's first woman cinematographer. She now shoots and directs her own films, using the new technologies. She refers to this kind of filming as 'the new embroidery. It allows for the expression of diverse views and the introduction of the voices of non-celebrities to counter the saturation of stories about the lives of the rich, beautiful and famous. It is perfect for thoughtful, compassionate but marginalised filmmakers!'⁴

Annie Goldson is an academic and a documentary filmmaker renowned for her compelling investigations into abuses of human rights: *Punitive Damage* (1999) about the civil war in East Timor and the murder of Pakeha-Malaysian activist Kamal Bamadhaj by Indonesian forces; *Brother Number One* (2011) about the imprisonment, torture and genocide of Cambodians by the Khmer Rouge and the death of a New Zealander Kerry Hamil, whose yacht had unwittingly strayed into Kampuchean waters during the atrocities; and *He Toki Huna* (2013) an exposé of New Zealand's involvement in the war in Afghanistan. Annie wrote that the new technologies have made it possible to 'self-make films, in a more artisanal and hands-on way'.⁵

Robyn Paterson's documentary *Finding Mercy* (2012) is about her search for an indigenous Zimbabwean primary school friend, Mercy, whom Robyn had been photographed with alongside President Mugabe, the two of them exploited as poster girls for his political campaign. She reflected that the new equipment has 'made a difference because aspects of the filmmaking that were traditionally male dominated (especially the camerawork due to the physical strength required to carry the heavy equipment) are now more accessible to women'.⁶

Abi King-Jones's documentary *Operation 8*, co-directed with Errol Wright, was filmed over four years and continues in the tradition of *Patu!* a film about the protests against the 1981 Springbok Tour of New Zealand. In *Operation 8* the filmmakers expose the infamous 'anti-terror' police raids on peace activists and Maori and Tuhoe sovereignty activists in sixty homes that took place throughout the North Island on 15 October 2007. The scenes of police in riot gear with batons

breaking windows, forcing entry into homes and frightening small children while helicopters circle are sickeningly reminiscent of what happened during the Springbok rugby tour, a dark and ugly time in New Zealand history.

Abi King-Jones says the digital technology allows them to make independent documentaries on politically sensitive topics that will never attract funding support:

Digital video allows a one or two-person crew to film observationally in a way that is efficient and unobtrusive. Being able to edit on a desktop computer means we can shape hundreds of hours of footage into a feature narrative ourselves, in our own spaces.⁷

Obstacles remain though for wide ranging distribution. Shirley Horrocks has established a reputation for high quality, in-depth, portrait-of-the-artist documentaries of poets and thinkers. *Marti* (2004) is about the life and work of the brilliant and complex photographer Marti Friedlander; *He Wawata Whaea: Dreams of an Elder* (2009) is about Merimeri Penfold, a Maori educator and translator who helped spread te reo, the Maori language, and tikanga, Maori culture, into Pakeha culture. Yet since the 1990s, now regarded as an era of possibility offered by more lavish budgets within the major funding agencies – NZFC, NZ on Air, Creative New Zealand and local television programming – the sources of funding have dwindled although the emergence of Maori TV broadcaster as a forward thinking, proactive supporter of independent film is a wonderful development. Shirley writes:

The arrival of relatively cheap digital cameras has been great for beginners and those with their own funds, but it is a terrible period for those who have previously made a living out of documentary making. The Internet offers new possibilities for distribution, but few opportunities to create revenue. It is also frustrating for those who want to make films with good production values since adequate budgets are no longer available.⁸

Along with the new digital technologies, the Internet has now become a major force in people's lives. The filmmakers viewed it as a double-edged sword, however: wonderful for research and distribution but also generating a seemingly unstoppable and voracious appetite for new material and audience engagement. Robyn Paterson wrote: 'The development of self-distribution and crowdfunding models place more pressure on filmmakers to be involved in all forms of social media, selling themselves and their projects, alongside making the work. I appreciate the new independence but personally find it distracting and exhausting and increasingly difficult to balance family time and work with the need to be constantly "live" online.'⁹

Sometimes a filmmaker subverts the medium to her own advantage. Roseanne Liang makes films about her own life. Her films are deeply personal, raw, quizzical and funny. They are intelligent films made with a light touch. Her documentary *Banana in a Nutshell* (2005), an exploration of traditional Chinese opposition to mixed marriage, charts her own love for a Pakeha man and her struggle to gain parental consent for the marriage. She followed up with an equally successful feature film on the same topic, *My Wedding and Other Secrets*. Then she filmed a comedy series, *Flat 3*, about three female Asian flatmates, in the tradition of Lena Dunham's *Girls*. It was shot as a web-series for \$1,000. She describes the project as 'pure joy. Being our own bosses creatively has been hugely gratifying and having the means of distribution at our fingertips and the video-on-demand possibilities, offered through the internet, are a huge advantage although there remains the problem of how to rise above the sheer weight of content to be visible.'¹⁰

Her second series was also made on a slender budget, but this time with crowdfunding from a 'small but devoted fan base'. And now the third series has attracted agency funding.

Film school

For the younger generation, the rise of film schools has been a positive development, offering the tools to realise aspirations, as women still feel the need to study and gain qualifications in order to embark on a challenging career. They feel this pressure more than men.

