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Shama, an insider looking in: a community-centred collaborative documentary production

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we analyse and reflect on the complex interweaving of documentary strategies and the five levels of performance that we designed in a small-scale community-centred collaborative documentary project entitled *Shama*. Shama Ethnic Women's Trust is one of the first NGOs in New Zealand established and run by ethnic migrant women for ethnic women and their families. Applying a filmmaking-as-research methodology, the project's aim was to respond to the scarcity of screen representation of ethnic NGOs. The purpose was not only to convey information about Shama's activities and services but also to convey a sense of the internal culture of the NGO and its community spirit. The portrayal of minority groups in community production often leads to an outsider-looking-down approach. We felt that providing an insider view was more important than simply conveying the facts efficiently about the organisation. This goal led us to apply a collaborative documentary practice, avoid an expository style, characterised by a single authoritative voice, and opt for a mix of performative and observational strategies, in which multiple voices and modes of address are featured. By shifting modes of address, we explored the ways in which a short, no-budget documentary could represent the complexity of this NGO.

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Introduction

Community documentary producers adopt a variety of approaches to the involvement of community members in the production process. To capture the reality and world of a community group, many filmmakers do the same things they would do in broadcast documentary productions. Some embrace joint decision-making with various degrees of formalisation. Some emphasise the community's informal engagement in the production process, while others promote and create space for the community's active participation and agency in shaping content. Many producers work in both corporate and

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community production and, pressured by tight budgets and resource constraints, resort to a formulaic approach to both types of production. This article presents *Shama*, a small-scale documentary project that moves away from such constraints, given its nature as a no-budget academic filmmaking project. Made in 2021 and finalised in 2022, *Shama* is an 11.05-minute short documentary written, directed, and produced by Arezou Zalipour. James Nicholson did the camera and sound work with the help of Niamh Swannack, who was brought to the project as a research assistant. Arezou and James co-edited the film.

The research project was designed using a filmmaking-as-research methodology to respond to the scarcity of onscreen representation of migrant and diasporic communities (Zalipour 2019a, 2019b, 2019c), specifically non-profit ethnic social agencies created by and for migrant ethnic people and their families in New Zealand. Very few NGOs in New Zealand have been set up and run by migrant ethnic women to support and help with issues of domestic and sexual violence among ethnic migrant communities. One such vibrant agency is Shama Ethnic Women's Trust, started in a garage in Hamilton around 2000 by a small group of migrant ethnic women. Shama is now providing a range of community programmes, social work and youth development services to the ethnic communities in the Waikato region and leads activities and initiatives at the national level. Arezou has been on its Board of Trustees since 2013.

The filmmaking-as-research methodology approach enabled us to explore the application of collaborative documentary practice in the context of *Shama* film project. The aim of the *Shama* film project partly was to provide information about Shama's activities and services but more importantly to convey a sense of the internal collaborative culture of the NGO and the communities it serves, that is based on shared experiences of ethnic women in Aotearoa. In our filmmaking as research approach, we devised strategies that defy the rhetorical underpinnings of the advocates of single authorship. Auguiste, Zimmermann, and their colleagues' idea of co-creation in new media practices during the pandemic comes to mind – 'projects emerge out of process and evolve from within communities and with people, rather than being made for or about them' (Auguiste et al. 2020, 34). In *Shama* film project, we thought how focusing on the spirit of Shama NGO, rooted in collaboration and community can help devise strategies for community-centred collaborative practice. Any documentary production by nature is collaborative (MacDougall 2022). Additionally, it is important to note that foregrounding cultural and ethnic voices in documentary should not be conflated with community-centred collaborative documentary production and practice. In *Shama* film project, we thought of strategies that can enhance both community-centred and collaborative documentary practices and we designed five levels of performance. We will discuss these further below in this article.

The challenge was to piece together a narrative in voice and actuality that was concise and informative enough for the spirit of the community to emerge. We realise that we had multiple objectives for this project:

- To *chronicle* – to inform people about Shama. Who are these people and what are they doing?
- To *reflect* – to allow the people of Shama to see a portrayal of their own organisation
- *To express* – to give a sense of the culture of Shama as an organisation

- To *persuade* officials and politicians to give support to this migrant ethnic organisation

In the beginning, we decided that the first three of these aims were the most important and that giving a sense of the culture of the organisation would take priority over information.

