The last refuge: food stories from Myanmar to Coffs Harbour

Mandy Hughes
Southern Cross University

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The last refuge: food stories from Myanmar to Coffs Harbour

A Myanmar jungle garden in Coffs Harbour, Australia

Mandy Hughes

BA (ANU), MLitt (ANU), Grad Dip Ed (UC)

School of Arts and Social Sciences

Southern Cross University

Doctor of Philosophy

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The last refuge: food stories from Myanmar to Coffs Harbour

To access the online documentary link

contact Mandy Hughes:

amanda.hughes@scu.edu.au
Statement of authorship

I certify that the work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original, except as acknowledged in the text, and that the material has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

I acknowledge that I have read and understood the University's rules, requirements, procedures and policy relating to my higher degree research award and to my thesis. I certify that I have complied with the rules, requirements, procedures and policy of the University (as they may be from time to time).

Signed                      Date 21/6/16
Abstract

Imagine you have spent more than 20 years of your life living in a refugee camp. You have fled your homeland with only your family and your stories. You have faced trauma, abuse, poverty and hunger. You yearn to reconnect to your culture, especially when you arrive in your new home, one that is unfamiliar and daunting. This is the scenario faced by many of the participants in this study. Somewhat surprisingly, it is food that can serve to reconnect people and rebuild lives.

This study maps the food journeys of people from Myanmar to the regional\(^1\) city of Coffs Harbour, Australia. The original contribution to knowledge is identified in both the topic and the research product. The project is unique in that it focuses on the social and cultural role of food in the lives of former refugees from Myanmar now resident in Coffs Harbour. Existing food related studies in Australia depict more established settler communities, such as those from African countries, and these studies come largely from health sciences, often focusing on nutritional outcomes. This interdisciplinary study used focused ethnography and participatory/collaborative visual research methods to produce a documentary and written thesis.

The creation of a documentary allowed the food journeys of Myanmar settlers to be conveyed in a multi-dimensional, textural way that depicts and engages multiple senses associated with food interactions. Whilst having academic value, the documentary is also aimed at a wider audience through screenings at local, national and international film festivals. The use of participatory research methods has allowed the film to develop into a

\(^1\) For the purpose of this research, regional Australia is defined as ‘all of the towns, small cities and areas that lie beyond the major capital cities’ (Regional Australia Institute n.d.)
product that is deeply connected to the participants. It has become their film, their medium to tell their stories; as well as an opportunity to stand up in front of the Coffs Harbour community and be proud of their culture. This research tells a positive settlement story, one where differences and challenges have been overcome and a resilient community has utilised networks built to confidently mark out its place in a new home.
Acknowledgements

This study was achieved in collaboration with the Myanmar community in Coff Harbour. I have many people to thank for facilitating this. Firstly, a huge thanks to the key informants who provided important background information for the study and who made introductions, which opened the door for me to engage with this truly inspiring community. To all of the participants, I thank you for your time and your valuable contributions. I feel privileged to have met you all and look forward to continuing our friendship.

My sincerest gratitude goes to Htun Htun Oo, the Myanmar community leader who made this project possible. Htun, despite his many commitments and responsibilities, agreed to come on this adventure with me and see it through to fruition. This study simply would not have been realised without Htun’s enthusiasm and support.

I acknowledge the invaluable guidance from my excellent supervisors Dr Angela Coco and Dr Lisa Milner who shared a wealth of knowledge with me throughout this project. I thank you for your patience and your insights. Appreciation also goes to my colleagues (staff and students) at Southern Cross University for your encouragement and interest.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Food author Naomi Duguid conceptualises food as ‘the last refuge’. She states ‘the kitchen and the dinner table are places where people can relax and feel safe, where they can take a break from the challenges of the world outside’ (Duguid 2012, p. 2). The food experiences of humanitarian migrants from Myanmar, now settled in the Coffs Harbour region of northern New South Wales, Australia, demonstrate this to be the case. These experiences are complex, challenging and noteworthy, and they tell settlement stories in authentic and relevant ways.

This inter-disciplinary study draws on ideas from sociology, anthropology and media studies in order to document, analyse and understand the social and cultural factors that influence food choices in a new and unfamiliar environment. In this case the ‘documentation’ (or rather ‘representation’) takes the form of written findings and analysis; as well as a documentary, informed by ethnographic and participatory research practices. In this instance the written thesis accompanying the artifact (documentary) differs from the standard exegesis format that prioritises reflection on the creative practice. Whilst such reflection is essential and indeed present, I seek to balance this and recognise the significance of the topic itself by attributing equal weight to the documentary and the research findings presented in the thesis and the documentary. This thesis therefore takes a hybridised form of both social science thesis, and exegesis-style reflection and documentation of creative output.

Research aims and objectives

The overarching aim of this study is to explore and document the foodways of former refugees in Australia by investigating the social and cultural factors that enhance or inhibit the consumption of nutritious, culturally appropriate/desirable and sustainable food. ‘Sustainable’ is used here in a holistic way that includes environmental, social, cultural and health dimensions (UNESCO 2010). Such sustainability is essential in promoting well-being,
and achieving well-being should be a fundamental goal of all settlement programs. It is important to note the inclusion of ‘well-being’ in the World Health Organization’s long-standing definition of health (World Health Organization 1948). For the purpose of this research, well-being is defined as:

a dynamic state, in which the individual is able to develop their potential, work productively and creatively, build strong and positive relationships with others, and contribute to their community. It is enhanced when an individual is able to fulfil their personal and social goals and achieve a sense of purpose in society. (Government Office for Science 2008, p. 10)

This study therefore explores the ways in which food can be connected to the attainment of well-being in settlement.

Specific objectives guiding this research are:

- To understand and share knowledge of the significant role of food availability and choice in the lives of Myanmar refugees and how this impacts on settlement.

- To examine and understand the socio-economic factors associated with food choices made by the research participants. These include education (language skills in particular), transport, and income, as well as access to local sustainable food systems such as community gardens and home gardens.

- To consider whether or not access to desired foods would promote wellbeing (physical and mental), as well as meet with the aims of the ‘right to food’ in terms of providing empowerment and community connectedness.
To contribute to a feeling of empowerment and strengthened identity by supporting the research participants in telling and disseminating their food stories, and representing their culture in a documentary.

Promoting empowerment is an essential feature of this research. For the purpose of this study, empowerment is defined as: ‘a process through which women and men in disadvantaged positions increase their access to knowledge, resources, and decision-making power, and raise their awareness of participation in their communities, in order to reach a level of control over their own environment’ (UNHCR 2001).

Additional aims include recognising food as both a fundamental human right (as indicated in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights), and an important means of cultural transmission. It is hoped that presenting some of the research in a non-traditional academic format (documentary) will make it widely accessible and will lead to greater understanding of settlement experiences. Such understanding may also contribute to further investment in appropriate resources such as access to gardens, more targeted healthy eating campaigns, and opportunities for business development. Local settlement agencies supported the objectives of this project (C Nolan 2013, pers. comm., 1 May).

This research meets the aims of the Australian Government’s Strategic Research Priorities (Department of Industry 2013) by addressing issues relevant to: 1) ‘living in a changing environment’, 2) ‘promoting population health and wellbeing’, and 3) ‘managing our food and water assets’. These contemporary issues are clearly of concern to a wide range of
disciplines and contexts in a changing global environment.

**Rationale**

This project is significant because it combines discussion and analysis of the important issue of food availability and choices, and how this is connected to placemaking through the continuation, interruption and re-definition of cultural practices, as well as the implications for health (physical and mental) and well-being. Poor post-settlement nutrition and other undesirable health outcomes for people from refugee backgrounds have been documented in Australia, North America and the United Kingdom (Careyva et al. 2015; Ewen 2012; Gallegos, Ellies & Wright 2008; Hadley & Sellen 2006; Manandhar et al. 2006; Marshall et al. 2015; Pereira, Larder & Somerset 2010; Renzaho et al. 2011). In order to address this potential problem, Whitehead (2004) identifies the need to examine the sociocultural contexts in which decisions about health related behaviours (food choices, in this instance) take place. Hence, by examining the social realm of food choices we can potentially reduce health risks and promote wellbeing in settler communities. Existing research in this area comes predominantly from the health sciences and so this study seeks to add an important sociocultural dimension. This is essential given the increasing awareness of the social determinants of health (Germov 2014; Marmot 2005; Wilkinson & Pickett 2010). Furthermore, many existing Australian and international studies focus on the experiences of refugees from Africa (Cummings et al. 2008; Hadley, Zodhiate & Sellen 2006; Pereira, Larder & Somerset 2010; Renzaho et al. 2011; Renzaho, McCabe & Swinburn 2012; Wilson et al. 2010) and this topic has not been explored in relation to Myanmar humanitarian migrants in regional Australia.

The issue of food provisioning and preferences in Australia is contentious as indicated by the
now defunct National Food Plan green paper (Australian Government 2012) and the ensuing debate that followed its release and demise. Such policy documents focus on trade and other economic outcomes at the expense of considering the sociocultural role of food, especially in the context of vulnerable communities. This is where the food experiences of former refugees, in this case those of the Myanmar community in the Coffs Harbour, can provide meaningful insights into the complexity of promoting and providing access to sustainable food systems and understanding the reasons behind behavioral patterns in food choice.

