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Unsettling narrative(s): Film making as an anthropological lens on an artist-led project exploring LGBT+ recovery from substance use

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Abstract

This paper explores *My Recoverist Family*, a film in which each of us had a different role: as an anthropological filmmaker (Amanda), the commissioner of the project and participant within it (Mark); and an audience member and critic (Ali). The film shows a group of LGBT+ people using art to explore recovery from substance use with reference to their biographies and wider social issues. The paper interrogates the interaction of visual and performing arts and storytelling in touching, articulating and representing the film's main focus - the injustices of LGBT+ people. Using the idea of unsettling narrative(s), we analyse how the filmmakers privilege exploration over explanation, and glimpsed momentary understandings over narrative coherence, explanation, and denouement. In order to align the writing process with the filmmaking methodology (influenced by anthropologist Tim Ingold's understanding of the creativity of undergoing), we utilised a methodological tool that Ali contributed to developing called the scenic composition. We argue that the paper's significance is both substantive and methodological: artistically metabolised narratives make it possible to complicate "the stories being listened for"; this, in turn, begins to dismantle the binaries around which much current addiction treatment policy and practice are constructed.

KEYWORDS: LGBT+ recovery, undergoing, filmmaking, narrative, art

Introduction: My Recoverist Family

This paper is about a film called *My Recoverist Family* (2017). The film was commissioned by *Portraits of Recovery (PORe)*, a Manchester-based visual arts charity whose work investigates the relational intersectionality of contemporary art and substance use recovery. The project was one part of *UNSEEN: Simultaneous Realities*, a commissioning programme which sought to explore whether LGBT+, South Asian, and disabled people in recovery from substance use could become more visible and better understood within the recovery communities in Greater Manchester. The authors are Mark Prest, a curator, recovery activist and founding director of PORE, who commissioned the project which led to the film; Amanda Ravetz, a visual anthropologist and co-director (with filmmaker Huw Wahl) of the film; and Ali Roy, an inter-disciplinary academic whose work spans research methodology, participatory arts and substance use. All three authors share a critical interest in recovery.

In the present paper, we explore the ways in which the film deals with the injustices experienced by LGBT+ people. In the five decades since the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality, LGBT+ people remain at risk of criminalisation, stigmatisation, and a loss of freedom. The levels of substance use problems in the LGBT+ population are a visible reminder of these persistent underlying issues (Buffin et al., 2012). PORE's work responds to this context with a deliberately activist agenda, which is informed by the histories of other marginalised groups, some of which have used art as a way to make interventions in the public sphere in order to seek recognition and acceptance as full democratic citizens (Roy & Prest, 2014). These histories of disability, sexuality, race and gender 'communicate the ways in which diverse groups have had to labour and fight for a voice in the world' (Turner, 2001).

My Recoverist Family attends to an artist-led process in which a group of LGBT+ people can be seen exploring recovery from substance use with reference to their own current lives and biographies, as well as with reference to wider social issues. The film cuts between a series of nomadic art workshops held in places of personal relevance to different group members and a final public live art event at which each artist/group member delivered a prepared performance to a large audience. The project was led by performance artist David Hoyle, and collaborating artist Jackie Haynes. Hoyle is well known for performances combining satirical comedy and cutting self-reflection. His work has often unpicked homophobic trends in Britain, as well as the false promises of a gay scene focused on materialistic and hedonistic pleasure. In the film, we see how David uses his humour, his own life experience and preparedness to be vulnerable to draw the

group into the shared reflections and conversations that sustain the work, including in the final performances. Haynes' brought her expertise of nomadic art practise and research into the project, introducing making activities and encouraging discussions undertaken on the move, working in temporary spaces and places. Someone we only glimpse is the producer of much of Hoyle's recent work, Nick Blackburn, who, towards the end of the project, worked with each of the group members in preparing their performances for the live art event, staged at Manchester's well-known arts venue HOME.

The film makes visible the group process in which people shared stories about their early lives in schools and in families and through which it becomes clear that several people have carried the trauma of early experiences of homophobic shaming with them through life and that feelings such as humiliation, anger, despair, disconnection, and resentment have impacted their interpersonal relationships, the possibilities of intimacy, their substance use and their broader experience of society (Meyer, 2003). Whilst the film bears witness to each person's own story about their life, these are glimpsed rather than seen whole. Also important is that the filmmakers do not provide—or impose—a conventional narrative structure as a means of organising the material, and the film offers no easy resolutions to the issues it explores. For some, the lack of individual characterisation that might have come with a conventional narrative arc has been a challenging aspect of the film whilst for others its non-narrativity has been pleasing. The three authors of this paper have themselves, at different times, had a range of feelings about these characteristics of the film.