Zia Mandviwalla, like Roseanne Liang, went through the film studies department at Auckland University. Both filmmakers have acknowledged the support from women academics in particular. Zia is Zoroastrian Indian and immigrated to New Zealand with her family as a teenager. She says at university she felt particularly supported by Indian scriptwriter Shuchi Kothari. After film school, Zia was fortunate to connect with producer Annalise Yarrell, who introduced her to cinematographer Ginny Lone. The film that resulted was *Eating Sausage* (2004), about a migrant Korean woman, entrapped and lonely in her home, watching the world pass by from behind sheer curtains, until she is invited to swimming classes. This film signalled Zia's strong talent. Her films are beautifully shot and composed, with potent visuals. Scripts are spare and simple, allowing for a slow consciousness-raising process whereby the viewer ends up caring about the fate of a new migrant and her gradual empowerment.

Zia's filmography also reveals her commitment to exploring the migrant's experience of dislocation on film. For *Eating Sausage* she drew on her experiences teaching English as a second language to mature Korean students. For her second film *Amadi* (2010), about a Rwandan refugee escaping a desperate situation in his home country and hoping to gain refugee status in order to bring his family out, she did volunteer work for refugee services. Her film *Night Shift* involved hours of research with people in the cleaning department at Auckland International Airport.

Following film school, women filmmakers continue to need support. That is where individual older mentors play a role. Michelle Savill was mentored by Gaylene Preston, who was the executive producer on two of Michelle's short films, *Elaine Rides Again* (2011) and *Ellen is Leaving* (2013). She says Gaylene helped 'in every way possible with her wisdom, contacts and letting me use her edit suite free of charge. I don't think anyone finds it easy after film school ...'¹¹

Abi King-Jones had this to say about Gaylene Preston: 'One of my personal heroines is Gaylene Preston, who I am lucky to count as a colleague and mentor – what a treasure we have in her! Passionate and generous in her work – vocal and fearless in expressing dissent.'¹²

Statistics and sexism in the industry

A breakdown of gender ratios for film production during the period 1999–2014 indicates that women tend to dominate the documentary genre, with up to 70% of the directors and writers being female. They are less active in short films, alarmingly under-represented in feature films and there have been no features directed by Maori women since Merata Mita's *Mauri* although Maori writer and playwright Briar Grace Smith has written two feature screenplays – *The Strength of Water* (2009), directed by Armagan Ballantyne about a Maori family caught up in a tragedy, and *Fresh Meat* (2012), a comedy directed by Danny Mulheron.¹³ There are, however, encouraging signs of change in the air as a result of directing opportunities offered through Maori TV and the NZFC (New Zealand Film Commission). The NZFC programme He Ara Māori and Pasifika Pathways has been set up primarily for feature film production. This programme is headed by Whetu Fala, herself a director and producer of television drama, documentary and short film.¹⁴ Hopefully a feature may emerge from one of the following directors.

Tuhoe filmmaker Kararaina Rangihau signalled her talent with the short *Taku Rakau e* (2010), about an ancestor who had written a waiata, still sung today, expressing her grief over the loss of land, language and people in the 1850s military raids on Maori. She has another short film in

postproduction with producer Hineani Melbourne: *Ukaipo Whenua*, set around Lake Waikaremoana where she lives.

Rachel House (Ngai Tahu, Ngati Mutunga) is one of New Zealand's most outstanding actors. She is also a theatre director and trained at the Prague Film School in 2008 where she was awarded best director for her short film *Bravo* and audience choice for her second short *New Skirt*. In 2010, Rachel directed Kylie Meehan's short film *The Winter Boy*; the film was picked up by many international film festivals.

During this period one Samoan filmmaker, Sima Urale, directed *Apron Strings* (2008), a feature written by Shuchi Kothari and Dianne Taylor. Another feature, *My Wedding and other Secrets*, was directed by a Kiwi-born Chinese director, Roseanne Liang.

Commenting on the statistics, Gaylene Preston reflected: 'You can just start shooting a documentary because life is happening all around us. With drama the world in the frame does not exist already and filling the frame demands enterprise and funding.'¹⁵ She pondered whether women, because of social conditioning, feel 'unentitled to the funding and are less comfortable with competitive processes'.¹⁶ For instance, the annual 48-hour film competition offers opportunities to anyone to gather a film crew and actors together and make a film; yet female director participation is low. According to researcher Marian Evans (2008), citing figures from the 2002 competition, women directed only 129 of the 611 entries.

Robyn Paterson says it took ten years working in the industry before she felt confident about making a short film or a feature. 'In contrast, I have watched several male contemporaries dive straight in at a relatively young and inexperienced stage. There is a gender difference when it comes to the confidence and brashness required, which likely stems from wider societal structures and conditioning.'¹⁷

When I was writing *Reframing Women* I uncovered the ugly side of sexism in the industry. Gaylene Preston recalled male crew turning their backs on her camera when filming the documentary *Making Utu* (1983). Cinematographer Mairi Gunn remembered pornography being circulated on a 1980s film set and finding a topless poster girl stuck on the tailgate of her truck. 'If I hadn't been a feminist this would have derailed any attempts to forge a career.'¹⁸

Today the situation has improved and there is more respect amongst the male dominated 35mm crews; yet, it is still a man's world. Robyn Paterson commented:

While film production offices have an over-representation of women (generally in lower paid admin roles), on set the film crews are heavily male dominated and the experience is often akin to working on a construction site in terms of the culture. In this environment there are definitely barriers to women putting themselves at the helm in the role of director.¹⁹

It seems women are still more comfortable with producing, a role that tends to sit better with traditional, socially ascribed gender roles whereas directing demands a different mindset:

I think what largely hampers us is lack of confidence and self-doubt which can stem from popular representations of male brilliance. The film world idolises genius and hotshot directors, terms more commonly attributed to and represented by men. While women are equally talented their achievements are often perceived and treated differently which decreases the likelihood of them pursuing a long-term career in film.²⁰

Gaylene Preston believes prejudice is still rife in the industry and gave an example of her own experience with a female producer. 'A female producer walking into a funding body backing a "talented male" inspires confidence for some reason, but a woman walking in with another woman can inspire doubt. Pure sexism wouldn't you say?'²¹

Leanne Pooley is a documentary maker especially noted for her portrait of the artist films. *Haunting Douglas* (2003), about a brilliant, creative genius, the dancer and choreographer Douglas Wright, contains a close-up portrait of the struggle and pain of the artist's life. *Topp Twins – The Untouchable Girls* (2009) offers an intimate and affectionate glimpse into the lives of lesbian singing and comedy legends Jules and Linda Topp. Her documentary also reads like a social history of feminism, the gay rights campaigns and the Maori land protest movement. Leanne says her film was subtly working on the conservative worldview using music and laughter to convey the message. She talked of her delight when the film was a hit in places like Korea and Nashville, Tennessee. Speaking about a more recent experience in 2013, directing a film about mountaineer Sir Edmund Hillary, Leanne Pooley remarked: 'My crew in *Beyond the Edge* was male dominated. I think, as a woman you are fighting your own corner by simply standing up. You just have to stay standing.'²²

Subject matter

At the outset of my investigation, I wondered whether twenty-first-century preoccupations would be the same as in the latter part of the twentieth century or whether there would be new directions. Now that feminism is no longer a legitimate topic, at least overtly, and no longer a driving energy behind the work, what might be the new passions and radical content? Surveying all the genres I discovered a consistency in subject matter and a growing confidence in the way material is handled. I found evidence of a strong social conscience and sense of responsibility permeating the filmmaking. Again women filmmakers appear impelled to shine a light on social injustices and human rights issues and to bear witness. They cover protest movements and peace issues; they expose marginalisation, racism and sexism, both overt and covert, using film as a vehicle for consciousness-raising. Abi King-Jones explores contentious simmering issues that divide the nation:

The backlash against feminism is probably symptomatic of the wider de-politicisation that has occurred in our society in recent decades. The current milieu fosters trivialisation of subject matter... My work traces conflict more along lines of race and class than gender, but the feminist voice is there in the many strong women that are featured in our films. The work is rebellious because it destabilises the status quo. Confronting colonisation/racism, inequality and state aggression makes for radical content.²³

Perhaps the biggest differences were in the approach and outreach. Women's film today is occurring in a global context. These women travel to international film festivals, they follow current filmmaking and filmmakers through the Internet and they are working on cross-cultural subject matter and engagement. These factors have helped shrink the sense of isolation that exists in a far-flung country in the south Pacific. In addition, many of the new filmmakers are film literate as a result of university film study, and their work references both contemporary and historical international film.

The subject matter today is both subtler and more complex. There is a reassuring wealth of strong and idiosyncratic female characters but as well we are beginning to see the emergence of more three-dimensional male characters, men who share some of the same emotional struggles and vulnerabilities.

Perfect Strangers (2003) was shot on the wild west coast of the South Island where big seas wash and roar and pulverise the pebbles. Once again Gaylene Preston subverted the conventional thriller plot, whereby the female is no longer the victim of her terroriser; only, this time her anti-heroine has a more nuanced and contradictory personality. Melanie (Rachel Blake) is passionate, sexually inquisitive, independent and vulnerable. With considerable effort and pluckiness she manages to mortally wound her terroriser, played by Sam Neill, and then sleeps with his inert body

whilst figuring out what to do with it. You know when a filmmaker has disrupted conventional, misogynistic cinematic codes, by the reaction of the men. David Stratton in *Variety* described *Perfect Strangers* as ‘unclassifiable’.

Hook, Line and Sinker (2011) explores the grief of truck driver PJ (Rangimoana Taylor), a stoic kiwi male struggling with the onset of macular degeneration. In the film his terror is portrayed through emotionally charged scenes and symbolism. In despair he rides his boat, unseeing out through big swells on Cook Strait. As the boat pitches and rolls the viewer shares his fear and confusion. There are no New Zealand precedents for PJ. He is reminiscent of Jorgen (Rolf Lassgård) in Susanne Bier’s *After the Wedding*. In that film Jorgen is terminally ill and his performance when he expresses his fear of dying to his wife is electrifying. These are real men and they are weeping. They are breaking down. They are also frightening their families. Carmel McGlone’s portrayal of Ronnie, PJ’s wife, is amongst the most complex we have seen on New Zealand cinema. She stands by her man. She is strong, tender, fragile, passionate, endearing to the viewer. These kiwi actors are experienced performers but their remarkable acting displays are also a result of the filmmakers’ adoption of a semi-improvisational technique after Mike Leigh and the Danish Dogme movement.

The arrival of distinctive new voices in cinema is always exciting. Kirstin Marcon’s first feature *The Most Fun You Can Have Dying* (2011), based on the novel *Seraphim Blues* by Steve Gannaway, is original and heart stopping. It follows a young kiwi male (Scott Whelan), diagnosed with terminal cancer, on an erratic, self-destructive journey to Europe. As viewers we are in turn compelled and alarmed watching this beautiful morbidly ill man, suffering without palliative care, in the act of fleeing New Zealand and the cancer treatment, lurching forward drinking and partying and engaging in lots of life-affirming sex. Upon a table in a bar he tells people, ‘I have cancer. If you want to fuck me you can.’ The film was shot on digital camera and uses filters effectively to produce mesmerising, liquid imagery reminiscent of French New Wave cinema.