The study is unique in its representation of refugee food issues as the findings take the form of audiovisual and non-traditional academic research. Furthermore, a common approach to the topic is to employ quantitative methods commonly utilised in nutritional studies (Gallegos, Ellies & Wright 2008; O’Reilly, O’Shea & Bhusumane 2012; Pereira, Larder & Somerset 2010). Although, these studies are valuable, it is hoped that my new research will, by applying qualitative methods and visual research, offer more nuanced interpretations and perspectives, as well as insights into the lived experience of settler food choices.

I was personally motivated to carry out this research from the perspective of an Anglo-Australian woman committed to promoting social justice and cross-cultural understanding, especially for people from refugee backgrounds. I was drawn to the Myanmar community in order to learn more about their cultural background, as well as their current settlement experiences. This interest stemmed partly from my extensive travel in Asia, as well as my teaching experience in Asian Studies. I also held a strong to desire to learn more about the emerging, multicultural Coffs Harbour community and share this knowledge with others.
Research output

This study is presented as two research products:

1) A documentary, *The last refuge: food stories from Myanmar to Coffs Harbour*. The documentary was launched as a part of the Southern Cross University Fusion (cultural diversity) Festival in August 2015. The film has subsequently been selected and screened in local, national and international film festivals (Antropofest 2016; Colourfest 2016; Ethnografilm 2016; FIFEQ 2016; One with a movie camera 2015). The film has also been made available on DVD as an educational and community resource.

2) This written thesis

Because of this binary approach, Milech and Schilo’s (2004, p.7) Research-Question Model has been used in the study as it emphasises the integration of both components of the doctorate in order to ‘research…question[s] in two languages’ (p.7). Furthermore, the different forms of communication (documentary and thesis) are interconnected to present an ‘affinity’ rather than depending on the written word to annotate the creative work (Paperstergiadis 2001, in Milech & Schilo 2004, p. 8). The two products are therefore presented as a complete whole, they complement and extend on each other to offer a multilayered interpretation of the participants’ food stories.

Research questions

The study poses two key research questions:
1) What social and cultural factors influence food choices for Myanmar refugees (settlers) in regional Australia?

2) How can visual research methods be utilised to benefit the research participants, as well as educate and engage service providers and the wider community?

The importance of the relationship and compatibility between question and method, as identified by van Manen (1990), is embraced here. The research approach is outlined in detail in Chapter 3 but it is worth noting the overall intention is to explore the lived experience of the participants and seek to create a rich portrayal of their engagement with food in the context of settlement.

**Burma versus Myanmar**

In the early stages of my research I made a deliberate choice to use the country name *Burma* instead of *Myanmar*. This choice was made because the name Union of Myanmar (now Republic of the Union of Myanmar) was imposed by unelected military rulers and pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi encouraged supporters of democracy to use the name Burma (BBC News 2007). I initially had adopted the name Burma to show support for the pro-democracy movement. However, the naming of Burma/Myanmar is strongly contested and there are many different interpretations as to who named it and what their motivation was (Dittmer 2008; Lintner n.d.). I was challenged about this upon entering the field and commencing discussions with key informants and participants. Some key informants suggested that many people from Burma now residing in Coffs Harbour prefer to use the name Myanmar and this is reflected in the naming of the *Coffs Harbour Myanmar Association*. Some participants asserted the name Myanmar is more inclusive than Burma as
it does not prioritise the Burman ethnicity but recognises a united Burma with multiple ethnicities. One participant who supported the use of Myanmar over Burma, stated ‘for me I like to bring along my brothers and sisters from different ethnic tribes, I like them to be included’. However, others have stated that this adoption of the name Myanmar merely indicates the success of the military in convincing the people that their agenda is about inclusivity, rather than dominance (Lintner n.d.). Nonetheless, given that my methodology prioritises collaborative and respectful engagement with my participants, I have chosen to adopt the name Myanmar throughout this thesis. I endeavor to remain true to my participants’ preferences throughout this work whilst maintaining support for a ‘free’ Burma/Myanmar. There are, however, times when participants use the names Burma and Myanmar interchangeably. I have transcribed interviews verbatim, so I have chosen to keep these inconsistencies in quotes from participants.

**Research context**

Migrants whose country of origin is Myanmar make up a significant proportion of applicants to the offshore humanitarian program\(^2\) in Australia. In the years 2012-2013, 2,352 these applicants were granted humanitarian visas for Australia, this represents 18.8 per cent of all applicants, from all countries (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2013). In recent years, around 20 per cent of humanitarian migrants to Australia have been settled in specifically identified regional areas, including Coffs Harbour (Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2014). Reasons for establishing the regional settlement program include the desire to build community capacity, increase diversity, provide suitable employment opportunities and offer a welcoming community for new arrivals (Department of

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\(^2\) The offshore humanitarian program provides assistance to those outside Australia seeking asylum via UNHCR channels (Refugee Council of Australia n.d.)
Immigration and Border Protection 2014). Many former refugees from Myanmar come from rural areas, therefore regional resettlement could potentially offer favourable conditions and opportunities; and provides a more connected social and physical environment than that of a large Australian city. There are currently more than 300 Myanmar settlers residing in Coffs Harbour (Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2016a). Although the arrival statistics in settlement reports show a number lower than this, children born in Thailand, Malaysia and India of parents born in Myanmar need to be included and this puts the population well beyond 300, with some estimates of more than 400 (key informant 2014, pers. comm., 8 September).

Myanmar is a nation of considerable ethnic diversity (see Appendix 1) and this diversity is also present in Coffs Harbour. Here, all the major ethnic groups of Myanmar are represented, with the Chin community (which is in itself made up of many sub-ethnicities and tribal groups) making up the largest percentage of the population (Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2016b). Lesser numbers of former refugees come from Burman/Myanmar, Karen, Karenni, Kachin, Rakhine, Kayan, Shan and Mon ethnic groups (Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2016b). Various religious groups are also represented with the majority being from Christian denominations, including Baptists, Presbyterians and Catholics, as well as an established Buddhist community (key informant 2014, pers. comm., 8 September). There are currently no members of the much persecuted Rohingya community living Coffs Harbour. However, I was present during a community meeting where members were asked if Rohingya would be welcome in Coffs Harbour. The positive response indicated a genuine desire to achieve inclusivity in this diverse community.

3 The names Burman and Myanmar are often used together or interchangeably to describe the majority ethnic group. When referring to the ethnic group I will use Burman/Myanmar to distinguish from the broader, multi-ethnic Myanmar community in Coffs Harbour.
Coffs Harbour is a regional city in coastal northern New South Wales, Australia, with a population of more than 70,000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016). The region experiences higher than average rainfall and a mild climate (Australian Bureau of Meteorology n.d). The sub-tropical Coffs Harbour region is an ideal location for growing food and this has the potential to align with the aspirations of those from traditional gardening cultures as found in Myanmar. There is a sizeable agriculture industry with fruits and nuts (bananas, blueberries and macadamias in particular) making up a large proportion of crops grown (Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences 2015). All of these factors contribute to creating a lush, green landscape, reminiscent of parts of Southeast Asia.

Whilst regional settlement can offer hope of the good life, there are still many issues of concern for those who relocate to foreign and often distant countries. These include difficulties with language, the availability of appropriate support services, mental health and other health issues, and establishment of identity and community connectedness (Bird, Brough & Cox 2012; Ewen 2012; Hiruy 2009; Schweitzer et al. 2011). In some cases, these issues are in fact more challenging in regional environments due to less developed infrastructure that may not adequately service emerging and diverse communities. The study of food choices and consumption is just one of many possible topics of exploration that will assist in understanding the complex and varied challenges faced by this population.

For refugees, their long journeys fleeing persecution are often characterised by significant food transitions that affect their overall health, well-being and sense of identity (Renzaho 2002). This has relevance starting in their country of origin, in the case of food insecurity in Myanmar (Shwe & Hlaing 2011), and is also present in the temporary host countries where large numbers of Myanmar people reside in refugee camps for many years awaiting
determination of refugee status (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs 2006; UNHCR n.d.b). Food aid provided in these camps might be informed by nutritional best practice but availability does not necessarily mean that aid food will be consumed. Goods may be traded or deemed culturally inappropriate or undesirable due to the monotonous nature of such food aid (Renzaho 2002). The same can apply in the final settlement destination – access does not necessarily equate with consumption. Few studies have explored the necessity of moving on from the notion of access as the key to food security. This is where the social determinants of food must be investigated. Food represents a complex and precarious commodity, it is so much more than meeting nutritional targets and its links to social life, identity and belonging cannot be underestimated (Germov & Williams 2010).

Previous research has highlighted the potential negative impact of living in a food desert (an area where there is little access to nutritious and affordable food) (Larsen & Gilliland 2008; Manandhar et al. 2006; Nelson 2000). This, however, should not be an issue in areas of Australia capable of significant food production due to favourable environmental conditions and social values that embrace the importance of nutritious, local food; such as northern New South Wales (Coffs Harbour Council 2016). Nonetheless, some studies (Pereira, Larder & Somerset 2010) suggest that in areas where nutritious affordable food is readily available to newly arrived refugee households, dietary intake of fruits and vegetables in particular, is still relatively low due to choice or other factors such as cost. Therefore, in some cases, the issue is more about food choice as opposed to availability. The sociocultural contexts of these choices are explored and analysed throughout this thesis.
Chapter overview

This thesis is organised into six chapters exploring the theoretical and lived aspects of Myanmar settler food choices. Chapter 2 provides a theoretical framework for this research by explaining the relevance of the key concepts placemaking and social capital. It then extends the contextual information provided in the introduction by examining the research landscape relevant to this interdisciplinary topic. It identifies key areas for inquiry including the social role of food, migration and food, and Myanmar refugee experiences. It also identifies gaps in the literature that validate further exploration of the role of food for diverse settler groups.