In the present paper, we use the idea of unsettling narrative(s) to argue that the film privileges a particular kind of storytelling, which is condensed, tangential, suggestive and lyrical, and which deliberately avoids the narrative impulse to explain and resolve (Abbott, 2007). This has important methodological and epistemological implications. In one discussion about the work, Ali described Amanda and Huw's role in the project as "along for the ride", recognising that this could easily be interpreted as a pejorative statement. However, what it incapsulates is a particular attitude and attention to the subject matter, the project and its unfolding process, those who took part and their own stories, and later to the rushes which were worked into the final film. This approach emerges from a commitment to 'finding the film in the material' summed up by Amanda during our discussions as a form of *undergoing* (Ingold, 2014). This mode of social science practice is 'more analogous with the art forms of music and dance than the ratio-

nalities of conscious thought'¹ (Gunaratnam, 2015, p. 7). We also argue that the form of the film is appropriate to the subject matter of LGBT+ recovery. Deleuze and Guattari (1988: 21-15) use the concept of the *rhizome* to describe the creation of paths without direction—the paths of the nomad—where important moments are those that come close to creativity through chance encounters and spontaneous events. Ingold (2011), referring to Deleuze, argues

Life is open-ended: its impulse is not to reach a terminus but to keep on going. The spider spinning his web or the musician launching into a melody 'hazards an improvisation'. But to improvise, Deleuze continues, is to join with the World or meld with it. One ventures from home on the thread of a tune (pp. 83–84)

The work of David Hoyle and Jackie Haynes responded to this conception (i.e., the idea that recovery is open-ended and not directed to reaching a terminus or destination), and they encouraged those who took part to explore recovery using movement, improvisation, and creativity. The film successfully captures these affective relationships, showing them in a state of constant movement and interchange (Roy & Manley, 2017).

In our paper, we attempt to navigate our different relationships to the film as a means of considering what it contributes to the understanding of LGBT+ experiences of recovery. Before doing this, we briefly introduce the wider landscape of recovery in policy, research and the arts, which provides important context to the project, after which we describe how we worked together, and how this process mirrored the paper's substantive interest in the creative unsettling of narratives.

Unsettling recovery stories: art, research, and public policy

The idea of recovery has a relatively recent history in the field of substance use in the UK. The language and many of the concepts have been adopted from the field of mental health, where recovery-focused policy and practice has a longer history. Some commentators and critical thinkers broadly welcomed this move from harm reduction to recovery. For example, Best (2010) argued recovery-oriented drug and alcohol policies made perfect sense not least because full recovery is what many people with drug and alcohol problems say they want for themselves. However, in substance use and mental health recovery has been heavily contested (Roy & Buchanan, 2016; Rose, 2019). In early dis-

¹ The quote from Gunaratnam refers to practitioners involved in end of life care, who must often work with people in situations of extreme uncertainty, but we find it applicable to the form of social science we advocate in this paper, because it reflects a particular attitude and approach which might be defined by negative capability—the ability to be in uncertainty without irritably reaching after doubt.

cussions, many leading people in the sector felt a move to recovery policy might work as long as it was recognised that recovery, like substance use itself, was highly personal and idiosyncratic in nature (UK Drug Policy Commission, 2008). Others have subsequently troubled this assumption. For example, service user academic Diane Rose (2014, p. 217) has argued that, the surface level assumption that recovery is ‘personal’ and ‘deeply individual’ is problematic ‘because we are not isolated individuals.’ Rose’s (ibid.) argument is that to focus too exclusively on individuals is to ‘render unimportant the social relations in which we are all embedded and which shape and form us.’ ‘In a real sense’ she suggests ‘we are those social relations.’ These arguments advance a view that the search for recovery is inevitably framed by a broader set of structural and systemic issues that often remain unacknowledged in policy and practice, which often fragments and minimises the issues faced by the wider LGBT+ population, focussing instead on specific issues, which in the case of LGBT+ people seem to include chemsex (Prest, 2017). What this implies, as Diane Rose so aptly proposes is ‘Not a rejection of every part of the recovery discourse and practice’ but an engagement with it which tackles ‘head on the fact that our society is intolerant of difference.’

This link to structural and systemic issues has also been taken up by critical voices in mental health who have raised questions about the possibilities of self-determination amongst people with lived experience, asking whether these people can be recognised as experts, can set the agenda, and can decide which kinds of stories need to be aired and heard in understanding issues like recovery. For example, the Recovering Our Voices Collective, have argued that if we listen only for the ‘lived experience’ of individuals, and only for processes of illness and recovery, we will miss many other vital storylines. We need to complicate what we are listening for: to listen less for stories of healing and recovery and more for stories of resistance and opposition, collective action and social change (Costa et al., 2012, p. 96).