Our filmmaking as research approach in exploring the application of a community-centred collaborative documentary practice can be understood by Trin T. Min-ha's concept of 'speaking nearby' rather than 'speaking for', which aligned well with our intentions and central aims of the *Shama* film project. Even though this concept is in tune with poetic language in filmmaking, we found it helpful to think of it as a way of positioning oneself in relation to the world where one prefers not to speak about a subject or object but to speak nearby. In an interview, Min-ha described speaking nearby as 'a speaking that reflects on itself and can come close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it' (Chen 1992, 87). To create this sense of indirectness of speaking nearby we avoided using an overarching commentary or directional, didactic voiceover in *Shama* film project. Our objective became to give expression to the prevailing tone of the Shama NGOs' community, a sense of collectivity and shared experiences and realities. The portrayal of minority groups in community production often leads to an 'outsider-looking-down' approach. We felt that providing an insider view was more important than efficiently conveying the facts about the organisation. This perspective guided the choices we made in the creative process including the experiences and benefits of the social actors involved, the film's objectives and filmmaker's agenda, and the filming and editing strategies we adopted. Arezou's service on the Board of Trustees of Shama Ethnic Women's Trust since 2013 and her own lived experiences as an immigrant woman of colour living in Aotearoa provided the grounding and insider knowledge that collaborative community production often requires. Documentary scholars remind us that in making documentaries about specific communities, there is a tendency to take a participatory approach and include the filmmaker as a participant in the film (e.g. Nichols 2017). In this project, although it would feel natural for us to bring in Arezou as a voiceover or participant in the documentary we did not do that.

Additionally, we decided to move away from creating a central character or individual for the film's narrative, although this approach, shaping other performances and materials around a central character, is common in documentary filmmaking. This is especially the case in many ethnographic and community documentaries whose approach is 'treating the individual as a gateway to a unified, homogenised sense of community or culture' (Nichols 2017, 168). In the absence of an authoritative voiceover or central character, we had to construct our narrative on a thematic, rather than chronological basis.

The perspective of an insider view also led us to avoid an expository style, characterised by a single authoritative voice, and opt for a mix of performative and observational strategies, in which multiple voices and modes of address are featured. By shifting modes of address, we explored the ways in which a short, no-budget documentary could represent the complexity of this NGO and the lived experiences of migrant ethnic women.

The short documentary *Shama* is about the lived experiences of migrant ethnic women through Shama's NGO. It opens with a sequence where Nirmala, one of the founders, shares her personal encounter when she arrived in New Zealand two decades ago:

> The first thing that happened to me when I landed here was that the cold affected me … and so somebody mentioned to me to go and have a panadol, so I went to the chemist and said 'I'd like some panadol' … The lady loudly says 'can you step aside and learn to talk in English' … [from] five feet I shrank to one inch, to nothing, I wanted to cry and there was not a soul I knew … I could just see the way I was walking out was like a little ant crawling out of the place …

We structured the narrative by starting with such original experiences that motivated a group of women to establish Shama, using dramatisations and a conversation between three of the founding members. We then wove in the scenes we had shot on Shama's premises – an observational scene of a cooking class and conversations and interviews with social workers. These scenes illustrated the organisation's engagement with women through providing support services, but also highlighted an underlying agenda of everyday feminism and the shared experiences of migrant ethnic women. The shared experience is also conveyed vividly by the cooking class scene which concludes with the sharing of food, images of an ethnic fashion show, and web videos addressing sexual violence issues that Shama had produced in various languages. These three sequences demonstrate Shama's style of engagement with its community better than any verbal explanation, as well as adding colour and variety to the documentary. The film ends with a short clip from the conversation with founding members emphasising the NGO's determination to help ethnic migrant women to 'participate in activities that are beyond just survival'.

The short documentary was envisaged to be for Shama's community. We had a public screening of *Shama* on the 20th anniversary of Shama Ethnic Women's Trust with a large number of ethnic social workers, advisers, ministers, and counsellors and a number of advocates that share the vision of making Aotearoa a better place for women from ethnic minorities to live lives with dignity and free from discrimination.

Next in this article, we analyse the documentary voice in community production and reflect on the complex interweaving of documentary strategies including the five levels of performance that we designed to enhance collaborative documentary practice. This article offers an original contribution to the field of collaborative documentary, particularly around the notion of performance.

Documentary voice in community production

In designing a documentary, filmmakers make choices about whose voices will be heard in the film and how they will be presented. The history of documentary making shows that all the way through the 1970s, 'members of the culture or community under scrutiny were rarely permitted to speak for themselves' (Fox 2017, 10). In the last decade, we come across several examples of documentary production that engage ethnic communities by working directly with the people at the heart of the subject to ensure that their voice is heard. The menu of voices available in documentary may include voiceover narration, interviews, observed or overheard dialogue, archival voice recordings, and performances generated for the purposes of the documentary. Filmmakers also choose whether to use embodied voices, where the speaker is identified and visible to the audience, or disembodied voices, where the speaker is never seen and may remain anonymous. In making these choices for the *Shama* documentary, we sought to make our production reflect

the principles and practices of the Shama organisation itself, and chose to prioritise this principle over functional considerations, such as the efficient presentation of information. We were inspired by examples of contemporary documentaries that foreground cultural and ethnic voices and analysed these by thinking about the ways we could consider community-centred collaborative documentary practice in a proactive manner in *Shama* film project.