Chapter 3 presents the methodological foundation for this work. It locates the researcher ontologically and explains the research approach undertaken in this study; an approach that prioritises ethical and collaborative research practices. Research methods are outlined, including a discussion on the use and benefits of visual methods. This chapter also articulates the analytical framework that interconnects the documentary and thesis.

Chapter 4 provides a discussion and analysis of key findings. The chapter commences by exploring food-related experiences in the journey seeking refuge, and develops to identify key themes and experiences post settlement. These findings include challenges encountered by participants, as well as the identification of positive ways to ‘make place’, and reconnect to their culture and community through sourcing, growing and cooking preferred foods.

Chapter 5 documents and reflects on the filmmaking process, from recruitment through to production, post-production and dissemination via private and public screenings. The chapter also considers documentary impact and how this can be measured.
Chapter 6 concludes the discussion by revisiting the significance of the social role of food in the participants’ lives and how this continues to contribute to the creation of a strong, proud and resilient community. Recommendations are also presented to suggest potential ways forward in supporting emerging communities to attain well-being through access and engagement with traditional or preferred foods.

Summary

Coffs Harbour supports a substantial Myanmar community due to its participation in the regional Humanitarian Resettlement Program. This community, like others from refugee backgrounds, experiences many challenges and successes throughout the settlement process. By examining the social and cultural role of food, we can begin to understand the lived experiences of this population. It is variously stated that for refugees, food represents a complex and precarious commodity due to the lack of certainty in meeting basic needs in all aspects of daily life. Food is so much more than meeting nutritional targets. For migrants in particular, food is ‘…helping us remember who we are’ (Vue, Wolff & Goto 2011, p. 3) and envisaging who ‘we’ might become in our new homeland. It is therefore worthwhile to study connections to culturally specific foods in order to understand a community.
Chapter 2 Literature review

Food research has become an increasingly important area of study since the late twentieth century and therefore there is a vast collection of work on the social and cultural aspects of food engagement. Likewise, the study of refugee settlement is growing in terms of publication numbers, diversity of communities studied and methodologies employed. Although there are some studies specifically pertaining to food and refugees, these have tended to focus on the nutritional and/or food security aspects of the topic; as opposed to the sociocultural factors that both influence food choice and allow for the continuation (or adaptation) of cultural traditions in relation to food. Many of these studies focus predominantly on African migrants in Australia and other settlement countries, therefore demonstrating the necessity for this work.

To establish a clear theoretical framework, this literature review first defines and discusses the relevant concepts of placemaking and social capital, and the links between the two ideas. Other concepts with explanatory power include identity, belonging and embodiment. These ideas will be further explored here and are also embedded in the findings and discussion section of this thesis. The concepts of placemaking and social capital in particular are integral to this discussion because they underpin successful settlement\(^4\) by facilitating real life ways to feel socially connected and at home in a new and foreign community.

This literature review then explores research pertaining to; the sociocultural role of food, background information on refugees from Myanmar, migration and food, nutrition and food

\(^4\) There is much discussion on how to define refugee ‘settlement’ in Australia (Bird 2013). This study uses the Refugee Council of Australia’s (2016) conceptualisation of settlement as being a two-way process between the settler and the wider community, and not just something that refugees ‘do’ or have done to them, and it includes tangible and non-tangible outcomes.
choices, and gardens and well-being. The chapter concludes by identifying gaps in the research which therefore validate an important role for this study on food, migration and the Myanmar community.

**Theoretical framework**

The theoretical starting point for my research recognises and embraces the sociological commitment to social justice and equity (Feagin 2004). This is relevant as my study focuses on a marginalised community with limited access to traditional power sources. Such an approach influenced my methodology, as well as my selection of theories and theorists that inform the analysis. My commitment to social justice also offers a guiding philosophy that promotes ethical and equitable research practices and seeks to address issues of social inequality.

I use placemaking as a primary theory to locate the foodways of the Coffs Harbour Myanmar community. Identification and analysis of placemaking forms an intrinsic part of this study because ‘creating a place for one’s self and for one’s group is central to personal and social existence’ (Gray 2002, p. 39). Placemaking is also instrumental in facilitating community ‘processes and products’ (Gray 2002, p. 40). Furthermore, Sampson and Gifford (2010) claim the idea of connecting place and well-being is under-researched and represents an important area of study in the health of emergent communities.

Placemaking as a concept is said to have emerged in the 1970s in planning theory (Rios & Watkins 2015) but can be increasingly seen in modern anthropology, geography and philosophy (for example Casey 2001; Gupta & Ferguson 1992; Malkki 1992; Pink 2008). Placemaking can be linked to Deleuze and Guattari’s theorisation of ‘assemblage’ (Rios &
Watkins 2015, p. 210). This notion contemplates the merging of bodies, actions, passions, statements and materiality and how these are territorialised and reterritorialised (Deleuze & Guattari 1992, pp. 87-9, pp. 503-5). This concept can be readily applied to the migration experience where identity (body, actions, passions) is re-created and re-negotiated. Rios and Watkins (2015) extend this idea to examine ‘circulations’ of material and immaterial culture. These circulations are relevant to the precarious and uncertain lives of asylum seekers and refugees, as are social relationships to material and non-material culture which contribute to creating a sense of place, and hence a sense of self. The interruption of such circulations can contribute to deterritorialisation (Malkki 1992) and can threaten the relationship to place. This is especially important for people from refugee backgrounds who will have experienced multiple interruptions at the beginning of the journey of forced migration, in interim countries and in their settlement destinations.

Relevant to this study is Rios and Watkins (2015) representation of translocal place. In their study of Hmong diaspora in the United States, they emphasise that place is not limited to geographic boundaries and recognise the ‘multidirectional’ mobilisation of ideas, products and experiences between and within global communities. The authors assert ‘the use of visual materials and material objects enable the symbolic and affective bridge between locations’ (Rios & Watkins 2015, p. 212). This provides a segue to my research where I focus on how food as a visual and material object can be a catalyst for the realisation of place by new arrivals.

An increasing number of publications explore the link between reproducing elements of place and enabling positive settlement for people from refugee and migrant backgrounds (for example Blunt 2003; Brightwell 2012; Brook 2003; Dudley 2011; Hiruy 2009; O'Neill &
This body of research moves beyond the notion of providing basic services for those exposed to trauma, to evaluating the impact of the whole environment (material culture, natural and built environments) or the ‘therapeutic landscapes’ (Sampson & Gifford 2010) on transition and settlement experiences. Place can ‘actively enhance’ healing processes for this population (Sampson & Gifford 2010). O’Neill and Hubbard (2010), in their study on migrant settlement in the United Kingdom, confirm the vital need for developing a sense of self in connection to emplacement. Further, Blunt (2003), in her study of Anglo-Indian home-making conceptualises acts of place that seek to reconnect us with memories of home (or nostalgia) as embodied activities.

Placemaking is deeply connected to achieving a sense of belonging and identity. Kiros Hiruy (2009), in his research on African settlers in Hobart, argues that ‘a common emotional response to forced displacement is to make where they are now like where home used to be…remove the strangeness of the new place…[and] maintain collective memory through cultural activities…’ (2009, p. 95). This is relevant in terms of the placemaking aspects of food, and how the growing, preparation and consumption of food can strengthen and re-invent identity for migrants in a number of ways. However, Sampson and Gifford (2010) note the importance of understanding the way in which people from refugee backgrounds relate to the idea of place as not just being about a yearning for home, but also about the possibilities of creating place in their new home. Identity and belonging, as fluid processes, can be seen in both of these phases of placemaking. In essence, place can be described as ‘space’ inscribed with a sense of belonging (Blommaert 2005, p. 222); one that can comfort, heal and reconnect a forced migrant to their idea of home, as well as offer a sense of hope in their new lives.
This thesis adopts an approach to the study of place that moves on from an architectural, fixed idea of place in space; to one that considers embodied and material practices like food making (growing, cooking, sharing) as being equally capable of reterritorialising the lives of forced migrants. Placemaking, despite its emergence in planning theory, has application to many diverse aspects of refugee settlement. In this context I use the term as a broad umbrella that includes acts of emplacement and sense of place/home.

Place is created within the context of social practices and relations (Witteborn 2011). In order for positive placemaking to occur, people need access to knowledge and materials, as well as networks and supports. Here the concept of social capital can be incorporated in this examination. However, the literature on social capital is vast and there are varying definitions, interpretations and applications of this concept. Poder (2011) scans the landscape of social capital theorists and identifies Coleman, Putnam and Bourdieu as significant contributors, although there are many other theorists, as well as extensions and re-interpretations of the original ideas.

Bourdieu explains social capital as ‘the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network’ (1986). Bourdieu emphasises the way in which social capital can only be accessible via group membership, and he suggests the associated power relations here can replicate inequality in society (1986). Group membership is relevant to this study, especially in a multi-ethnic community. However, my study focuses on the Myanmar community more broadly and how it acts as a support mechanism for newer arrivals. There is, of course, a hierarchy within the group and more established members of the community wield more power. But the work of these longer-term group members also benefits the newcomers as it enables connections within the Myanmar community and to the non-Myanmar community. As such community leaders act as distributors (and potentially
gatekeepers) for knowledge and resources. Bourdieu’s concerns about group membership and potential inequality have validity here; however, it is the positive benefits of group membership that will be drawn on to have explanatory power in the context of this study.