In recent years, a small number of arts and health and social science researchers have sought to reframe substance use and recovery as an issue that should be seen through the lenses of social justice, civil rights and cultural citizenship (Alexander, 2008; Parkinson, 2014; Roy & Prest, 2014). Working together with artists/curators and people with lived experience of addiction and recovery, they have begun to foster recovery landscapes within local communities using creativity. They aim to influence conceptions of substance use and recovery beyond the tropes that often populate existing policy, treatment and recovery support service arenas (Prest, 2015; White, 2016). Artists such as Melanie Manchot and Cristina Nuñez have collaborated with people in recovery to

make artworks with a knowledge-forming rather than a directly therapeutic impulse. Roy et al. (2015) have suggested that a distinctive feature of artists' work in such contexts concerns art's liminal, emergent capacities and artists' "negative capabilities", something that often presents significant challenges to prevailing explanatory (narrative) tendencies of biomedical and social science research (Abbott, 2007). A small number of academics in arts and health have begun to champion artists' unique knowledge contribution to arts and health research (Atkinson & Robson, 2012; Parkinson, 2014; Roy, 2015; Ravetz & Gregory, 2018).

In what follows, we look at what *My Recoverist Family*, as an artefact of a social art process, reveals about storytelling attuned to 'negative capability,' by reaching towards narratives that instead of cohering around 'outcome- and goal-focused modes of subjectivity' find ways to digest the seemingly indigestible material of social exclusion and stigma (Woods et al., 2019). We suggest that the meandering capacity of the art process holds open the formation and fomentation of stories aligned to myth in its cyclical rather than linear form and that these signify art's ability to convey meaning through the reflected and the glimpsed rather than through explanation (Vaughan-Lee, 2020). In this way, the present paper opens up a series of important questions about the contribution social and collaborative arts practice can make to public discussions and debates about recovery and the negative capability this requires.

Finding the paper in the materials: undergoing and anthropological knowledge

Given our distinctive relationships to the film, from the start, we questioned how to write the paper and whether it would work in a standard academic form. Rather than rushing to agree about its structure, we recorded and transcribed a three-way conversation about what was at stake in the film, the stories being shared, and how these were told. From here, discussing ways to move on into writing, Ali suggested a methodological device called the 'scenic composition,' which utilises a group process to work with complex data reflexively (Froggett et al., 2014). Following Ali's instructions, we each watched the film on our own, wrote a one-sided composition 'as and when it came' to us, using a 'personal voice or style' (ibid.) and later read these texts to each other, discussing what we had learned about the film. This device produced a wealth of material but also a further juncture—whether or not to follow the process developed by Froggett

et al. (ibid.) in full.² The scenic compositions were rich with interpretive material and, at Amanda's suggestion, we chose to 'search for the paper in the materials', an approach that modelled her own and Huw's filmmaking process as a form of 'undergoing': a creative process whereby 'in opening to the unknown—in exposure—imagination leads not by mastery but by submission' (Ingold, 2014, pp. 124). We wrote, shared, swapped, and rewrote, allowing ideas to emerge and take shape, before discussing them together and refining them.

In the discussion section, we return to some themes and ideas more than once, approaching them from different directions, rather than organising the material into clearly defined subsections. This approach reflects Amanda's commitment to anthropology as "undergoing", Mark's to recovery as a non-linear process and Ali's to an arts congruent social science that privileges exploration over explanation, and glimpsed momentary understandings over narrative coherence, explanation, and denouement. In this way, through our writing, we have—borrowing from Bion (1962)—sought to adopt a "digestive" mode of writing in order to symbolise and give meaning to our experience of the film as a shared object of interest. We argue that our analysis mirrors the film's depiction of an artist-led process in which people on whom damage has been forced through personal and systemic forms of homophobia use creativity to symbolise and make meaning out of this violence, delving into independent and shared events of injustice so as to *expose, refute, and defend different dimensions* of their oppressive life experiences.

Discussion - Unsettling Narrative(s)

Author Louise Doughty (2019) says all books have two beginnings. 'One beginning is the moment you begin tapping the keyboard to string together the opening lines, but the other beginning is the moment in your life which provoked that story in the first place.' The moment in Mark's life that provoked the project that led to the film *My Recoverist Family* was his severely impoverished experiences in rehabilitation treatment for chronic alcoholism. As a gay man, Mark found that the difficulties of addressing what he defines as an illness were intensified by an experience of a complete lack of understanding of the significance of difference from the treatment system or empathy from those in treatment with him. In the film, this is reflected in a powerful moment just after Mark's performance in the final live event (Image 1). Set in a domestic tableau, Mark is wearing