Both new films with their high emotional registers and raw performances indicate a new stage in women’s cinema.

Very occasionally a special film arrives where all the components – imagery, storytelling, music, research and participatory process – are in harmony, and where the Kaupapa is right, meaning that a philosophy of integrity and respect has been established to enable the work to evolve smoothly. *How Far is Heaven* (2012) by Miriam Smith and Christopher Pryor follows a year in the life of three Pakeha Sisters of Compassion and a small Maori community at Jerusalem (in Maori language, Hiruhama), in a remote part of the Matemateāonga Range, on a bend of the Whanganui River. This river, and the taniwha that lives there, exert a powerful and sacred presence in the lives of the inhabitants, particularly the children. It flows swiftly around a little cluster of buildings on a hillside and a wooden church painted pale gold, with a tall attenuated, slender spire at the centre. The church was established by the French Mother Therese Aubert who arrived here in 1860, with the intention of companioning the Maori community through a process of mutual learning and respect. Her approach was radical during the time of colonisation.

The film took five years to make because the filmmakers used an immersive style of observational filming. For one year they lived at the convent with the sisters. The resulting material provides a spontaneous record of real people and their unfolding daily lives. Miriam says they were accepted very quickly into the community but it took about five months for the camera to become ‘sort of “natural” and accepted’ before people felt comfortable and then ‘they would carry on as usual without even glancing at the camera. Then if they’d had enough they would say “Cut!” or “Stop filming and have a cuppa.”’²⁴

Without a doubt the children are the real stars, with their refreshing honesty, and quirky humour and opinions. A teenager considers the idea of being a nun but promptly rejects it: ‘I don’t think God would have me because I drink and smoke.’ In one scene sister Margaret Mary introduces a series

of aspirational Maori historical figures and sets a task, 'I want you to write about your dream.' She is startled when a child, says, 'I want to kill.' 'Kill?' she asks. 'Yeh, I want to kill a pig', he replies. 'Why?' 'For the kai.' 'So you want to be a good pig hunter so you can eat pig.' Yeh, he smiles.

The documentary style is slow and takes in the four seasons, beginning with autumn and the golden leaves of poplars shifting, falling, fluttering. Then winter and high viewpoints of mist hanging over the charcoal ranges, trailing the river with just the spire of the church poking through. You see the road wet and glistening and hear the sound of a four-wheel drive on the surface. In spring, Sister Margaret Mary is picking daffodils in the orchard on the hill, and arranging them in a glass vase in the kitchen. The film shows people at work, making soup in giant pots in the kitchen, searing the skin of a strung up pig with a blowtorch. Finally, summer and the harvest, and the birds – a rooster crowing, the tuis chonking, a little piwakawaka, with a bright fan for a tail, zooming close to the ground and bouncing up again, as a child chases it. The film ends on the little boy exchanging a shy wink with the camera.

This is a compelling film about a country, Aotearoa, and two peoples, about children and the need to nurture their innate potential, and about the three extraordinary sisters who accompany them. In the film, the sisters quote Mother Aubert who wrote, 'It is in loving that we learn to love.'

The Red House is Alyx Duncan's first film and it too signals the arrival of an emerging talent. The film is classified as a fiction, although it reads like a documentary, about a cross-cultural couple, the filmmaker's parents – her father is Pakeha and his wife is Chinese – and the house they dwell in. Alyx describes the work as a "hybrid," a film that works with real life bending the truth beyond the actual situation within a narrative frame'. She chose this format because 'my parents are very private, humble people ... So my approach was to allow them to be playful and to feel confident in the knowledge that the story was not their own.'²⁵

The main character in this film is the house, the terracotta red house that inhabits an island above a mangrove swamp. The cinematography is intentionally slow and thoughtful, drenching the senses with beautiful imagery. As you watch you can almost feel the house breathing; you smell the sea; you feel the wind that softly lifts the white mosquito net around their bed and the change in temperature that fogs the windowpanes. You can hear snowdrops being picked. Alyx describes her style best:

For me a film is like painting with the senses, blending light, sound and emotion together with collaborators and the audience. The beauty of film is you have to be present in the moment and recognise something special is happening, and at the same time capture that moment and find out how it fits into the bigger picture of life.²⁶

These films indicate a new trend in documentary-making in Aotearoa and it is being led by a younger generation of female film, art and theatre school graduates. *Gardening With Soul* (2013) by Jess Feast is the most recent addition. This is a gentle study of the life of 90-year-old Sister Loyola Galvin and the garden she tends at Our Ladies Home of Compassion in Wellington. Her style is simple and slow, punctuated by the small shifts in the sister's day of gardening and ministering to people. Her camerawork flows around Sister Loyola's gardening through the seasons recording snow on cabbages, sunlight on yellow daisies, bees on seeding flower heads while the soundtrack records Sister Loyola's sage reflections upon spirituality, pastoral care and the cycle of life, death and rebirth reflected in nature. Reflecting on her own great age, Sister Loyola says, 'the garden says life is evolving, the dying off needs to happen for the next stage in life.'