It is worth noting that some theorists suggest inequality within networks can heightened in extreme conditions like natural disasters (Hurlbert, Beggs & Haines 2008) and I would argue this is also relevant for people from refugee backgrounds who have lived in challenging conditions, with very high levels of social and material insecurity. The first Myanmar settlers to Coffs Harbour would have encountered many interruptions to social networks during their journey to refuge. Although welcomed by some members of the local community (sponsors, settlement services and church groups), early Myanmar settlers would have certainly experienced disempowerment and had to develop their own friendship and work networks.

Putnam’s (1995, pp. 66-7) original interpretation of social capital can also be drawn on as it recognises the way social networks can enhance a sense of self and encourage cooperation, and ultimately achieve mutual benefit for group members. However, Putnam’s conceptualisation of social capital has been critiqued due to its limited (and sometimes unfavourable) application to culturally diverse communities (Hallberg & Lund 2005). Hallberg and Lund (2005, p. 54) acknowledge Putnam’s work on social capital as encompassing ‘the idea that personal connections and contacts constitute value’; however, they state his more recent work constructs cultural diversity as a threat community. In this context, Putnam’s theorising seems to undermine his earlier ideal of social capital with its potential application to cross-cultural settings. In light of Putnam’s more recent work, applying his ideas to my study would seem incompatible. Putnam’s own work suggests social capital is found to a lesser degree in migrant communities (Hallberg & Lund 2005).
Despite the diverse interpretations and disagreement about the ‘true’ meaning social capital, I will apply its core ideals in this study - that is the capacity of networks to enhance community, which is, I believe, potentially heightened rather than reduced in migrant communities. This can also be observed in other studies applying a social capital framework to culturally diverse communities.

The capacity of community leaders to enhance a group’s social capital and link into the non-refugee community was identified in Elliot and Yusuf’s (2014) study on Somali settlement in New Zealand. Possession of social capital, power and decision making (or lack thereof) can therefore play a significant role in resettlement for refugee populations. Such potential for community capacity building and enhanced settlement can also be seen in Major et al.’s (2013) study on Sudanese youth in Australia; McMichael and Manderson’s (2004) research on Somali women in Australia; and Pittaway, Bartolomei and Doney’s (2015) work on social capital enablers. Social capital, when applied to refugee settlement, can therefore be defined as being ‘the invisible glue’ that binds communities (Elliot & Yusef 2014, p. 101).

Social capital for people from refugee backgrounds can strengthen ties within a specific cultural group and form a bridge to the broader non-settler community, as well as provide links to institutional power and decision making (Elliot & Yusef 2014). Therefore, social capital networks are also essential in order to acquire preferred foods and prevent food insecurity (Dean & Sharkey 2011). More specifically, Elliot and Yusef’s (2014) differentiation of three different forms of social capital: bonding, bridging and linking, can be readily applied to food procurement for people from refugee backgrounds. Access to specialised ingredients can be realised through bonding with local settlers from the same cultural group, knowledge of local growing conditions can found in bridging social capital via relationships with the broader non-settler community, and linking social capital can
influence local or broader policy initiatives. These multiple aspects of social capital can also help analyse the idea of empowered food provisioning, as outlined in the concept of right to food which promotes equitable access to appropriate and culturally significant food systems.

The right to food is asserted in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948) and the Rome Declaration on World Food Security (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO] 1996). The latter affirms ‘the right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger’ (FAO 1996). Informed by these significant international documents, many authors have gone on to theorise the essential nature of food as a fundamental human right. Renzaho (2002), Motala (2010), and Beuchelt and Virchow (2012) acknowledge the complex debate associated with the provision of food in a culturally appropriate, nutritious and equitable manner. These ideas inform the underlying right to food approach in this project.

The theoretical framework for this study utilises the ideas and concepts outlined above but ultimately brings the focus back to the notion of food as facilitating social encounters. Appadurai (1981, p. 494) declared food to be ‘a highly condensed social fact’. This theme is continued in Kalcik’s (1984) work on foodways and the migrant experience in the United States. Here Kalcik explores food as an identity marker, a way to connect to culture and tradition, as well as a means of acculturation. More recently Wessell and Brien (2010) confirm that food is much more than sustenance, it is ‘crucial to life, both for physical and cultural nourishment, eating is fundamental to how we experience and make sense of identity and place, as well as how we construct it’ (p. 1). Germov and Williams’ (2010) edited text on the sociology of food has further explored the multiplicity of food in its meaning, consumption and socialisation. Some of the chapters in this book postulate the role of food in
identity creation (Germov 2010; Germov & Williams 2010; Mennell 2010), as well as examine the power structures at play in food systems (Dixon 2010; Falbe & Nestle 2010; Leahy 2010; Lappe 2010; Lawrence & Grice 2010). Many of these ideas are relevant to food and placemaking and the way in which food can be internalised as a cultural symbol, as well as a conduit for social organisation.

Whilst most scholars agree on the important sociocultural role of food, it must also be stated that the role of food in multicultural engagement remains contested (Meyer & Rhoades 2006; Narayan 1995; Sheridan 2000). In their work on ‘eating the Other’, Flowers and Swan (2012) present critiques of multicultural food exchange. This includes Heldke’s examination of ‘food adventuring’ (middle class, North American ventures into ‘exotic’ food) and Hage’s ‘multiculturalism without ethics’ (Flowers & Swan 2012). Such provocative explorations promote caution when assessing the real benefits to be gained from crosscultural food exchange. However, much of this work assumes all intercultural food engagement occurs at a superficial level, and manifests as ‘eating a culture’ but not wanting to pursue cultural knowledge/exchange beyond this. This is not necessarily the case when one examines migrant experiences such as those in the Myanmar community Coffs Harbour. Here we can observe how food exists in a culturally and geographically specific context, and within certain social networks that serve to deepen a sense of identity and community past, present and future. Appropriating food as a form of material culture (the food item), and non-material culture (taste, memory) is not a superficial experience and can contribute to the realisation of positive placemaking for forced migrants, as a bridge to the wider community that facilitates social inclusion.
Background to life in Myanmar and the refugee experience

In order to develop a well-informed understanding of the life experiences of the research participants prior to coming to Australia, I consulted various historical, political, statistical and literary sources. These included an account of the hardship of life in contemporary Myanmar by Larkin (2010), figures and statistics from the World Fact Book (CIA 2014) and the United Nations Human Development Index (United Nations Development Programme 2014), as well as classic and contemporary novels set in Burma/Myanmar (Orwell 1934, 2009; Ghosh 2001).

The journey made by refugees from Myanmar has been documented extensively. Some key sources consulted include Alexander (2008), the Australian Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (2006), Dudley (2011), Mitschke et al. (2011), Lopes Cardozo et al. (2004), and Refugees International (2009). These sources outline the extreme conditions experienced by Myanmar people in their country of origin, and also in the ensuing border refugee camps and other transition locations. For instance, Alexander (2008) depicts the acute conditions faced by Chin refugees in India and Malaysia. Lopes Cardozo et al. (2004) provide a brief history of refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border and the displaced people currently residing there. Further, Dudley (2011) offers some reasons for forced migration including human rights abuses and village relocations, and Mitschke et al. (2011) depict camp conditions. The Burmese Community Profile from the Australia Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (2006) also provides a snapshot of Myanmar former refugees now resident in Australia and their experience of forced migration.
The documentation of food issues, especially food scarcity, in Myanmar can be found in reports by human rights and other non-government organisations. ‘Food Scarcity and Hunger in Burma’s Chin State’ (Chin Human Rights Organization 2008) explains various reasons for the food security ‘crisis’ including the negative impact of the flowering bamboo crop (attracting rodents), lack of access for NGOs to provide food supplies and seizure of arable land for cash crops by the military junta. The report explains that the motivation of some Chin people to seek refuge in India is due to food security issues and associated human rights abuses. This is further substantiated by Refugees International (2009) who cite famine and systematic abuse in Chin State as steadily increasing since the 1988 uprising.

There are numerous studies on health and well-being issues faced by people from refugee backgrounds (Clark et al. 2013; Correa-Velez, Gifford & Barnett 2010; Sampson & Gifford 2010). These studies include participants from a wide range of countries especially Sudan, Burundi, Congo and other African countries, and to a lesser extent Afghanistan, Bhutan, Iraq and Myanmar. There is still, however, fairly limited research on Myanmar settlers, especially those multi-ethnic communities in Australia. Recent contributions to this field include a doctoral thesis and associated publications by Jessica Bird (2013; Bird, Brough & Cox 2012) examining social organisation and identity for Karen settlers in Brisbane. Factors influencing the mental health of Myanmar refugees in Australia have also been documented in a study by Schweitzer et al. (2011). Brough et al (2013) also examine mental health for this group by exploring narratives of suffering and the experience of trauma. Both studies (from overlapping research teams/projects) provide relevant background information on well-being and possible mental health issues pre- and post-settlement and how these impact on settlement outcomes.
A link between mental health and food security is apparent in the Schweitzer et al. study, as the majority of participants (74 per cent) indicated they had experienced trauma due to lack of food and water pre-migration (2011, p. 11). Furthermore, ‘while exposure to traumatic events impacts on participants’ mental well-being, post-migration living difficulties had greater salience in predicting mental health outcomes of people from Burmese refugee backgrounds’ (Schweitzer et al. 2011, p. 20). Participants in the Schweitzer et al study indicated some difficulties in settling into Australia, especially communication difficulties and how this can have a flow on effect to employment, and accessing necessary services. However, there were no specific questions relating to food and the social factors that hinder or promote food security/sovereignty. The absence of food related content in studies to date affirms the need for this study.