² In the original methodological paper, Froggett et al. 2014 present each scenic composition in full. This is followed by an analysis of the individual compositions which is developed by the group members and then a longer discussion which explores what the compositions—taken together—offer as a means to understand the shared object of interest.

a blue dressing gown. This performance works with his reflections in a moment after treatment when he first sought to combine his addiction experiences with his career as a curator, hoping he could perhaps do something transformative for himself and others. In the performance, he reflects on what he now understands to be missing from the “grief letter”³ he wrote to his dead father during treatment:



Image 1: Mark Prest, Performance at HOME. Still from My Recoverist Family, 2017 (Source: Amanda Ravetz)

I wrote this letter to my long since dead father... somewhere towards the end of my time in rehab ... On recently reading it back, I noticed some glaring gaps. I don't tell him that I am either gay, alcoholic, or in treatment. These absences speak of denial, guilt and shame. What insanity to be fearful of rejection from the dead! As part of my (treatment) graduation, I was asked to write and read aloud this letter to my fellow inmates, a ritual of moving to the last stage. In the main, they were white, male, and straight. To my knowledge, yes, the only out gay in the rehab. It felt uncomfortable in that room to speak of my failed relationship hangovers. All those glaring eyes, looking at me like a novelty, or an exhibit from a freak show. So, I didn't, and left there with my many queer hurts and harms still firmly in place, my gay recovery identity at odds, and even now I'm still

³ In rehabilitation treatment people are often encouraged to write a grief letter as a form of reconciliation.

feeling conflicted. Now nearly a decade since, with you, with this, I'm finally seeking integration of these two polarised and opposing viewpoints, towards a more liveable identity fit.

The letter was written at a moment and in a place in which Mark found himself unseen and unsupported as a gay man. In our discussions about the project and the film, Mark reflected on the fact that, although his performance used the letter which he had written many years ago, he had here restaged it in a new way. He chooses to rework the letter into a performance in a space in which he seeks to reconcile his conflicted Queer and recovery identities and through which he hopes to establish a more knowing sense of his masculinity through choosing to open out the possibility of a more intimate and honest exchange with his deceased father. This restaging opened new possibilities for Mark and for the audience. Mark hoped that having his experiences heard and recognised in a public space might be personally and politically transformative; Mark expresses these hopes in terms of the search for an 'experience of de-shaming and self-affirmation.' Mark's performance is powerful, partly because he delivers it in a calm and measured rhythm and cadence, in which the musicality of his delivery freights the words with another layer of meaning conveyed through its presentational symbolisation (Langer, 1942). Delivered in this way, it draws the audience into a shared reflection on a larger set of questions about the things that we conceal in familial and intimate relationships, often for reasons we do not understand at the time. This example points at two important things that are happening in the project. The first relates to the work that making art together is doing *in* and *on* the project and how attending to this process generates an important directorial impulse for the film. The second, and related, point concerns what kind and status of knowledge-making art together produce within the project and how this is seen and recognised (or misrecognised) by different audience members.

Art can sometimes operate in social practice as a method or means by which some other outcome can be delivered, serving what some describe as an instrumental function (Holden, 2006), or it can imbue a social process, deliberately diminishing the distinction between method and outcome (Kester, 2011). As we observed in the introduction, the film attends to two kinds of space in the project, cutting between the nomadic art workshops and the final performance event. In what we are shown of the workshops, we come to appreciate that sharing stories is a major component of what the group does together in this space. These stories told in the workshops *could* have been retold in their original form in the final performances, building on the role of storytelling in formal and informal treatment and recovery settings. In these spaces, personal testimony is recog-

nised as a powerful and important mode of relating, sharing, and learning together; and it is recognised that stories can be deployed different people and that these different tellings—and retellings—can produce different effects (Roy et al., 2020).

However, part of our impulse in this paper is to explore the implications of the filmmakers' decision to unsettle the individual stories told in the project in the final film. Writing about the work of Laurent Berlant (2011) Hua Hsu (2019) notes that some modes of storytelling (especially in sentimental fiction) provide implied 'solutions to problems that feel unresolvable in real life.' Hsu (ibid.) goes on to suggest that in order to unpick this tendency we need to find 'configurations that don't simply reproduce the same old patterns.' The art making in the project opened out a space in which people could begin to share stories about their own lives, and through self-expropriation⁴ (Ricco 2015) could give meaning to aspects of their own experiences in new ways. By creating performances for the final event, the group members were able to draw on their own stories but rather than repeating them, were able to generate new and to a degree changed "configurations" from this source material. These performances worked with deeply personal and intimate issues, but in ways which allowed for altered modes of telling, opening up new ways for the audience to relate to the experiences, as well as generating new forms of understanding, as Mark's example above shows. The performances evoked humour, self-reflection, and empathic exchange, generating a space of togetherness in which the audience was invited to consider the issues alongside the performers rather than being cast in the role of passive observers (Malone, 2017).