Produced by New Zealand documentary maker Annie Goldson, *Pacific Solution: From Afghanistan to Aotearoa* (dir. James Frankham 2005) tells the story of Afghan refugees who survived shipwreck and were rescued by the freighter Tampa, and the course of events that resulted in their arrival in New Zealand. The documentary does not feature a voiceover narration; the story is told almost entirely through interviews. The voices of Afghan refugees feature prominently in interviews and observational passages, supplemented by interviews with experts including commentators, lawyers, and immigration officials. In places, the film also uses archival interview material from the media, featuring John Howard (Australian Prime Minister till 2007) and Helen Clark (New Zealand Prime Minister till 2008). While these other voices frame the story and offer an alternative point of view to that of the refugees, Frankham uses the voices of refugees to drive the narrative, often juxtaposing a voice track from their interviews with actuality footage in passages that advance the story to a new chapter. *Pacific Solution: From Afghanistan to Aotearoa* adapts the conventional interview-driven format of contemporary documentary to deliberately foreground the experience of its main subjects, making them the principal narrators of the film.

While *From Afghanistan to Aotearoa* preserves the conventional controlling role of the producer and director, Cahal McLaughlin's *We Never Give Up* (2002) was made as a collaborative production that ceded more control of the final film to the participants and their community (McLaughlin 2003). The film was a collaboration between the Human Rights Media Centre (HRMC) in Cape Town and Khulumani Western Cape. Khulumani's website describes the organisation as 'a membership-based, civil-society organisation in South Africa, which campaigns for truth, healing, and redress for those damaged through our apartheid history, and for the advance of the ongoing struggle to create a democratic, non-racial and just society' (https://khulumani.net/). The film was built on interviews with members of Khulumani, to which archival images and some visual sequences were added after the interviews had been edited. McLaughlin describes a long and involved process of consultation during the editing of the 60-minute documentary. He took all the initial decisions when producing a rough cut from the interview material – a necessary part of the process which is usually undertaken by the director and/or editor. Following this, a series of rough cuts were shown to five groups of people representing Khulumani and the HRMC. These groups sometimes disagreed about the inclusion and exclusion of material (McLaughlin 2003, 175).

This demonstrates the complexity that can arise in collaborative production. In the case of *We Never Give Up*, the gravity of the material and the importance of ensuring that the participants had some control of their stories justified such an elaborate and careful consultation. But even here, it can be argued that the balance of power was still in the director's favour, given that the director alone had access to all the raw footage.

Crucial in this collaboration was the role of the producer, Shirley Gunn. Given that McLaughlin was based in London and was coming to the project as an outsider, it was

vital that one of the core groups making the film was an insider. Shirley Gunn, the Chair of Khulumani Western Cape and the Director of the HRMC, filled this role. She also acted as the interviewer. McLaughlin says this was 'a key element in establishing trust' as Gunn was 'respected for her role in the earlier anti-apartheid struggle as well as her current leadership in Khulumani and the HRMC' (McLaughlin 2003, 173). *We Never Give Up* is an example of a collaborative documentary that productively combined the outsider's filmmaking expertise with the insiders' ability to maintain the trust of the community and defend the integrity of the project.

The foregrounding of the voices of the refugees in *From Afghanistan to Aotearoa* and those of the Khulumani participants in *We Never Give Up* stands in contrast to the approach taken in *Another Country* (dir. Molly Reynolds 2015). Set in Ramingining, a remote aboriginal settlement in the Northern Territory of Australia, this film avoids interviews, instead featuring a voiceover narration that is the dominant voice of the documentary. Although voiceover commentary is commonly used in documentaries to guide our understanding of images and orient the viewer, in *Another Country* the voiceover does not offer an outsider-looking-in perspective. The narrator is actor David Gulpilil, a member of the Ramingining community, and the originator and writer of the documentary. Gulpilil, who identifies himself at the start of the narration, is not a typical inhabitant of Ramingining. He has spent much time away from the town, pursuing his career as an actor in major Australian feature films. His status in Ramingining is that of an insider-outsider. He positions himself as an intermediary between his community and white Australians, making this quite explicit when he addresses the audience in the second person: 'This film is about what happened to my culture when it was interrupted by your culture.' (*Another Country* 1994).

In a 2016 interview, when Reynolds was asked why she had notconstructed the film around interviews, she explained that it was not a culturally appropriate approach. 'That style of engagement doesn't cross cultures very well, and the Yongl mob of Ramingining, they're not entirely comfortable or good with this Q & A style of doing things, it's very confronting' (Te Ara Motuhenga interview series 2016). The voiceover in *Another Country* narrates the film from the perspective of its principal subjects, avoiding an outsider viewpoint. But it is also notable that the use of voiceover, an unfashionable device among contemporary feature documentary makers, is culturally appropriate in this case. The film seeks to align itself with the community of Ramingining not only in content but also in form.