**Displacement and food**

Dudley (2011) documents the importance of continuing links with cultural traditions in times of uncertainty, and this is particularly relevant in the case of refugees. For people living in refugee camps, especially for the extended period that many people from Myanmar endure, lack of food (or preferred foods) can be a source of psychological stress, which can impact on well-being. In their examination of trauma and social functioning in Thai-Burma refugee camps, Lopes Cardozo et al. (2004) document the link between lack of food and trauma amongst Karenni refugees. This in turn is connected with poor social functioning. However, a coping mechanism for participants included ‘thinking about their homeland’ (Lopes Cardozo et al. 2004, p. 2639) in a positive, reminiscent way, which is significant given the trauma faced in Myanmar, but also points to the importance of maintaining cultural traditions such as gardening and growing food. This idea relates to Dudley’s (2011) discussion on the importance creating a sense of home in refugee camps in order to enhance social and mental...
stability, and resilience. Dudley highlights engagement with food as a means to attain this sense of home by growing vegetables, tending animals and cooking familiar foods. She states that ‘satisfaction of hunger is important too: not solely in a biological sense, but as culturally constituted notion made more acute by displacement’ (2011, p. 749). These examples exemplify the potential role of food in placemaking and how this can contribute to heightened well-being.

The subject of food arises throughout Hiruy’s (2009) research on refugee settlement in Tasmania. Although it is not Hiruy’s explicit intention to examine the role of food (both negative and positive) in re-settlement, food is mentioned frequently in comments by his participants in connection to their capacity to establish and maintain identity in their new home in Australia. Examples of this include the way in which food is instrumental in bringing communities together, the way in which the offering of ‘ethnic’ food can promote pride (‘I’m not just selling food, I’m selling culture’ [Hiruy 2009, p. 94]), the role of food in re-producing ‘the familiar’, and the sensory nature of food in triggering emotions and positive feelings about home. This connection between food and good memories is also illustrated in Sutton’s work on food culture and identity on the Greek island of Kalymnos (2001).

Acceptance and integration into a new culture can be linked to food practices. For humanitarian migrants, social integration can be the key to achieving a sense of belonging, as indicated in the work of Correa-Velez, Gifford and Barnett (2010). Such social integration may be achieved through empowered food provisioning, that is, being able to access and make informed choices about foods to be consumed and grown. This approach should be adopted during transition in camps (see Dudley 2011), and in Australia and other settlement
nations. Correa-Velez et al. state: ‘factors that best predict wellbeing over the first three years of settlement are those that can be understood to promote a sense of belonging, becoming at home, being able to flourish and become part of a new host society’ (2010, p. 1406). If governments and settlement services wish to facilitate migrant wellbeing, they need to support appropriate food programs in order to contribute to positive settlement and integration processes.

Appropriate food engagement programs could potentially offer a means to reassert power and control over food choices for everyone (Turner 2011a), and of course this is significant for people from refugee backgrounds who may have had little access to formal (or informal) power. The idea of empowering refugees through access to preferred foods is yet to be fully explored and reiterates the validity of this research project. It does reaffirm Dudley’s research on the role of food in Karenni refugee camps, where ‘engagement in the present with objects from the past, are in a refugee setting particularly powerful and dynamic in forming and re-forming connections with the pre-exile past’ (2011, p. 742). Procuring traditional foods in a new life, post-camp settlement, can potentially offer such a powerful reconnection.

Preference for traditional foods can also provide an avenue for better health by avoiding processed western foods that can be a common feature of acculturation (Renzaho & Burns 2006).

**Nutrition and food choices**

The most recently published *Australian Dietary Guidelines* (Australian Government 2013) promote the ideal attainment of nutritional variety and balance for ‘all’ Australians. This was a useful document in terms of acquainting myself with current nutritional best practice, whilst at the same time recognising the highly political nature of such policy documents. The reality
for many people in a number of cultures is that there is little equity in terms of access to, and utilisation of, healthy, sustainable food systems. For newly arrived migrants, procuring food in their new place of residence can be extremely challenging and confusing (Ewen 2012). Some Myanmar settlers arrive with nutritional deficiencies, as highlighted by Kemmer et al. (2003) in their work on iron deficiency in Myanmar communities. However, food intake in their new place of residence, for example in so-called developed countries such Australia and United States, can also affect health outcomes.

In Australia, quite a substantial body of work exists on the relationship between food choice and nutritional outcomes, in particular how this appears in diverse African communities. Public Health expert Andre Renzaho and colleagues examined the relationship between acculturation, health and migration (2004; 2006; 2011; 2012). These studies document potential poor health outcomes, in the form of nutritional deficiencies and increased health risks associated with poor food choices. Renzaho’s work informs my own study, as it is significant to note cross-cultural and geographical differences in food-related health outcomes for settler populations. Although it was not my intention to document nutritional outcomes in this study, food choices cannot be explored without considering the long-term impacts of such choices. These choices are very much embedded in sociocultural considerations and constructs.

Globalisation impacts on food consumption, as well as its availability. Evans, Sinclair, Fushimalohi and Liava’a’s (2001; 2002) work on nutritional transition in Tonga presents an important case study on how food choice does not necessarily correlate with nutritional knowledge and taste preference, and how factors associated with globalisation (such as trade liberalisation) need to be taken into account. The discussion on trade liberalisation is relevant
to Australia where a wide array of global food products (highly processed foods in particular) are embraced despite being ‘commodities of doubtful benefit’ (Evans et al. 2001). Such food is readily available to newly arrived migrants who internalise these choices as the ‘norm’ in the Australian diet.

The case of Tonga presents an interesting paradox because previous assumptions about food choice centred on the notion that we eat based on food preference. However, Evans et al. (2001) suggest that, despite high levels of education about the nutritional make-up of certain foods, some populations will invariably make food choices based more on socio-economic factors, rather than personal preference. This is relevant to Myanmar migrant populations as they are likely to be located on the lower levels of socio-economic ladder as they settle into their new place of residence. Issues of status and integration must also be considered in relation to food choice. Evans et al. (2001) suggest that preference for global foods is more complex than seeking high status through western products. This theme is of great importance to my study on Myanmar settlers in seeking to understand the social influences and power relations reflected in food choice. It also presents challenges for community education programs promoting the benefits of healthy eating.

Beyond acknowledging the role of food to nourish the body, there needs to be recognition on the part of food providers of the potential benefits of an embodied approach to food (Turner 2011b). Such an approach recognises ‘the role played by the body in the fabrication of our social, economic and political lives’ (Turner 2011b, p. 5) and hence the construction and reconstruction of personal and cultural identity. Embodiment takes place not only in the eating of food, it can also be recognised in the act of growing food; an act that can connect an individual physically and mentally to the seeds, the soil, the plants and the memories. This
reaffirms the social significance of engagement with food, especially in the context of
growing your own food. Growing food therefore plays an intrinsic role in facilitating
preferred (often healthier) foods, and at a deeper level, enhancing well-being.

**Gardens and well-being**

Dudley (2011) examines the benefits of empowered food provisioning for Myanmar refugees
living precariously in camps. In camps, some residents have vegetable plots, small animals
including chickens and pigs, and some capacity to forage for food. All of this broadens their
meager food staples, as well as providing a sense of identity by evoking memories of home.
There are similar observations of the benefits of community and home gardens in destination
countries (see Anderson 2010; Bishop & Purcell 2013; Cummings et al. 2008; Hordyk,
Hanley & Richard 2015; Lee 2001; Spivey & Lewis 2015; Turner 2011a).

Community gardening came to Australia in the 1970s, considerably later than in the UK and
Western Europe, where it has existed in some form since the early 1800s to supplement
family food supplies and offer some respite in the newly industrialised landscape (Australian
City Farms and Community Gardens Network 2002). With increasing popularity of these
gardens, recent research assesses why people choose to engage with community gardens and
examines the potential benefits. Some researchers have suggested that community gardens
can potentially enable inclusiveness and connectedness within communities, empower
participants to have an autonomous role within the food production system, promote better
health through consumption of fresh food, and facilitate improved mental health and well-
being (Anderson 2010; Cummings et al. 2008; Turner 2011a).
For settlers in a new country, food production can provide a means to re-connect with memories of place, identity and community. This is exemplified in the successful Burmese Community Garden program in Werribee Park, Melbourne, Victoria, where community members come together to grow, cook and share produce that re-connects them to their food memories and cultural identity, as well as deepen connections to their community (Parks Victoria 2012). Such gardens exemplify the notion of placemaking (as employed in this study) and how it is interconnected with belonging (Turner 2011a). Gardens are also linked to the concept of attachment to place, especially in the context of displacement (Brook 2003). The act of gardening and the familiarity of known plants therefore facilitate an embodied connection to home.

Turner (2011a) documents another important function of community gardens. That is, the way in which community gardens foster the capacity for members (especially those from migrant backgrounds) to grow culturally significant or otherwise rare foods, unavailable in mainstream shops. Of course this can also be achieved in home gardens which act as informal community gardens anyway. In the case of the Myanmar community in Coffs Harbour, home/community gardens have enabled the distribution of rosella (a type of hibiscus) leaves. These are part of the traditional diet in Myanmar, however securing rosella leaves is not easy, as they are not stocked in Australian supermarkets. Growing your own food thus allows culinary traditions to continue, and this can be an essential part of maintaining a sense of identity in the resettlement process.