These new films are slow, tender, thoughtful and deeply immersive. They have an appealing simplicity that belies the complex and exacting nature of the work. In each film the participants are endowed with dignity while the slow pacing and pauses are an acknowledgement of the audience and its powers of discernment and ability to reflect.

Motherhood

In 1991, whilst interviewing filmmaker Gaylene Preston for my MA thesis, she was in the midst of nurturing her small daughter Chelsie. She commented that motherhood has a huge bearing on a woman's productivity, 'I don't think you could tell from looking at a man's filmography when the children were born' (Shepard, 1992: 47). Recently she followed up and said: 'There is no doubt that my filmmaking has thrived since my mother died and my daughter left home.'²⁷ That change had just occurred when I interviewed her in 2007 for my book *Her Life's Work: Conversations with Five New Zealand Women* (2009). She had recently adapted rooms in her home for use as a film studio as well and in that year had three films in varying stages of development including her multi-textured dramatic documentary *Home by Christmas* (2010), about her father's experience of the war, which was the companion film to *War Stories* (1995), that featured her mother. In the back room, editor Lala Rolls was ensconced cutting *Lovely Rita: A Painter's Life* (2012) about artist Rita Angus.

The younger mothers agreed with Gaylene's observation and also mentioned additional stresses when the day job (to support the filmmaking) has to fit around school hours. Jess Feast is a mother of two small children:

I really understand what Gaylene is saying because this feels like the biggest challenge to my productivity ... I can't grab all the opportunities just yet because of my dual role as a mother. I accept that for a time, while my children are young this is my reality. I try to see my life, including the role of film making within it, as a whole but it is difficult not to become overwhelmed at times.²⁸

A choppy life – riding success and disappointment

Initially I was uncertain about asking filmmakers whether gaps in the filmography might also indicate failed funding applications. I do understand the time-consuming nature of the enterprise but also I wasn't sure whether questions about disappointments and knocks to self-esteem would be appreciated.

I was wrong about this. Every filmmaker spoke freely of the choppy nature of the film life, the arduous and unpaid nature of their labours and of the hours, days, weeks, years of effort that go into the films. They also wrote of the knocks to self-esteem, when a film fails to attract funding or is declined by festival committees. They described the dreary, bleak days of thinking 'Is my film good enough? Will I ever make a film again?' Even the most successful directors encounter stumbling blocks and disappointment when a film fails to secure international distribution.

When I asked the filmmakers about the qualities you need to be a filmmaker they replied 'perseverance, tenacity, obsessiveness, gritty determination, dog-headedness'. Robin Laing is a senior producer; she has been active since the 1980s, when she formed a crucial partnership with Gaylene Preston that led to many seminal women's films. She is on the board of WIFT – Women in Film and Television – and was president at a critical time for the organisation. She wrote: 'It is a highly speculative business and you have to be prepared to work like a dog while not earning a cent – sometimes for years – and while trying to hold down other work so that you can pay the bills. This is not an industry that is family friendly – it is impossible to have a family life while making a feature (television and documentary is a more family friend route).'²⁹

Along with tenacity these women are good at strategising. Gaylene Preston said: 'Knowing when to walk away or re-mortgage and lose the house is a very personal decision ... Fortunately I treat a "No" as a challenge and play along with the game. I figure that the makeup of the funding committee this year will be different next year.'³⁰

Multiple roles and filmmaking

In my book *Her Life's Work* about five New Zealand women artists, writers and thinkers, I addressed the disruptions and discontinuities and conflicts that permeate a woman's life as a result of gender role expectations and the desire for satisfying meaningful work (Shepard, 2009). I wrote of the challenge and the sacrifice involved in keeping the wheels of society oiled, caring for people in our midst – babies, children, partners, friends, elderly relatives – doing voluntary work, teaching the craft and working in paid employment to pay the bills.

Fiona Samuel is an actor, a scriptwriter and a director. She is best known for two outstanding dramas – *Piece of My Heart* (2009), about the agonies unmarried mothers suffered giving up their babies for adoption before the availability of the contraceptive pill, and *Bliss* (2011) about the formative period in the life of great New Zealand writer Katherine Mansfield. She made the following point about the feminist exhortation to try and have it all:

I have never believed I 'had to do everything' and now more than ever think it's a ludicrous goal. It's just un-do-able. I agree with Caitlin Moran who said step back and ask yourself 'Are the men worrying about this?' If not, why not? They have children and relatives too, they live in multiple challenging contexts too ... The single massive difference is that they don't seem to feel this ridiculous guilt and pressure to 'do it all' and 'be it all' and 'have it all' and 'take care of all' and neither should we. Just reject it!³¹

Annie Goldson, considering the superwoman question, reflected that her day job as an academic supports her filmmaking; luckily, the university recognises her filmmaking as research output. This enables her to write reflectively on her work. She added that her work process has evolved to fit her situation. These days she transports current film projects on a portable memory device, to university and overseas: 'This is a lifestyle skill I have developed. I'm constantly interrupted but I've learned to re-focus because I have to.'³²

Cinematographer Mairi Gunn offers this wisdom: 'The challenge for us all is to give up the ideal of the illusive work/life balance, in order to create a *single, integrated life, that can include parenting, travelling, breathing, earning, gardening, art and film making*. This was never resolved during the feminist years.'³³

Engagement with Maori, the *tangata whenua*

The question most critical for me, given my failure to involve Maori filmmakers, was how non-indigenous filmmakers negotiate their position. Many of us are descendants of the colonisers. How do we negotiate a legacy of post-colonial guilt and redress the wrongs of the past? And how might we legitimately embrace the values of tikanga Maori (Maori culture) in our work practices? The range of responses offers hopeful solutions.