A voiceover traditionally features an authoritative male voice that functions as a unifying device and carries the central argument of the film. Bruzzi (2000) summarises various critiques of this aspect of the voiceover but proposes ways of lessening the didactic tone of anonymous male narrators, such as personalising the voice, using informal language, and employing a female narrator. However, Nicholson (2019, 222) argues that when voiceover co-exists with other voices in a documentary, a hierarchy of voices is created, in which the voiceover dominates, not only because of the speaker, but because non-diegetic voices have the power to comment on, validate and identify all other elements in the text, including other voices. This means that the voiceover remains a dominant voice, even when such tactics as Bruzzi suggests are employed.

Many producers of corporate and community videos use voiceover in their productions for practical reasons. Narration is an efficient way of conveying information

and of interpreting visual material for the audience. By using narration, a producer can shorten the overall length of the production and impose meaning on generic and archival footage. Narration is cheap to record at high quality and can be rewritten late in the editing process. All these factors help to constrain costs in productions which normally have very low budgets by the standards of broadcasting or theatrical productions. However, we decided that in *Shama*, we would not use voiceover, so as to avoid creating a hierarchical structure in the film, because this would be antithetical to Shama organisation's central values.

An illuminating example of a comparable production that uses voiceover is *Shakti* (2006), a community documentary production about an ethnic NGO in New Zealand. This 50-minute television documentary was produced under a community development scheme, the TV series *Open Door* (NZ on Screen, which ran from the year 2000–2012. The series was described as 'a unique form of community-based television that allowed groups or individuals to apply to make a documentary programme about an issue […] using the expertise and equipment of the production team, but with participants taking editorial control' (Shakti 2006). The production company Morningside Productions and the broadcaster TV3 selected the best proposals for production. *Open Door* ran for 12 seasons, funded by New Zealand on Air and broadcast on TV3.

In spite of the stated aim of participants taking editorial control, *Shakti*'s use of voice-over disempowers the collaborators and imposes an outsider viewpoint. First, the male narrator is anonymous, in the tradition of the 'voice of Godstyle. Michael Rabiger (2004) describes this type of voice as 'a mediating presence standing between the audience and the film's 'evidence'; this, of course, is the voice of authority, with all its connotations of condescension and paternalism' (Rabiger 2004, 277). These connotations are reinforced by the fact that in *Shakti* the narrator's voice is that of a Pakeha (New Zealand Anglo-European) man – a member of New Zealand's dominant cultural group, rather than a member of the collective community who run Shakti and for whose benefit it functions. This separates the dominant voice of the documentary from the communities it represents, as it is the voice of an outsider in terms of culture, ethnicity and gender. Third, the function of this voice in the narrative is dominant. Although it takes up far less screen time than the interviews with the women who run Shakti, its placement and content convey its authority. The narrator introduces each new sequence, establishing authority over the film's structure. He introduces and names each new interviewee, giving them a role in the narrative and by implication validating their contribution, and he provides crucial information that frames the narrative. For example, it is the male narrator who provides the description of Shakti and a statement of its mission: 'Shakti is an organisation dedicated to supporting ethnic women from ethnic communities in crisis because of domestic violence. It offers women a safe haven and a helping hand to make a fresh start in life' (Shakti 2006).

The regular use of the narrator's voice in this framing role reinforces it as the dominant voice in the documentary. Michael Chanan (2007, 116) refers to anonymous narration as an 'invisible voice that inflects the film's whole mode of address', and this pervasive influence of a voice from outside the community represented in the documentary is something we sought to avoid.

Instead of a narrator, *Shama* features a multiplicity of voices, deployed in various ways. There are interviews, where the social actor is responding to questions from the filmmaker

and there are overheard voices, where the filmmakers' stance is observational, and the social actors converse among themselves. And there are theatrical voices, where the social actors consciously play a fictional role. The film does feature some direct address to the audience and incorporates performances in which social actors – members of Shama's community – perform scripted monologues. The documentary also includes a montage of short clips produced for web delivery by Shama itself, in which women speak directly to the camera in their native languages. These videos are aimed at migrant ethnic women who may be experiencing sexual violence. The videos explain the legal rights of women in New Zealand and provide channels of communication and support.

A feature of *Shama* is the use of prompted conversations, which supplement the interviews with the organisation's founding members and staff members. Rather than following the format of a participant answering questions, we established topics of conversation with the participants, then recorded the conversation between them, shooting in an observational style. This method could be viewed as lacking authenticity, as the resulting dialogue has been generated specifically for the purpose of the production, but this is also the case with conventional interviews, where a dialogue on specific topics takes place by agreement, for the record. In the case of *Shama*, these scenes were largely controlled and generated by the collaborators-participants themselves, giving them a more active role in the production than a tightly controlled interview would have done. Our target in prompted conversation was also to reduce the authorial intervention of the director (and the absence of an interviewer) by creating conditions in which the participants direct their own conversations. For example, the Shama founders' conversation was 35 min take with no interruption.