Community and home gardens may also offer an oasis, as identified in the evaluation of the Lismore Community Gardens (Anderson 2010) and in the literature on the psychological benefits of gardens (Brook 2003; Kaplan 1995). That is, a green space ‘that evokes and
fosters positive feelings’ (Anderson 2010, p. 8). Brook (2003) asserts that people who are surrounded by plants are healthier and have higher levels of well-being than those without exposure to nature. This emotional and sensory connection could provide necessary therapeutic benefits for people from refugee backgrounds who have experienced significant trauma (see Kaplan 1995). These studies inform the analysis of the role of gardening in this research, as well as how the documentary is used to explore emotional and sensory connections to food via audiovisual means.

As Coffs Harbour is home to several community gardens, I examined various community garden evaluations (Anderson 2010; Cummings et al 2008; Turner 2011a) in order to prepare for this study and consider how these spaces might be used by participants. I deemed the Lismore report (Anderson 2010) to be especially important because of its proximity (two and a half hours drive north) to Coffs Harbour, similar population size, similar levels of socio-economic disadvantage and similar climate. Interestingly, lessons learnt from the Lismore evaluation informed the Coffs Coast Community Garden in terms of its cultural diversity strategy (M. Anderson 2014, pers. comm., 24 Feb.).

The first Coffs Coast Community Garden was established in 2010 with the aims of setting up a green space that would encourage sustainable gardening practices, raise awareness of the benefits of gardening, facilitate intergenerational and inter-cultural exchange, and promote community connectedness and engagement (Coffs Regional Community Gardens n.d.). This is typical of agendas set by community gardens in contemporary Australia (Anderson 2010; Turner 2011a). Interestingly, the Coffs Coast Garden, like the Lismore Community Garden (at the time of evaluation), has few members from culturally diverse backgrounds (M. Anderson 2014, pers. comm., 24 Feb.). An African women’s group was established several
years ago but it is no longer running. In terms of membership, only one couple have identified as being from Myanmar background. The gardens represent a potentially positive way to connect to the local community and build social capital through the highly social means of food production and engagement.

Summary

Although there is considerable research on themes relevant to my study (food and migration, benefits of gardening, the social role of food, nutrition and food choices) there is nothing that focuses on the social and cultural role of food for refugees from Myanmar, now resident in Australia. There is a clear gap in understanding the unique issues that may be present in connection to food engagement for this community and how this can hinder or facilitate placemaking. The empirical work examined in this literature review has allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of issues that may be faced by the participants in this study. It has also informed the ideas explored in interviews, conversations and in the documentary. The study engages a variety of disciplines to produce new research in meaningful, multidimensional and accessible ways. In the next chapter I outline my methodological approach, including the necessity to engage with people from refugee backgrounds in a collaborative, sensitive and respectful manner.
Chapter 3 Methodology

This chapter discusses the methodological approach to the study by locating the researcher ontologically and epistemologically. I outline the research design by describing the use of ethnographic methods and a participatory approach. I explain how the use of visual research methods can offer an accessible and textural representation of the lived experience. Ethical considerations are examined. This study sought to prioritise the well-being of participants at all times, and to encourage a reciprocal, empowered relationships between participant and researcher. Recruitment and fieldwork practices are outlined, in addition to a discussion on data analysis and categorisation. The selected analytical framework was applied in both the written and audiovisual data in order to produce a fully integrated research product. Two research questions provide the foundation for this enquiry:

1) What social and cultural factors influence food choices for Myanmar refugees (settlers) in regional Australia?

2) How can visual research methods be utilised to benefit the research participants, as well as educate and engage service providers and the wider community?

The study’s broader objectives were:

- To understand and share knowledge of the significant role of food availability and choice in the lives of refugees and how this impacts on settlement.

- To examine and understand the socio-economic and cultural factors associated with food choices made by the research participants. This includes locational factors,
education (English language ability), and access to affordable and culturally desirable sustainable food systems.

- To consider whether access to desired foods would promote good health (physical and mental), as well as meet with the aims of the concept of ‘right to food’ in terms of providing empowerment and community connectedness.

- To contribute to a feeling of empowerment and strengthened identity by supporting the research participants in telling and disseminating their food stories, and representing their culture in a documentary.

All of these objectives reflect the desire to promote cross-cultural understanding and embrace empowered community collaboration. Social constructivism, therefore, presents as a suitable research paradigm.

**Research paradigm**

Social constructivism is utilised as an appropriate paradigm for this research as it aligns with my personal philosophy on the acquisition and interpretation of knowledge. Social constructivism (also referred to as constructionism) can be explained as an examination of the ‘interactional constitution of lived realities within discernible contexts of social interaction’ (Holstein & Gubrium 2005, p. 341). From an ontological perspective, I embrace the notion of socially constructed, multiple realities where experience of certain phenomena and the intricacies of the lived experience will vary according to sociocultural context. This philosophical stance stems from Idealism with its emphasis on ‘embodied knowing as the determinant of social reality’ (Higgs 2001, p. 54). From an epistemological perspective, I
believe that knowledge is subjective and produced by relationships and interpretation, and where findings are ‘created’ not found (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba 2011).

Social constructivism is appropriate for exploring the hows, the whats and the whys of food in the context of refugee experiences. It enables a researcher to focus on ‘how people methodically construct their experiences and their worlds, and in the configuration of meaning’ (Holstein & Gubrium 2005, p. 484). Lincoln et al. (2011), in their revised discussion on research paradigms, note the overlapping characteristics of non-positivist paradigms such as critical theory, constructivism and participatory modes. In this regard I can identify an underlying critical framework in my study whereby I recognise that ‘people actively construct their worlds but not completely on, or in, their own terms’ (Marx, 1956, in Holstein & Gubrium 2005, p. 484). For people from refugee backgrounds there have been periods in their lives where little has been done on their own terms. They have been subjected to trauma and violations, and have spent many years awaiting other people’s determinations. Therefore, applying a constructivist approach with influence from a critical framework seeks to achieve the research goals of understanding the ways in which meaning is ascribed, as well as examining the social location (in terms of power relations) and expose potential empowerment/dis-empowerment of the research participants (Higgs 2001, pp. 52-4) in relation to their food pathways.

This research makes no claims of objectivity as it is interested in disseminating the personal and community stories of participants in their unique social context. The subjective nature of research is summed up by Darlaston-Jones (2007) who suggests that observers can merely interpret what they see based on their perceived understanding of a participant’s life experiences. I therefore aimed to ‘journey alongside’ the participants (Lenette, Cox &
Brough 2013) in co-producing an in-depth body of knowledge, capturing their lived experiences.

**Methodology**

One aim of this research was to share food stories in order to promote and build community connectedness, feelings of pride and a sense of identity in relation to specific cultural traditions and experiences. I wanted to provide a means for marginalised people to be heard and recognised within and outside their communities. The broader objective was that this research would promote greater inter-cultural understanding, and ultimately effect social change in the form of policy recognition or provision of appropriate support services. In order to achieve these goals, I used a research methodology that was both collaborative and respectful of participants at all times. This study embraced a reciprocal research strategy, as advocated by Mackenzie, McDowell and Pittaway (2007, p. 299). This approach seeks to ‘move beyond harm minimization as a standard for ethical research and…conduct research projects that aim to bring about reciprocal benefits for refugee participants and/or communities’. Such an approach can mindfully distinguish between the conception of subjects, participants and co-researchers in seeking to address power imbalances in research with people from refugee backgrounds (Doná 2007).

In applying the concept of reciprocal research, I sought to develop meaningful, trusting relationships with my participants, embedded in a commitment to community engagement. Community engagement is becoming increasingly important in academic spheres and seeks to disseminate research processes and products beyond the ivory tower (Strom 2011; Whiteford & Strom 2013; Winter, Wiseman & Muirhead 2010). This is especially important when working in regional areas where universities are (and should be) enmeshed in their
communities, reflecting community concerns. Traditionally, ethnography has been a multi-
method approach to research that seeks knowledge from the point of view of those
researched. It therefore provides the most appropriate framework to carry out reciprocal,
collaborative and community focused research.

**Ethnography**

Ethnography was chosen as a means to employ both participatory and visual methods to
create a documentary capturing lived experience, and a thesis expanding on and
complementing the knowledge represented in the film. Ethnography embeds such methods in
an interpretive, reflexive and constructivist manner (Hjorth & Sharp 2014; Whitehead 2004).
More specifically, I utilised focused ethnography, a sub-branch of ethnography. Focused
ethnography differentiates itself from ethnography more broadly as it is characterised by
short term field work (Knoblauch 2005), as opposed to extended periods (18 months or more)
of participant observation favoured by early anthropologists (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995).
Furthermore, focused ethnography explores specific themes and issues within a culture,
rather than a broad observation of the cultural experience in its entirety (Ewen 2012). The
main traits of focused ethnography were applied; however, fieldwork was conducted over a
relatively substantial period of time (10 months), with ongoing community consultation
continuing for many months after formal data collection. The interdisciplinary combination
of anthropological, sociological and media research methods was used to produce a
collaborative description of Myanmar refugees’ food pathways.