This impulse in the project to generate *new* configurations can be seen Adele's final performance titled *10 Steps to a New You* (Image 2). In it, we see Adele performing the role of a librarian, stamping dates on books as she reads out their titles. We soon discover that all of the books are self-help books:

10 Steps to a New You

Super Foods.

I Can Make You Thin.

Change Your Brain, Change Your Body.

Realistic Weight Control

Juice Fasting and Detoxification.

⁴ Rico writes: 'In other words, in their overflowing fulfillment, bodies are self-expropriating, and bodily fluids provide "substantial evidence" of this. To this we might add that *art* is the first and ongoing techno-aesthetic presentation of this self-expropriation.' (2015)

The X Factor diet,
The C-word.
Reverse Ageing
Barefoot Doctor's Invincibility Training.
Rapid Cognitive Therapy
The Yoga Year
Rational Recovery, The New Cure for Substance Addiction
Barefoot Doctor's Urban warrior, A Spiritual Survival Guide.
Light Emerging, The Union of Bliss and Emptiness.



Image 2: Adele Performance at HOME. Still, My Recoverist Family 2017 (Source: Amanda Ravetz)

Adele's performance offers a powerful parody of the parasitical self-help industry with its endless list of publications and false promises. After reading out the list of books, Adele reflects on her difficult relationship to this genre, which she now recognises often provided implied 'solutions to problems' that felt 'unresolvable in real life,' and often extended her sense of isolation and personal failure. She says 'I began to see many of the authors of the books that I had devoured as vultures and vampires feeding off vulnerable people like me, as we were trying desperately to heal ourselves.' In some ways Adele's reflections are reminiscent of Anne Boyer's powerful memoir (*The Undying*)

which offers a Marxist and feminist reading of her own experience of breast cancer, and through which she seeks to oppose narratives confined to individual triumph or tragedy, observing:

To tell the story of one's own breast cancer is supposed to be to tell a story of "surviving" via neoliberal self-management—the narrative is of the atomised individual done right, mammogrammed, of disease cured with compliance, 5K runs, organic green smoothies and positive thought (Boyer, 2019, p. 9)

Boyer (ibid.) points out a number of uncomfortable truths about cancer treatment, identifying the ways in which stories which tap into a particular narrative frame are often foregrounded in breast cancer care, whilst others are marginalised and side-lined. In contrast, the performances seen in *My Recoverist Family* make a series of interpretative demands on the audience and offer no easy resolutions. In this respect, the performances are provocative rather than "ameliorative" (Bishop, 2012), as the film seeks to convey the complex and messy strands and links between personal biography, social and structural issues and attempts at recovery.

At the final event on the lead artist's initiative, the audience are invited to choose and wear a badge which either says *recovered* or *unrecovered* – with some audience members choosing to wear both. This provocation names and critiques the binary implied by the idea of recovery, something which infiltrates recovery and the landscape of treatment and which Ali reckons with at the beginning of his scenic composition. Here is an excerpt:

And there are stories—of shame, of decline, of guilt, of acts of mistreatment—delivered, received—and we *feel* them all.

And there are performances, linked and unlinked to the stories, overlapping and disconnected...

Dressing up—in fruit costumes—laughter, smiles, shared food, shared recollections. Costumes, clothes—prawn cocktail and ready salted, feelings, the shaming binaries of gender, recovered-unrecovered, hopes of transcendence, lived and lost transformations—'The confidence to know I'm not the only one.'

When Ali wrote it, it came as a series of fragments, which Amanda described has "a quality of litany or mythic structure" to it and which reflected 'a poetic response to his admiration for what *My Recoverist Family* shows about the different kinds of storytelling that happen—and are desirable—for people with lived experiences of addiction and recovery.' Ali's composition reflected something he became interested in as our

work together unfolded, the form through which the stories undergo a transformation in the project. Ali's listing of film events and impressions such as 'prawn cocktail and ready salted' (Hoyles' terms for dressing up or being in civvies) enacts what he is also concerned to draw out of My Recoverist Family: how a certain kind of storytelling, condensed, tangential, suggestive, lyrical can open a space for more and different meanings to be unearthed and attended to.