We also used a conventional interview format at Shama's premises and in places where they conduct their activities, such as their board of trustees' houses and the nearby lakeside cafe. Other voices in the documentary include dialogue captured during observational coverage of a cooking class and the voices of the women presenting the web videos on sexual violence. All the voices heard in the production are those of members of the Shama community.

Nichols (1991, 44) observes that in the absence of voiceover, 'textual authority' shifts to the social actors portrayed, especially in the participatory mode. This was the motivating factor behind our use of voices in *Shama* – to allow the community to be heard in their own voices, with no higher authority imposed by the production. This is not to deny that as the editors of the film, we re-ordered, shortened and juxtaposed pieces of voice tracks to shape and interpret our narrative, but our disposition of voices was deliberately designed so that we would not speak on behalf of the community members – they would speak for themselves.

As well as paying attention to the identity of speakers, we considered the placement of voices in sound space. The voices in Shama are mostly diegetic voices; the speaker is visible on screen. Voices only enter the non-diegetic sound space when an interviewee previously seen on screen speaks over archival photographs or observational footage. This use of diegetic voices is a deliberate strategy. Diegetic voices maintain a sense of immediate connection with the scene, whereas a non-diegetic voice, whether of a narrator or an interviewee, has a separating effect. The non-diegetic voice positions itself between the audience and the image on screen, interpreting the imagery for the

audience. By employing diegetic voices, we sought to maintain the connection between image and sound, avoiding the sense of an outsider looking in and telling the audience how to understand what they see.

In terms of Bill Nichols' description of documentary modes, this means that Shama avoids using the expository mode, and shifts between participatory, observational and performative modes. These shifts in mode and the multiplicity of voices reflect the structure and operating style of Shama, creating a much stronger representation of Shama as an organisation than an expository text, dominated by a single narrator, could achieve.

Five levels of performance

Given the original objective of promoting awareness of Shama's services, it would have been reasonable to employ the devices of expository documentary to convey information and advocate for the organisation, in the same way, the producers of *Shakti* did. In this project, however, we wanted to move away from presenting information in an expository documentary and evoke emotions that underlie the complexity of migrant ethnic women's lives at grassroots level. In the production process, we realised that the community production strategies we adopted facilitated a locus for experimenting with levels of performance. We discuss these choices below.

The main difference between broadcast production and community production is who you are accountable to. When working in broadcast, the filmmaker works with a commissioning editor(s) and is also accountable to collaborators and stakeholders. In community production, the filmmaker works with participants and the main accountability should be to the members of that community. In *Shama* we were accountable only to the Shama Ethnic Women's Trust and the community it supports. The variety of Shama's activities, the diversity of its community and the richness of its history made a faithful representation of the organisation a challenging task. Due to the small scale of our production project, it was not practical to attempt a representational inclusion of all activities and services Shama offers. So our intention became to convey the reality of migrant ethnic women's experiences and Shama's ethos, not simply as an NGO, but as a community. We felt that offering an insider view and moments of emotional connection was more important than simply conveying the facts efficiently about the organisation. Consequently, we designed five levels of performance to facilitate this approach in the production process. They are:

- Performance of fictional character
- Performance of self in prompted conversation
- Performance of self in interview
- Performance of self in observational coverage
- Performance for camera-archive

One level of performance we used is the performance of fictional characters. In one sequence of the film, three ethnic women perform scripts written by Shama social workers that distil the experiences of many migrant women who have joined the centre. These performances may be termed theatrical performances, in that each performer is playing the role of a fictional person. We sought permission to record performances

of stories developed from a series of focus groups conducted for the purpose of this research project by Shama's social workers, in which they reflect on their experiences and practices with clients. The focus groups captured key issues, challenges and stories they have encountered in working with migrant ethnic women and their families in the Waikato region. The scripts were edited and recorded for the documentary as a way of conveying the original experiences of migrant ethnic women.

Renov (2017, 123) reminds us that performance leads to 'a source of anxiety over the problematic power and textual authority' of the filmmaker and the latter's tendency to 'control meaning' in performance work in documentary making. Through this collective mode of script development and the use of community members as performers, we sought to share control of meaning in these performances and allow the collective original experiences of migrant ethnic women to emerge.

–Shama community members performing for the camera. Stylisation was restricted to a black space, three-point lighting and direct address to the camera.

In *Shakti*, the 2006 documentary discussed above, there are many instances of theatrical performance. Bruzzi (2000, 185) wrote that even though dramatised performance in a non-fiction genre is supposed to draw attention to the reality of the situation, it mostly draws attention to 'the impossibilities of authentic documentary representation. The performative element within the framework of non-fiction is thereby an alienating, distancing device, not one which actively promotes identification and a straightforward response to a film's content.' The dramatised scenes in *Shakti* represent a different approach to performance in documentary from the one we adopted in *Shama*. *Shakti's* dramatised scenes are stylised, using shadows, silhouette, blur and dutch angles to create a distinctive look for these sequences and to avoid depicting the faces of actors. This stylisation is a conventional way of portraying domestic violence in New Zealand current affairs productions, and these scenes were probably written and designed by the production team.