I discovered that women of other ethnicities are more comfortable about engagement because they don't share the post-colonial guilt; as migrants, who have been on the receiving end of racism, there is common ground. Roseanne Liang is Chinese and was born here. She replied: 'Having been born here, Maori culture is simply part of being Kiwi.' But she also admitted, 'Maori culture hasn't been foregrounded in my work because, for better or worse, I don't feel culturally qualified to address Maori stories. However I have Maori colleagues, use a little Maori language through the local vernacular, feel a kinship with Maori culture and family and those essences of Maori-ness, I feel come through in my work as much as my New Zealand-ness.'³⁴

Dana Rotberg is a filmmaker from Mexico who was attracted to New Zealand on seeing Niki Caro's feature *Whale Rider* (2002), a film inspired by Witi Ihimaera's short story about a Maori

coastal community and a 12-year-old girl, Kahu, who challenges her grandfather for the traditional male role of leader of the iwi (the tribe).

Dana based *White Lies/Tuariki Huna* (2013) on a novella by Witi Ihimaera, *Medicine Woman*. Three strong women – Maraea, Maori mother of Rebecca Vickers, Rebecca herself, and medicine woman Paraiti – dominate the screen in this extraordinary film. The pace is slow, allowing the film to deftly explore questions of identity, and the painful effects of colonisation. The narrative pivots around Rebecca's pregnancy. Rebecca is married to a wealthy Pakeha; her mother Maraea is the maid in her daughter's house. Maraea has been bleaching her daughter Rebecca's skin daily since childhood to ensure her survival in a white man's world. Because the newborn will reveal Rebecca's identity, Maraea approaches Paraiti for assistance with an abortion. Paraiti is conceived like an archetypal Mexican goddess – visually her body is wide and forms a triangle when she crouches. She is also strong, sage, comfortable in her identity and determined the baby will survive. Whirimako Black's performance is mesmerising as is Rachel House's rendition of Maraea – tight lipped, terrified, struggling with her conflict over destroying the foetus to ensure her daughter's survival. The birthing scenes, on clay under the house, of Rebecca in labour are riveting in their realism and also the longest in the history of cinema.

To make her film, Dana formed close working relationships with Maori advisors.³⁵ Their input was integral to the scriptwriting and production process:

Kararina was there all the way from beginning to end. Every word was approved ... the translation word-by-word was done in the marae ... Once the script was finalized and accepted and, in many places, changed by the three cultural advisors and the community, only then did I go ahead. (Evans, 2013)

Film editor and director Lala Rolls is Pakeha. She grew up in Fiji, emigrating to Aotearoa in 1981 at seventeen. One of her most compelling documentaries, *Tuwhare* (2005), is about Maori poet Hone Tuwhare at the very end of his life. She journeyed to his home near the sea at Kaka Point, and with cinematographer David Yates she filmed Tuwhare reading in a thin, reedy voice over footage of wild surf, kelp movement in rock pools, light on water, the simple cottage and the burnished golden face of the poet. The soundtrack also featured Tuwhare's poems set to music by New Zealand musicians.³⁶

Lala remembers 'being horrified by the lack of visibility of Maori lives in Dunedin and the way the media, to this day, portrays Pacific places and people, although it is improving. This fuels my work and my aim to reflect real Pacific and Maori lives on screen. I am Pakeha but I am of the Pacific in my heart and soul.'³⁷

Cinematographer Mairi Gunn is Pakeha but her ancestors, the Gunn clan in Scotland, were dispossessed during the Highland Clearances. When she shot and produced *Restoring the Mauri of Lake Omapere* (2007), she was introduced to a Maori community in the far north and experienced this contact as a life-changing experience. She found a deep affinity with Maori philosophical, ethical and human values.

I discovered a world where humans were prioritised over money and where spiritual concerns are foregrounded. I so enjoy the focus on caring for others, feeding and housing people, praying and singing.³⁸

There were challenges too. 'This film put me in the place where Maori and Pakeha meet. This can be jubilant or uncomfortable. Nonetheless, this is where I am now forever.'³⁹

Miriam Smith, writing about her engagement with the Maori community while filming *How Far is Heaven*, reflected that she and her partner were 'conscious of working within a Maori worldview. That said the Sisters of Compassion were pakeha and the film's focus was on exploring their unique and complex longstanding relationship with the Jerusalem community in the present

day.⁴⁰ She saw parallels between their situation and that of Sister Margaret Mary, who was a recent arrival, and so, like us, ‘doing a lot of learning about living within a Maori community’.

Documentary maker Abi King-Jones saw her position in these terms:

I am Pakeha and Aotearoa is where I live. The films I have made with Errol Wright have been an exploration of Maori-Pakeha relations because we live within a colonising society and that is where a defining power imbalance lies. The question of cross-cultural representation is inherently problematic and so we seek not to tell Maori stories, but to engage in a dialogue that brings an indigenous perspective to the fore. Our audiences are predominantly Pakeha, so it could be said that our films speak back to our own, dominant culture – and hopefully shifts it.⁴¹

These responses show that engagement between the cultures is in a process of active evolution. The way to reach across the divide is through taking responsibility for our own education in Te Ao Maori and through consultation and dialogue with Maori, treading always with care and sensitivity.