Throughout our discussions, Ali has been interested in the differences between the workshops and the final performance. The appeal to him of My Recoverist Family is in how it registers some of the complex relational work the group does in the workshops, in which the participants grasp towards the evocation of a shared conceptual world of being queer, and then in the performance of a qualitatively different form of story emerging. Jonathan Lear's book (2006) about the last great Chief of the Crow Nation, Plenty Coup demonstrates how stories and actions gain identity via their location in a conceptual world; so when there is a loss—or absence—of this location in a shared social and cultural space, there is an impoverishment of story. Lear (*ibid.*, p. 32) suggests, 'This is a *real loss*, not just one that is described from a certain point of view. It is *the real loss of a point of view.*' (emphasis in original). Ali has been interested in how My Recoverist Family bears witness to a queer experience of oppression, of substance use, and of exposure to a policy-driven economically-attuned binary narrative about recovery in a way which is redolent of the ruptured conceptual world that Lear describes. For Ali, part of the power of My Recoverist Family is that it registers the ways in which queer experience is shaped and formed by social relations and how acknowledging these dynamics of power and inequality, are, in practice, vital to generating new understandings (Rose, 2014).

Amanda is concerned with how to approach explorations of social suffering alongside others through artistic and visual anthropological means. She holds to what Ingold (2014) describes as a process of undergoing in which, rather than employing mastery by extracting sense from materials, there is a submission to these materials, assemblages and relations. In responding to the dialogues that made up the project, Amanda found it important to avoid grasping themes, stories, or issues, attempting instead to sit with them, letting things arise somatically without necessarily trying to explain or resolve them fully. This is a practice that is defined by a commitment to *negative capability*, the ability to be *in uncertainty* without irritably reaching after doubt (Bion, 1970), which could also be described as an openness to reverie, both as an experience and a mode of knowing, often difficult for the academic researcher to conjure (Ravetz, 2018b). Aman-

da's scenic composition led Ali and Mark to comment that it was imbued with 'the filmmaker's eye,' because it registers the visual, painterly aesthetic and auditory qualities of the film, describing a palette of colours running through it, noting the 'purity' and 'vibrancy' of these and contrasting them with the darkly lit space of the interwoven performance. Here are some short excerpts from Amanda's scenic composition.

The colour palette has a lot of greens, yellows and oranges. This begins with the fruit costumes, with their pure reds, yellows, whites, and greens, later picked up in other scenes—warm, live colours, threaded through the art project and into the editing. Whilst making the film, I had noticed this palette, but in a subtle or even barely conscious or peripheral way.

Jackie Haynes wearing an apple green dress, leaning over ... with her camera to take pictures. This fresh fruit green, juicy and lush, vibrant, vital but also as Adele says in the apple portrait scene, capable of becoming cider, one of her favoured intoxicants. The ferment of lush fruit that involves a chemical change, and, to use word play, foments something, stirs up trouble—not an altogether bad thing, because to stir up is to aerate, to assist the composting process, to go into places of generative digestion and transformation.



Image 3: Fruit Costumes made by Jackie Haynes. Still, My Recoverist Family 2017 (Source: Amanda Ravetz)

Amanda made several associations between the colour palette and the fruit costumes worn by participants during the first workshop, (Image 3) and the intertwining flesh of body and world through different forms and modes of material being (Sobchack, 2004, p. 3). The composition also drew attention to the fact of things sitting beneath, or on the edge of her consciousness in viewing the film, *notes, patterns, threads, braids, textiles* on the periphery of her awareness: it is through attending to aspects of the film registered through an aesthetic that is 'DIY, porous, crafted, straggly and messy.' This choppy aesthetic felt like a double-edged quality for Amanda,⁵ but, discussing this as a group, we identified the filmmaker's impulse and commitment to *trail* rather than *trap* the materials produced in the project, tracing and registering the gestalt emerging from the work rather than providing narrative coherence (Vaughan-Lee, 2020). Hence, in distinct contrast both to 'sentimental fiction's' impulse to resolution (Berlant, 2011) and narrative social science's prevailing impulse to 'explanation' (Abbott, 2007), Amanda and Huw's impulse is to allow a process of 'enworlding,' where mind-body and body-world are mutually enfolded (Chamarette, 2012), mirroring how the participants rework their source stories into final performances, tolerating the uncomfortable absence of coherence in order to allow for the emergence of something not yet known.

Following this train of thought, we have also been interested in the responses of different people to these aesthetic qualities of the film. Ali has always been struck by his recollection that at one of the screening events one person who took part in the project revealed some disappointment with the film, suggesting that it had not altogether told their story as they would have done, thereby unsettling their sense of narrative coherence. We view this as an important reading of the film, and we take seriously the possibility that the perceived infraction of one's narrative might be unsettling if the form in which it is told (or retold) does not capture in full the original intentions of the story(teller) (Frank, 2010; Roy et al., 2020). This interpretation opens important questions about the different work that art and storytelling do within the project and also questions the filmmaker's decision not to focus on reproducing—in full—the individual stories of those who took part. It is not our intention to propose one privileged reading of the film in this regard, nor to deny that the film has invoked feelings of disappointment in some people who have viewed it, including some who did not take part in the project. We also do not wish to deny that these feelings might have been avoided had the film been made in a way in which the coherent retelling of the recovery stories of the seven participants was its main focus and form. However, we propose that presenting the