Various qualitative research instruments were used to explore and document the multiple
social realities and experiences of participants. These tools were utilised in a way that
connected (over a period a time, in different settings) the participants and the researcher to
understand events rather than control them (Higgs 2001, p. 46). Methods used included key informant interviews, walking interviews/tours (O'Neill & Hubbard 2010; Pink 2007b), semi-structured and informal interviews with participants, participant observation (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995), and the visual research method of documentary filmmaking (MacDougall 2005), using lightweight, discrete camera equipment. Journals were also kept throughout the fieldwork (see Appendix 5) to document off camera interactions/experiences and my own reflections on particular situations. The end product of a documentary accompanied by written findings and reflection exemplifies Clifford Geertz’s (1973) pioneering notion of thick description; that is a rich, dynamic and multi-layered representation of Myanmar settlers and their relationship to/with food.

The benefits of representing people’s narratives using both participatory and collaborative visual research methods can be identified in relation to specific research populations. Lenette, Cox and Brough’s (2013) work with women from refugee backgrounds reveals such benefits as they confirm participatory approaches (especially those utilising visual methods) can be influential in the policy and advocacy arena, as well as ‘enhancing a sense of agency and self-representation’ (p.2), thereby contributing to empowerment. This type of storytelling also offers the capacity for healing and the opportunity to focus on achievements in the post-settlement experience (Lenette, Cox & Brough 2013).

**Participatory methods**

Early in my fieldwork, I undertook community consultation to determine an appropriate way to achieve my objectives. This involved initial discussions with seven key informants from refugee settlement services, health services, religious and other community organisations. One key informant was from the Myanmar community and the remaining informants were
non-Myanmar. Set questions were used to prompt discussions but these conversations evolved into a broader discussion of a number of topics relating to perceived food challenges and the importance of traditional food. During these discussions, potential participants were identified and were later contacted by key informants to seek their permission for me to contact them. In some cases, the suggested participants forwarded my request to someone they felt was more suitable. One person’s name came up in many conversations with key informants. I made several attempts to contact this person by email and eventually I met with this leader from the Myanmar community to tell him more about my project, to determine interest and solicit feedback on my research plan. It was understandably an important priority for the community leader to look after the best interests of his community and to ensure that they would be protected from potentially unethical research practices. During this initial meeting the community leader asked many questions about my intentions and exactly what would be expected from the participants. After a meeting lasting more than one hour, the community leader agreed to take the information back to the community and seek their consideration and input. He emphasised the fact that if they worked with me, it would be as a group, not as individuals and it was essential that they agreed on whether or not to support the project. A positive response was received from the community and a meeting was set up to provide more detailed information (see Appendix 2) to the group. Thus began an ongoing and constantly evolving collaborative relationship between myself and the Myanmar community of Coffs Harbour.

Much of the literature on participatory research focuses on its potential benefits, especially in the context of former refugee communities where access to power and voice can be limited (Collie et al. 2010). Some authors, however, highlight possible limitations to such methods including the way in which they might be perceived as culturally inappropriate, and that
participants may be reluctant to be the focus of research development and might prefer to be led by the research team (Johnson, Ali & Shipp 2009). This is an important consideration in cross-cultural research and was taken into account throughout this project. To ensure methods were culturally appropriate, one significant community leader acted in the role of cultural broker to ensure my methods would be embraced by the community.

For inspiration in using participatory methods I turned to O’Neill and Hubbard (2010) who present an innovative case study on their work with former refugees resettled in the United Kingdom. Their project Sense of belonging engaged participatory action research in combination with arts practice and ethnographic research methods – or ‘ethno-mimesis’. The aim of their project was to enhance an understanding of ‘feelings about home, dislocation, and the process of making place’ (O’Neill & Hubbard 2010, p. 50). The authors undertook walks with participants in their new hometowns. This key ethnographic tool allowed the researchers to engage in a deeper understanding of the participants’ lived experiences. This meaningful outcome is summed up as follows:

Working with an ethnographer and an artist, the storyteller (e.g. migrant, refuge, asylum seeker) can find the ways and means of re-presenting their story facilitated by the collaborative process. Artistic representations of migrants’ lived experiences can be transformative, providing recognition, voice, a means of sharing identity. (O’Neill & Hubbard 2010, p. 48)

This walking tour research tool, also utilised by Pink (2007b), was used in my study to invite settlers from Myanmar to take me into their new home, in particular, their gardens or their kitchens. This technique is effectively applied to the topic of food in the context of settlement as it can be a way to communicate feelings of belonging and home in a relaxed and informal
manner. It also gives participants the opportunity to take the lead in performing aspects of their daily lives. For example, two participants provided very detailed tours of their gardens, proudly showing off their crops, especially rare Myanmar jungle plants. In my study, walking is used as a tool to engage with participants but it also represents a visual motif in the documentary, as footsteps mark the start of the film to represent my participants’ long and challenging journeys to refuge. Post-walk discussions were scheduled to provide more detail or revisit themes mentioned during the walks.

Semi-formal interviews were also used as a data collection method. It is important to note that interviews (especially those on camera) may not necessarily be identified as ‘participatory’ as Bill Nicholls (1991, p. 47) declares they are a ‘form of hierarchical discourse, deriving from the unequal distribution of power, as in the confessional and the interrogation’. Whilst this may have historic validity, and such a style of interviewing still exists in some domains, this conceptualisation of interview relations could not be further from the model applied in my study. A more reciprocal interview style was achieved through developing positive relationships with participants over time (meeting them on multiple social occasions prior to filming) and adopting a conversational, empathetic tone which reflected genuine interest in wanting to hear the stories being told. This more casual approach was also achieved by avoiding overly structured interviews and allowing the conversation to develop in a participant-led direction. Although, in the early phase of fieldwork, I did have a list of questions to prompt me (see Appendix 3), I soon disregarded this list. I always asked participants if they were happy to talk about the issues I raised and at the end of interviews I asked if there was anything else they wished to discuss or revisit.
It is important to note that language could have been a potential barrier to interview participation. I had originally intended to conduct interviews in English. This presented a dilemma as I did not want to exclude anyone from the study but at the same time I needed to be realistic about what was achievable within the context of my own limited language skills and a limited budget. However, the community leader provided a solution by offering interpreters at no cost. For most interviews this was in fact the community leader himself, as he was qualified to do this due to his own work experience as a professional interpreter. Other community members also volunteered their services. Although the Myanmar community in Coffs Harbour is culturally and linguistically diverse, Burmese is/was used as the common language between different ethnicities and was therefore used in most interviews. Participants’ responses were then translated into English.

Visual methods

The use of visual research methods in academia is not new if we observe the long-established traditions of ethnographic filmmaking in anthropology, and the photographic output and analysis of visual sociology (Filak & Gorisek 2015; Hamilton 2006; MacDougall 2005; Mitchell 2011; Pink 2003). However, despite the recognition of an increasingly visually literate contemporary world, there remains an ongoing debate on the validity and rigour of such methods (Jackson 2014). This reflects the perceived dichotomy of practice versus theory, and some critics reduce visual research to a mere ‘tool’ or accessory to the core business of academic exploration. Visual researchers and their supporters contend that engaging in such research can enhance a study in a multitude of ways. These include the ability to produce sensory accounts of every-day life (MacDougall 2005; Pink & Leder Mackley 2012), the capacity for the creation of visual archives (Jackson 2014), the ability to capture the reflexivity of the researcher (MacDougall 2005), enhanced close reading of a
particular social phenomena (Jackson 2014), the potential for people previously excluded from the research process to share stories (Cox et al. 2014), and the possibility of engaging a broad audience (Jackson 2014; Mitchell 2011). Visual research is beneficial in its ability to play the dual role of being both ‘an instrument of research as well as a medium for presentation’ (Filak & Gorisek 2015).

Importantly, visual representation in the anthropological tradition of ethnographic filmmaking has evolved over time from the ‘voice of god’ style early documentaries on traditional societies, to more progressive recent attempts to encourage participants to become fully involved in the process of their own representation (MacDougall 2005; Pink 2007a). Evans and Foster (2009) highlight such a mode, that anchors visual research more broadly in participatory research. They contend ‘participatory video has emerged as a key tool in putting together process and product in ways that provide avenues for marginalized communities to participate both in forms of critical self-analysis and ways of self-representation’ (Evans & Foster 2009, p. 88).

The capacity for research participants to engage in all aspects of visual representation can be affected by a variety of issues, ranging from technical ability/interest and the intended audience (Evans & Foster 2009), to cultural appropriateness (Collie et al. 2010), to issues associated with legal residency (Hernandez-Albajar 2007), to ethical issues of identification and anonymity (Matthews & Singh 2009). Some of these issues posed a very real concern for my project. I knew there was no guarantee that participants would want to be involved in the production side of visual representation (documentary). However, there are other ways of empowering participants to be a very substantial part of the representation process including
editorial consultation and deciding what themes should be pursued in interviews (Evans & Foster 2009). I adopted this approach successfully in this research.

Furthermore, the power of images can ‘provide the basis for transformation of the collective as well as the individual’ (O'Neill & Hubbard 2010, p. 48). Visual representations can tell individual and group stories to reinforce identity, and this is significant in the context of re-negotiated, re-invented identity as experienced by refugees. Identity performativity is especially important in the visual context and relates to Irving’s idea that ‘memory is produced in the act of performance’ (2008, p. 187). It is also re-produced and re-interpreted, and memory for one person will be different from another. The representation of participants telling their own stories can therefore lead to an in-depth and multi-dimensional understanding of how people experience their daily lives and engage in processes of self-identity and placemaking (Pink & Leder Mackley 2012); in this case through engagement with food.