Identity politics

In her article ‘A conversation with filmmaker Sima Urale’, published in *Pacific News from Mānoa* (2012), filmmaker Sima Urale said she didn’t want to be identified solely as a Samoan woman filmmaker who makes films about Samoan or Pacific Island subjects. She added that she enjoys a plurality of roles and is steeped in ‘western’ modes of film storytelling and visual imagery. Sima has directed some of the richest and most compelling investigations of Pacific island experience. *Velvet Dreams* (1997) interrogates the construction of the south sea ‘dusky maiden’ and short drama; *O Tamaiti* (1999) is about the little children who care for one other while their parents are working day and night shifts in the new country to put food on the table. But Sima doesn’t restrict her storytelling to Samoan subject matter. Her filmography also includes *Still Life* (2001), about a Pakeha couple, *Coffee and Allah* (2007) about a Muslim Ethiopian woman, and *Apron Strings* (2008) about mother-son relationships, one Indian and one Pakeha. Sima commented that making a film back home ‘personally is probably the touchiest hardest thing for me to do – hardest for me because I left Samoa when I was little’.⁴² She thought that going back and trying to recapture something that is no longer her experience ‘won’t be very truthful’. These statements shed light on the complexity of the political terrain.

Jess Feast is Ngati Raukawa but was not raised in Maori culture. Her situation reflects a wider cultural phenomenon whereby a generation of Maori became disconnected from their whanau and iwi through colonisation and shifts from rural communities to the city for work. She sees her Maori identity as a small part of her plural identities but perhaps a deepening one:

I feel I come to Maori stories as an outsider. However filmmaking is also a door through which I can learn more about Maori personally, politically, spiritually. I think this aspect of being from Aotearoa is essential to explore.⁴³

Zia Mandviwalla describes herself as ‘a chameleon. I was born in India. I am an Indian Zoroastrian and grew up in the Middle East. I went to British schools in Dubai. I immigrated to New Zealand with my family as a child and have a New Zealand accent’.⁴⁴ She feels this gives her an advantage. ‘I feel privileged to be from nowhere and to be able to “chameleonise” into different situations. I work in an office with a lot of Maori and I don’t feel daunted at the prospect of telling a Maori story because I have represented a Korean couple, a Rwandan refugee, a Samoan cleaner in my three films and I know I would do my homework both in terms of learning the cultural understanding of a situation and importantly to get to the heart of the emotional core of the situation.’⁴⁵

Film and social responsibility

In her still relevant book *When Women Call the Shots: The Developing Power and Influence of Women in Television and Film* (1996), Linda Segar discussed the enormous influence of the film medium and its potential to cause harm to vulnerable viewers when the power is misused. I wanted to know whether the filmmakers feel a social and ethical responsibility toward their subject matter and the participants. Abi King-Jones wrote:

A sense of social responsibility is what motivates our work – more than just informing it. When we enter into communities, especially Maori communities, and trust is established in the sharing of their stories, we have a responsibility to those iwi and whanau. In *Operation 8*, the violence was perpetrated by the state. To confront that violence was empowering for the viewer and the victims alike.⁴⁶

Some filmmakers feel a social responsibility to assist at a grassroots level within the community. Justine Simeai-Barton is Samoan. Her dramas – *Brown Sugar* (1997), *The Trophy* (2007) and *Snow in Paradise* (2012) – champion the experience of feisty young women finding their feet in the world; they also explicate the experience of Samoan migrants in New Zealand, as in *The Overstayer* (1999). On identity, Justine said: “‘A Pacific filmmaker’ doesn’t define who I am. It’s actually a small part of my life.”⁴⁷ She has a feature project in development but also channels her talents into teaching film and media students in New Zealand and in the Pacific. She says: ‘I feel most occupied and grounded when working on media community projects with migrant and refugee communities assisting them to tell their own stories. Sometimes they screen in community halls and schools and sometimes on social media sites. I love being a filmmaker. My work is very personal and about relationships. It involves connecting with people to tell their personal stories, that’s it. I like keeping things simple.’⁴⁸

Satisfaction and resilience

Given the difficulties, the impossible impediments and obstructions, the complex scale of the work and the hugely demanding nature of managing different egos on set, I wondered why women make films. Is it an addiction? According to Annie Goldson, ‘I don’t know what else I would do. I like being creative. I feel better when I’m creating something.’⁴⁹ Then she paused, and added: ‘I am domestic enough but that role has never really held me.’ Fiona Samuel thought that – when all the elements were in sync: the funding in place, the like-minded collaborators accompanying her on the journey, assisting her to achieve her vision – ‘This is some of the best fun there is ... When you feel your work is really yours, not something imposed on you or asked of you but something coming from within you, and that it has met an audience and given them something, then you feel fulfilled and happy.’⁵⁰

Miriam Smith emphasized the value of the relationships formed whilst making *How Far is Heaven*:

We formed strong relationships and some great friendships with the Sisters and community while living there, and consequently these genuine relationships make the film what it is ... The time taken to build these relationships, the hundreds of cups of tea, the endless roams of the village with the kids, was hugely personally rewarding.⁵¹

I had also asked the women how they nurtured resilience. Miriam reflected that a key lesson from the Sisters was about self-care,

The Sisters are really good at this. I learnt from them that self-care is crucial to general wellbeing and therefore to success on all fronts. So for me this means – daily meditation, exercise, a good night’s sleep and at least one day a week of not working. (Sometime when shooting this is not possible – but I do try!) ... Self-care helps me to step back and be more philosophical when dealing with all the stresses and endurance of the filmmaking life.