⁵ The filmmaker is not immune to what Sylke Rene Meyer (2014) calls post-diction narrative, tied as it is to dominant systems of power of the last 10000 years.

work in a way which foregrounded narrative coherence would have narrowed its communicative capacities and demanded less of the audience. We also argue that the non-narrative aesthetic qualities of the film emerged from the filmmakers' decision to follow David Hoyle's commitment to deliver on the epistemic possibilities opened out by the project, in which he sought to honour the *deep* and complex *experiential knowledge* of those who took part—through talk, movement, art-making *and* performance (Holgate et al., 2012). This commitment involved attending carefully to each individual's story, something that contributed so much to the sharing in the group and the art that emerged from the group process. However, it also involved a transformation of these stories into the final performance pieces through the process of collaborative art-making, and we argue that these final performances made by the group members were not reducible to the individual stories in any simple or obvious way.

Returning to the beginning/the mouth of the tale

In the film *My Recoverist Family*, we see a group of LGBT+ people working together to explore, understand, and articulate issues around recovery from substance use with reference to their own lives and biographies, as well as wider social issues. What we see, as an audience, is a film that continuously cuts between the workshops and the final performance event. One artistic impulse of the project was to find ways for the group to be comfortable with each other's bodily being and to offer one another companionship, reciprocity, care, kindness, and protection. The group process was nomadic, and storytelling was one important form within it. A second artistic impulse that developed within the project took the form of developing a series of performances for a final public event. These performances made by individuals with the support of a producer drew on people's own stories; however, in the performances, these stories found expression in ways which were condensed, tangential, suggestive and lyrical, rather than representational. By attending to this important artistic impulse of the project, the film opens out the possibility of different ways of telling recovery stories. Moreover, through a commitment to explore rather than explain, it manages to trace the nature of the connections developed through the project without attempting to explain or resolve these. What we come to appreciate through this is that the search for recovery amongst this group of LGBT+ people is 'not a trajectory or journey towards some obvious destination and that it involves many resignations, and obvious losses as well as clear examples of healing and benefit' (Roy 2020). As Hsu (2019), writing about the work of Laurent Berlant (2011) suggests:

In the absence of real stability—the state of affairs that we must come to terms with—there is still the possibility of true solidarity, the experience of having adventures and being in the impasse together, waiting for the other shoe to drop, and also, allowing for some healing and resting, waiting for it not to drop.

We argue that, in the film, the stories told by participants are more evocative because they are glimpsed rather than seen whole and we suggest that this is important because troubling the relationship between the person, the story, and the art complicates the recovery story as a form (Woods et al., 2019). We argue that by attending to the material in this way, the film draws the audience into this exploration, rather than casting them in the role of passive observers. This is not always comfortable either for those involved or for audiences coming to the film who are forced to live with ambivalence and uncertainty.