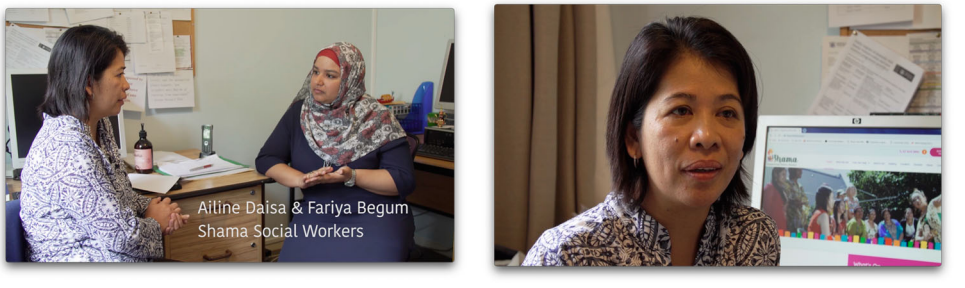
In *Shama*, unlike in *Shakti*, stylisation is restricted to shooting in a black space, using three-point lighting. The performers address the camera directly, contrasting with the conventional 'fourth wall' style of *Shakti's* dramatised scenes. The performances in *Shama* lack the more professional style of the *Shakti* scenes, but their unflinching gaze

and authentic voices are effective. Crucially, these performances were written and performed by members of the Shama community, not the production team.

Although the actors' faces in the *Shakti* dramatisations are hidden, the scenes are clearly linked to the interviewees. For example, the documentary opens with a dramatised re-enactment of a domestic violence scene showing the shadow of the victim on the wall. This is juxtaposed with Shakti founder Farida Sultana's interview, in which she recounts her personal story of violence in the UK and her subsequent introduction to Shakti Aid UK. Her story is intercut with the stylised domestic violence scene, while periodic interjections by the Pakeha narrator provide information about Shakti's services and support for ethnic women in Auckland.

This approach can be understood in the light of what Elizabeth Marquis discusses as the functions of performance, even though her focus is on masculinities in documentaries like *The Case of Milo Radulovich* (dir. Edward R. Murrow and Fred Friendly 1953) and *Point of Order!* (dir. Emile de Antonio 1963). One of the functions Marquis identifies is the use of performance to 'bolster and/or destabilize normative understandings of identity categories such as gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, race, class and dis/ability' (Marquis 2009, 28). *Shakti's* stylised dramatisation bolsters the image of migrant ethnic women as victims, something that Nichols (2017) also notes as a clear trend in the documentary tradition. In *Shama*, we aimed to acknowledge the challenges faced by these women but to portray them as having agency and self-determination, rather than being passive victims.

Another level of performance in *Shama* is what Thomas Waugh (1990) terms 'performance of self'. This takes place both in interviews and in prompted conversations. In two scenes in *Shama*, the latter is used as an alternative to interviews: a conversation between three founding members of the organisation, and a scene showing two social workers in conversation. The latter takes place at the behest of the director, camera and sound operators, who have asked the social workers to talk about topics that appeared in their collective reflections during the social workers' focus groups. During the conversation, the filmmakers recorded as observers, without participating in the dialogue. The social workers were performing as themselves but were also conscious of the purpose of the conversation and of participating in a scene for the documentary.



–Left: Prompted conversation. Right: Interview in the same location.

The approach is naturalistic. The scene is set in the workers' office and is lit by the room lights and the office window. The social workers sit at their desks next to each other as they do every day at work. This scene differs from the theatrical performance sequence

in two ways: the women are performing as themselves, not as fictional characters; and they are generating the dialogue themselves, not following a script. This type of documentary performance constitutes active, creative collaboration by the participants in the documentary process.

We decided to remain very flexible with our approach in shooting prompted conversations. In the case of the three women who founded Shama many years ago, the prompted conversation was recorded in the living room of Arezou's house in Hamilton. Using one camera and two shotgun microphones, we recorded a 35-minute continuous take, but did not intervene or prompt the participants. The founders talked about their experiences and the history of Shama. They recalled the experiences that roused them to action, and remembered their first meetings in a Hamilton garage, when they came up with the name Shama. Shooting the conversation this way was challenging and inevitably resulted in some unusable footage. The rhythms of a spontaneous conversation between three people do not always lend themselves to concise editing. In this, as in other parts of the production, we faced a trade-off between an easy process that was efficient in production terms, and an approach that yielded material that felt more authentic, but was less malleable in post-production than structured interviews, introduced and ordered by a voiceover.