In conclusion, this survey on gender and film in Aotearoa has produced some exciting results. I was unsure when I began my investigation whether women’s cinema was in good health or decline. I thought that a combination of forces, including the backlash and the erosion of feminist debate as well as the stresses of increasingly complex lives, might have stifled activity. These results attest that women today are as creative, vociferous, strategic and determined as the early feminist filmmakers. As a body, the work adds up. It really does and it occurs to me that if younger women, including my 27-year-old daughter, were to read the filmmakers’ words and learn about their approach to life and work, alongside a viewing of the films, back to back, they would be empowered and inspired. There is cause for celebration.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. Younger filmmakers following Jane into the international arena include Christine Jeffs, author of *Sylvia* (2003, about writer Sylvia Plath) and *Sunshine Cleaning* (2008), Niki Caro with *North Country* (2005), and Alison Maclean who is now based in New York making films including *Jesus’ Son* (1999).
2. Pakeha is a Maori term to designate the ‘white’ or Westerners descending from the original colonizers of the country [Editor’s note].
3. Andrea Bosshard in written communication with D. Shepard, 4 April 2014: 2.
4. Mairi Gunn in written communication with D. Shepard, 29 March 2014: 4.
5. D. Shepard, interview with Annie Goldson, 1 April 2014: 3.
6. Robyn Paterson in written communication with D. Shepard, 27 March 2014: 5.
7. Abi King-Jones in written communication with D. Shepard, 25 March 2014: 5.
8. Shirley Horrocks in written communication with D. Shepard, 16 March 2014: 1.
9. Robyn Paterson in written communication with D. Shepard, 27 March 2014: 8.
10. Roseanne Liang in written communication with D. Shepard, 20 March 2014: 2.
11. Michelle Savill in written communication with D. Shepard, 9 April 2014: 1.
12. Abi King-Jones in written communication with D. Shepard, 25 March 2014: 12.

13. I have based my statistics on a survey of the films documented NZ on Screen website and a survey conducted by Evans (2014).
14. In 2014 the NZFC He Ara initiative offered two funding rounds for a total of \$200,000 inviting individual applications for no more than \$50,000 per round. In some instances, up to \$100,000 would be awarded for 'a truly compelling application with a very strong creative and commercial approach and/or one that includes a large slate of strong projects'.¹⁵ Gaylene Preston in written communication with D. Shepard', 6 April 2014: 6.
16. Ibid.
17. Robyn Paterson in written communication with D. Shepard, 27 March 2014: 6.
18. Mairi Gunn in written communication with D. Shepard, 29 March 2014: 13.
19. Robyn Paterson in written communication with D. Shepard, 27 March 2014: 8.
20. Michelle Savill in written communication with D. Shepard, 9 April 2014 : 1.
21. Gaylene Preston in written communication with D. Shepard, 6 April 2014: 6–7.
22. D. Shepard, interview with Leanne Pooley, 20 March 2014: 2.
23. Abi King-Jones in written communication with D. Shepard, 25 March 2014: 8.
24. Miriam Smith in written communication with D. Shepard, 2 April 2014: 2.
25. Alyx Duncan, in written communication with D. Shepard, 8 April 2014: 1.
26. Ibid.
27. Gaylene Preston in written communication with D. Shepard, 6 April 2014: 8.
28. Jess Feast in written communication with D. Shepard, 26 March 2014.
29. Robin Laing in written communication with D. Shepard, 2 April 2014: 2.
30. Gaylene Preston in written communication with D. Shepard, 6 April 2014: 7.
31. Fiona Samuel in written communication with D. Shepard, 26 March 2014: 8.
32. D. Shepard, interview with Annie Goldson, 1 April 2014: 3.
33. Mairi Gunn in written communication with D. Shepard, 29 March 2014: 1.
34. Roseanne Liang in written communication with D. Shepard, 20 March 2014: 7.
35. The Maori advisors on *White Lies/Tuariki Huna* were Kararaina Rangihau, Tangiora Tawhara and Whitiaua Ropitini.
36. The music was commissioned by Toi Maori Aotearoa and collated by Charlotte Yates for an album of his poetry entitled *Tuwhare: Various Artists* (2003).
37. Lala Rolls in written communication with D. Shepard, 13 April 2014: 9.
38. Mairi Gunn in written communication with D. Shepard, 29 March 2014: 8.
39. Ibid.
40. Miriam Smith in written communication with D. Shepard, 2 April 2014: 8.
41. Abi King-Jones in written communication with D. Shepard, 25 March 2014: 9.
42. 'A conversation with filmmaker Sima Urale', blog.hawaii.edu/cpis/2012/06/02/a-conversation-with-filmmaker-sima-urale/
43. Jess Feast in written communication with D. Shepard, 26 March 2014: 9.
44. D. Shepard, interview with Zia Mandviwalla, 3 April 2014: 12.
45. Ibid: 11–12.
46. Abi King-Jones in written communication with D. Shepard, 25 March 2014: 9.
47. Justine Simei-Barton in written communication with D. Shepard, 1 March 2014: 2.
48. Ibid.
49. D. Shepard, interview with Annie Goldson, 1 April 2014: 6
50. Fiona Samuel in written communication with D. Shepard, 26 March 2014: 8–9.
51. Miriam Smith in written communication with D. Shepard, 2 April 2014: 2.

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