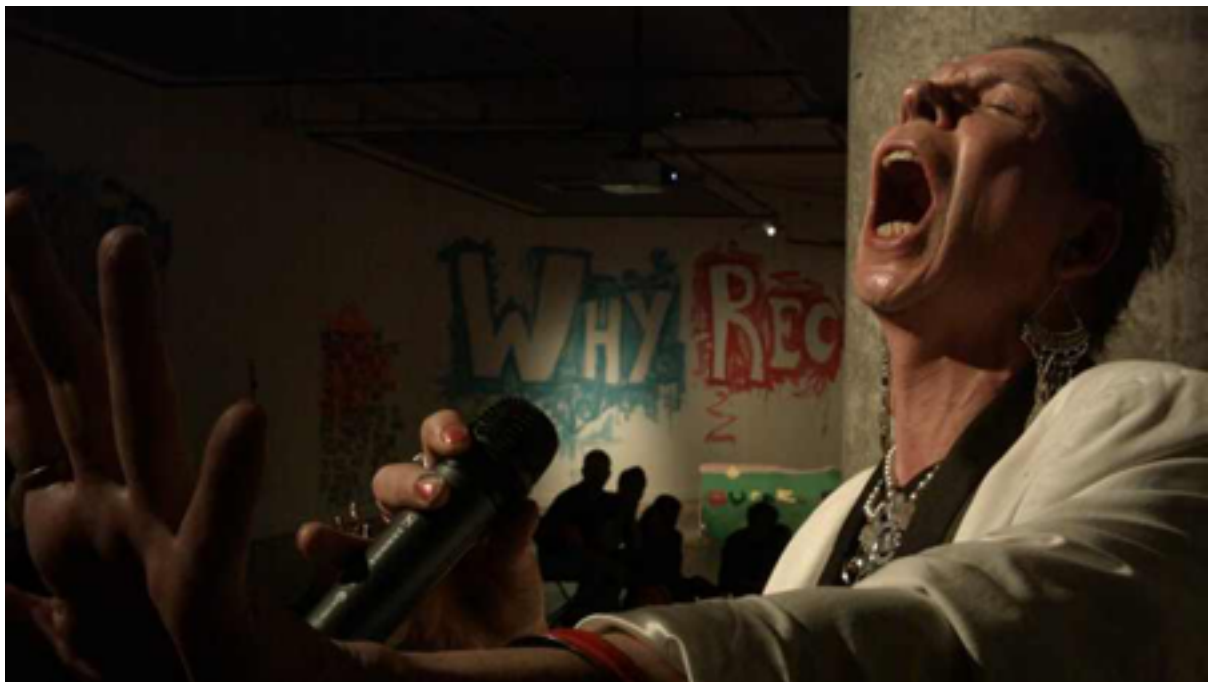


Image 4: David Hoyle, performance at HOME, Still My Recoverist Family, 2017 (Source: Amanda Ravetz)

In Mark's scenic composition, he reflected on David's emergence through the project. For much of the project, as curator, he was aware of David's discomfort at many points, not wanting to be identified as a spokesperson for recovery and how he was 'sometimes ... unsure of his place.' At the same time, Mark was moved when he felt that David had finally 'found his comfortable place as the Mothership,' which he believed happened in the final performance when David referred to the group as *my recoverist family*, the phrase eventually chosen as the film's title by the filmmakers. The ambivalence David

experienced is also an important feature of the film; by the end, the audience is left no clearer about the futures of those who have participated in the project. Mark reflects this ongoing ambivalence in his scenic composition:

I am still undecided as to what new knowledge on Queer recovery the film imparts. Did it meet my expectations? Well, of course not. Recovery teaches us that expectations are never met so better not to have them. It was a starting point—a means to open-up an ongoing discourse as to what lies beyond.

In this paper we have attempted, in keeping with our *object* of knowledge, and with our commitment to anthropology as *undergoing*, to suggest ways in which the film *My Recoverist Family* provides important glimpses of how art becomes the fleshy ground of metabolising structural violence, in which the cruelly optimistic tropes of resolution are replaced by an evocation of solidarity through artistic self-expropriation (Berlant, 2011). The value of this is that the audience is left to live with an understanding that many LGBT+ people continue to lack basic rights and recognition and continue to experience themselves as outsiders whose existence presents a problem for the straight world, including in recovery communities. However, at the same time, we are able to see how involvement in making art and taking it public constitutes an important moving with events rather than a forcible mastering of them; and through this paper that the same might be said of anthropology. By choosing a certain kind of storytelling—condensed, tangential, suggestive, lyrical—and adopting anthropological approaches to creativity described by Ingold (2014) as *undergoing*, the film shows something of the movement that art can help effect from operating primarily as a *site of escape* for oppressed people towards becoming a *zone of socio-cultural resistance* and epistemic transformation.

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Povzetek

Članek obravnava film *My Recoverist Family*, v katerem je imel vsak izmed avtorjev imel drugačno vlogo: antropološki filmski ustvarjalec (Amanda), komisar projekta in udeleženec v njem (Mark) ter član občinstva in kritik (Ali). Film prikazuje skupino LGBT + oseb, ki uporabljajo umetnost za raziskovanje okrevanja po uporabi opojnih substanc glede na njihove biografije in širša družbena vprašanja. Prispevek preiskuje interakcijo vizualnih in uprizoritvenih umetnosti ter pripovedovanja zgodb v dotiku, artikuliranju in predstavljanju glavnega fokusa filma – krivic, katerim so izpostavljeni LGBT + ljudje. Z uporabo ideje o vznemirjanju pripovedi analiziramo, kako ustvarjalci filma dajejo prednost raziskovanju pred razlago in trenutnemu razumevanju pred narativno skladnostjo, razlago in razpletom pripovedi. Da bi postopek pisanja uskladili z metodologijo snemanja filma (pod vplivom razumevanja kreativnosti dela antropologa Tima Ingolda), smo uporabili metodološko orodje, k razvoju katerega je prispeval Ali, imenovano scenška kompozicija. Trdimo, da je pomen prispevka vsebinski in metodološki: umetniško presnovljene pripovedi omogočajo zapletenost "zgodb, ki jih poslušamo", to pa začne rušiti binarnosti, okoli katerih sta zgrajena večina sedanjih politik in praks zdravljenja odvisnosti.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: LGBT + okrevanje, proces, snemanje filmov, pripoved, umetnost

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