There is a sequence in *An Immigrant Nation: The Footprints of the Dragon* (1969) where a conversation on location was shot that was similar to *Shama's* conversation sequence with the founders. Produced by Helen Wong, this documentary is one of the first television documentaries about Chinese ethnic communities in New Zealand. We see the Kwok family gathered in their lounge to watch home videos of them growing up and their parents' anniversaries and birthdays. Even though Frank Kwok is seated at the centre, directly addressing the camera, we see all ten siblings and their children, making remarks once in a while as they remember things. The Kwoks are originally from China, with the fifth generation born in New Zealand in the 1990s. Performing as themselves, the group reminisced about the time when their ancestors had to pay the $100 poll tax for Chinese immigrants, and about some personal encounters with discrimination. Though intercut with the home video footage, the scene successfully conveys the sense of family and community and shares their experiences of racism and anti-Asian sentiment from the turn of the century to the present time.

To supplement the prompted conversations between the Shama social workers and board members, we also recorded short conventional interviews with these participants in the same locations. These interviews constitute another level of performance, a familiar one to documentary viewers. Bill Nichols introduced the term 'social actors' to describe people who appear in documentaries as themselves (Nichols 2017). This phrase implicitly recognises that all forms of social interaction can be characterised as performance, and that the collaborators who appear in documentaries are to one degree or another performing a portrayal of themselves for the camera. The interview features one type of performance of the self, common in documentaries, where the conventions require a social actor to participate in a dialogue staged specifically for the film. The interview participant is appearing as herself, but the formalised nature of the dialogue and the consciousness that the conversation is for the record mean that the participant is conscious of performing. Performance is understood here to indicate our awareness that we modify our behaviour in response to the social situation we are in, particularly when in a well-understood

framework, such as the on-camera interview. We found that the interviews were a useful way of enlarging on or clarifying issues that arose during the prompted conversations. Because Arezou, the interviewer, was personally known to the interview participants as a member of the Shama community, their performances in interviews were relaxed. There is little discernible difference between the participants' behaviour in the interviews when compared with their behaviour in the prompted conversations.

The social workers at Shama believe that their ethnic background, cultural understanding and language abilities are an advantage to them in their present position with the organisation. As migrants themselves, they have a particular empathy with the clients and understand the feeling of being an outsider in a new society. Performing as themselves allowed them to distil their experiences for the documentary while remaining true to their original selves and role. The ease with which the social workers shift between the prompted conversation and conventional interviews attests to the integrity of their performance.

There is a sequence in the documentary that shows Shama's cooking class programme and the diversity of women involved with Shama. We adopted the initial plan of shooting the cooking class with an observational frame. The camera observation of the natural landscape of behaviours and relationships facilitated a collective performance of self in the Shama house. Prior to the shoot and working through Shama's manager, Arezou arranged for collective consent by informing the cooking tutor and the women about the date and nature of the shoot. So they were free not to join by not coming to the class. On the day, Arezou also described the consent process before the shoot and some women gave consent on the spot by signing the consent form for the research project. Those who were unsure or did not sign were advised not to sit at the front. In the edit, we were careful not to include the faces of those few women who did not sign the consent form. Shama House does not allow men to come to the premises unless they obtain a prior invitation for community events. The observational camera also helped James as cameraman to become an onlooker, so that his presence exerted minimal influence on the cooking class proceedings. In *Another Country*, for instance, Molly Reynolds utilised an observational frame for Easter parade performances and an opening dance sequence because of her view that the standard documentary interview would be an uncomfortable and inappropriate way of engaging with the people of Ramingining.

In *Shama*, the level of performance of self in observational coverage in the cooking class presents a couple of hours in the life of migrant ethnic women as they come together to exchange recipes, while learning everyday Kiwi dishes from the Pakeha woman who has volunteered as a cooking tutor at Shama for the last fifteen years. We contend that the other-centeredness of the observational camera, free from an intrusive observer, is necessary for the community production approach. As demonstrated in an interview with the cooking tutor, through a direct mode of address the women meet once a month to learn about health, sometimes reminiscing about the scarcity of ingredients for ethnic dishes from their homelands in New Zealand markets. The small kitchen and meeting room where the cooking class is held are not designed for this purpose but are a space to accommodate the performance of women from different cultures and languages. The cooking tutor, Glenys, has brought lettuce and beetroot from her home garden and speaks softly in English using simple words for ease of communication.

Some of these women are early immigrants without English-based education and find it useful to practise their English in this environment. Zalipour and Hardy's (2016) research into the interrelation of food, women and religion in diasporic New Zealand films indicates that 'food is significant in diaspora for its ability to re-establish a visceral–intuitive relation to religion and origin [and] the emotive register of the discourse'. Their analysis shows that food can portray 'the degree to which a material, mundane practice such as cooking, linked back to the place of one's birth, can alleviate the discomforts of being permanently outside that place.' (782–788). Through the cooking class sequence, our film *Shama* also makes the point that the collective act of cooking and sharing food can be one of the performances of cultural difference. The performative element of culture appears to surface without any directorial plan or cueing.

The *Shama* documentary also includes two areas of performance not generated for the film, but captured in archival materials. These are the photos of the 'Fashion Fusion Show' that Shama organised and the language videos on the prevention of sexual violence. The show brought together women of 'all cultures, ages and sizes', wearing cultural clothing, outfits or fashion accessories, which some have brought from their countries of origin. By nature, a fashion show contains a specialised form of performance. We used the interview with Silvana Erenchun Perez, Shama's manager who organised the fashion show, to introduce this event and place it in context. But we ran most of the photos with music and no voice track, in order to allow the audience to appreciate not only the clothes, but also the performance of the women modelling them. This was another example of showing rather than telling.

–The 2020 Fashion Fusion Show.

The photographs of the event captured a powerful sense of celebration and joy, and this was an example of the expressive power of performance in documentary, which, as Marquis notes, can 'invite affective reactions from spectators', engaging the audience more effectively than verbal argument (Marquis, 27).

Another example of performance garnered from archival material can be seen in a series of very short videos produced through a community mobile video-making project, using the theme 'one phone, one message, one language'. Arezou designed

this project for Shama's national initiative and programmes on sexual violence prevention in 2020, entitled *Let's Talk*. In *Let's Talk*, Shama's aim is to provide culturally appropriate support, advocacy, and programmes for ethnic women, their children and families. *Let's Talk* developed six messages about preventing and responding to sexual violence experienced by ethnic communities. The messages were crafted by ethnic social workers working in sexual violence treatment and prevention in ethnic communities in collaboration with the Shama Sexual Violence Response Team. In response to the pandemic lockdown in 2020, Arezou developed simple guidelines for recording a down-the-lens midshot on a mobile phone, with tips about lighting, sound and background. Shama staff sent a call to migrant ethnic communities around New Zealand looking for volunteer 'community champions'. The volunteers were to translate one message and then record it in their own first language and voice, using their phones with the help of the video-making guide. Arezou and her RA then edited the phone footage, added Shama's logo in different colours representing multiple languages and added non-diegetic music tracks. In 2020, 16 videos in 16 different languages were produced and disseminated broadly. In these short videos, the volunteers address the camera directly in their own languages, in their own house or space, without the presence of filmmakers.

We used a short montage sampling of these videos in the Shama documentary. Unlike the fashion show event, this sequence was not introduced using an interview. With Shama's logo clearly displayed in each video, we felt the material was self-explanatory. Although the volunteers address the camera directly, in the context of our documentary this was also an example of showing rather than telling, as it was a demonstration of Shama's community activism in action.

Conclusion

In this article, we reflected on the production choices we made as filmmakers and researchers in the film project *Shama* from a community-centred production perspective. The various levels of performance we adopted honoured the documentary's ideological parameters, participated in the collaborative nature of the migrant ethnic community, and gave fundamental support to the autonomous expression of migrant ethnic identities.

To stay true to community organisation, producers need to ensure that their documentary reflects the community fairly. This is not only a matter of content. The form of the documentary also must reflect the community organisation's structure and ideology. We arranged for Shama staff and people involved to view the film's rough cut and give feedback, and we also provided the opportunity for reflection. We were interested in what they thought about the overall feel of this documentary and if it gave a fair presentation of what Shama stands for. The responses to the short documentary were overwhelming. Below are examples of verbatim responses to the film:

> 'I really like it, and it captures the essence of Shama, why we established it and what services are provided.'

> 'I love it!! I loved the diversity and how it tells our story.'

> 'I think it's good, I like the mix of things, it really shows the spirit of the organisation.'

> 'It does not only talk about the challenges and the issues that are particularly related to migrant, refugee and ethnic families but also talks about how we need to celebrate diversity and make a social change that can support diverse lives.'
>
> 'This is beautiful!!'
>
> 'This is an excellent video with key considerations being given to uphold Shama's core ethos.'

Most of the participants indicated in their feedback that migrant ethnic lives are 'complex [and] reaching out for help is the solution.'

The general takeaways for community-centred collaborative documentary production are to use embodied voices, avoid a hierarchy of voices, employ a variety of strategies, facilitate avenues for the contributions of collaborators-participants to devise and improvise dialogues, include insiders in the key creative roles and production team from the outset. The presence of an insider in the production team is vital to both these requirements, providing insight that goes beyond the authorial intervention and participatory mode of documentary. Being willing to mould the form of the documentary to the community's character demands a willingness to be flexible and the ability to adopt a variety of production strategies. Collaboration involves the inclusion of material generated by the collaborators as well as that made specifically for the production. The disposition of voices is an important element as it determines the internal power structure of a documentary, establishing the relationship between the filmmakers, collaborators and audience. We conclude by stressing how important it is not to default to voiceover as an established model if this means the filmmakers do not collaborate and align their production with the community they represent.

Note: In 2022 *Shama* was selected for five international film festivals, won two Best Women Empowerment Film awards, and received a public screening at the 20th Anniversary of Shama Ethnic Women's Trust.

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