Documentary was also chosen as an appropriate medium to deliver visual representation due to the sensory, emotive, and layered nature of filmic representations. Pink conceptualises ‘video as a route through which seeing and hearing can lead researchers and viewers to empathise with and imagine multisensory embodied experiences and not simply the aural and visual worlds of others’ (2012, p. 8). Engagement with food is in itself a sensory experience on many different levels and it is appropriate to employ a sensory medium (video) to capture such interactions, feelings and experiences. Sensory mediums can also be highly effective in fostering the audience’s connection to the participants, and hence develop empathy. One limitation of video is that it cannot, of course, capture all the senses (ie. smell, taste) but it
can record the personal experiences of these through facial expressions and sound (Pink & Leder Mackley 2012).

David MacDougall, a leading ethnographic filmmaker, summarises the potential impact of visual representation (the moving image, with integrated sound) as follows:

[F]ilm offers social research and cultural studies a useful alternative to expository prose. It may be objected that film is open-ended, too mimetic, and in a sense is too concrete to be analytical. But while it is true that the contents of film images are often in themselves undifferentiated, their further articulations give film its analytical potential, notably the selective use of the camera, the juxtaposition of shots (or, more simply, editing), and the overall organization of shots in time. Like all communicative systems, film is a compromise between order and productive disorder. Writing and film suffer from different kinds of ambiguity and overdetermination. With their shortcomings, they should be thought of as two incomplete but at times complementary systems (2005, p. 51).

Film (or digital video as is now the case) also has the potential to express the researcher’s own experience of seeing (MacDougall 2005, p. 60). Hence, the combination of documentary representation and written discussion in the form of this thesis is further justified as providing a meaningful vehicle for research output. The two forms combined have captured the interaction between research participants and the researcher in order to create a highly reflexive end product. They also reflect the interaction between the participants and the research product, as observed during the film screenings and in post-screening discussions.
Ethics

The impact on participants in this research was low risk/negligible (National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2013) and therefore an expedited ethics application was lodged and approved by the SCU Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number ECN-14-087). As Working collaboratively and Making the documentary raise different ethical issues in regards to interactions between participants and the researcher, they are treated separately in this section.

Working collaboratively

With high ethical standards placed at the forefront of my research, it was essential that respectful negotiation and collaboration was ever-present throughout this study. I would frequently check with the community leader to ensure that the community members were happy with what I was doing and if there were any problems or concerns I sought to address them as effectively as possible. Early in the study I was worried that one participant might have been expecting some sort of payment for contributing to my research so I made several attempts to contact him post-data collection to ensure he was happy with what had taken place. I did not receive an immediate response and so I asked the community leader to check that he understood that payment was not part of the process. I soon received a response from the participant agreeing to do follow up interviews. There were clearly no problems and I had been worrying unnecessarily. My relationship with community members continued to develop in a positive manner.

A requirement for obtaining ethical approval is the need to ensure benefits to the community (National Health and Medical Research Council 2013). Community leaders and key
informants did stress the need for some kind of benefit in order for the participants to give up their time and be part of my project. This is understandable given the participants’ many commitments including caring for children, working multiple jobs, studying and community work. But benefits do not necessarily have to be monetary or material. I expressed my commitment to this idea and suggested that the benefits included influencing future and current policy, and provision of services to this and future groups in the context of food. Another benefit would be the opportunity to come together as a group and represent traditions and culture in a positive way by telling their stories about food, and sharing this with the local community in the form of the film screening. A further potentially powerful aspect of a participatory storytelling approach includes the capacity to provide a counter narrative to the sometimes negative representation of the refugee in mainstream Australian culture (Lenette, Cox & Brough 2013).

Norweigan researchers Dyregrov, Dyregrov and Raundalen demonstrate other benefits for research participants from refugee backgrounds including feeling good ‘when taken seriously and being the focus of caring attention’ (2000, p. 414). During my time engaging with the Myanmar community I developed such relationships and enjoyed getting to know participants and hearing their stories. I believe they also found pleasure in telling me about their cultural ways and their personal stories. Several participants stated: ‘it made me feel proud’. An important consideration was my awareness that it can be painful for refugee research participants to re-live traumatic experiences however it has been reported that ‘it hurts to talk, but it also feels good and we need to talk’ (Dyregrov, Dyregrov & Raundalen 2000, p. 415). The benefits of talking about the refugee experience are also documented in Hiruy’s (2009) work on resettlement in Hobart. It was not my intention to discuss the experience of trauma with my participants, however to prepare for the possibility that painful
memories might arise during conversations, I completed a two-day *Accidental Counsellor: Working with People from Refugee Backgrounds* training course conducted by STARTTS (a dedicated post-trauma counselling service). This training provided me with skills to respond to traumatic disclosure, in the form of appropriate referrals, as well as skills to deal with the situation in the moment.

The signing of consent forms was completed in a collaborative manner that promoted informed consent. An ‘iterative’ approach (Mackenzie, McDowell & Pittaway 2007) was adopted whereby trust and understanding were developed over a period of time. This negotiation of informed consent is essential in seeking to promote participant autonomy and self-determination (Mackenzie, McDowell & Pittaway 2007). Participants were introduced to consent forms at the initial community meeting where they were explained in English and then translated by the community leader. Participants took a copy of the form away with them for further consideration. Some consulted family members who were more confident in speaking English. The consent form was revisited and translated if necessary at the interviews and observations. The forms were only signed once each person was interviewed, and the translator and myself were satisfied that understanding had taken place in terms of the context, form and implications of the research.
Making the documentary

As this project included making a documentary it was important to consider and apply the principles of ethical filmmaking, especially in relation to the filmmaker/participant relationship. It is suggested that foundational documentary makers paid little regard to equitable and inclusive relationships between subject and filmmaker and the participant was often rendered powerless (Nash 2010, 2011). Nash draws on Pryluck’s (2005) description of how filmmakers have taken advantage of their participants through ‘conning and manipulation’ and the use of intimidating equipment, as well as the exclusion of participants in the creative process of representation (2011, p. 23). Representation of reality has also come under scrutiny in response to early documentaries like Robert Flaherty’s 1922 classic Nanook of the North, whereby many scenes were highly staged and manipulated for audience entertainment (Nistor 2011). An ideal model of ethical documentary making would be one where the filmmaker deliberately avoids the subject mentality and surrenders their privileged and powerful role as chief orchestrator thus taking ‘the stance of an advocate or enabler’ (Winston 2000, in Nash 2011, p. 23). I adopted such an approach to maximise inclusiveness and develop trust in the researcher, as well as encourage feelings of empowerment through the process of telling stories on camera.

Another ethical consideration was that of the notion of anonymity. Security concerns for people from refugee backgrounds can continue well into their settlement period in their new home (STARTTS 2014). However, choosing to show your identity, after a process of informed consent, can transform a participant from anonymous informant to a ‘person “with a face” ’ (Filak & Gorisek 2015). This is still a contentious idea within the context of the ethical review process (Allen 2015; Yang 2015) but it is an important consideration to be addressed if visual research can continue to advance and increase its acceptance and
legitimacy. Anonymity is often the norm in many fields of research, but in this project I was compelled to deviate by identifying participants in the audiovisual component of the work. Mike Evans (2004, p. 60) poses the question ‘can community centred research be respectfully undertaken while embracing the notion of anonymity of research participants?’ Evans suggests that anonymity can in fact have the effect of obscuring voice (2004, p. 72). In fact, anonymity can sometimes be in opposition to the aims of a study and can nullify agency (Allen 2015; Cox et al. 2014; Yang 2015). It can also obscure subtle but important details such as facial expressions and associated emotions (Allen 2015).

One of the main goals of this study was to represent and empower multiple voices and so it was necessary to reveal the identity of the speakers, at least in terms of showing their faces in the documentary. This was only done once participants were fully informed of the implications of appearing on camera, should they choose to be identified. Participants, therefore, chose to self-reveal. The role of the community leader was very important here in explaining the research output and checking, and re-checking that participants were comfortable with being part of the documentary. I would always show participants what they looked like on camera before I started recording by flipping over the movable screen so they could see themselves. I would then ask if they were sure they were happy to be filmed. Participants were given a choice as to their level of representation and in some cases I expected that participants may have preferred to have their story told in words (subtitles) or through voice only (theirs or an interpreter’s) with the vision overlaid with appropriate images that do not reveal the identity of the speaker. However, this was not the case and all participants who appear in the documentary were willing to be identified and this represented the vast majority of the participants in the study. Three interviews were conducted off-camera but all of these interviewees were willing to be interviewed at a later date on camera. One
participant did a second interview, this time on camera. Two of these interviews did not eventuate due to data saturation being reached earlier than expected. Interestingly, all participants except one (James) chose not to have their names included in the film and preferred to be credited as ‘the Myanmar community’, rather than individuals.

Saturation was determined using Morse’s (2000, p. 4) considerations whereby ‘the scope of the study, the nature of the topic, the quality of the data, [and] the study design’ informed my decision as to when I should stop collecting data. Saturation was therefore reached when I had undertaken in-depth interviews and observations with nine participants and, for some participants, this included multiple interviews in different locations. The interviews revealed complex and differing personal connections and aspirations in relation to food, as required to meet the objectives of my study. These interviews and observations were conducted with members of diverse ethnic groups and achieved the aim of reflecting diversity in the community. Common food challenges were identified by most participants and at this time saturation was also observed through repetition of themes.

It is worth reiterating the significance and nature of informed consent in this project. Sometimes it is appropriate for such consent to be achieved over a long period of time and revisited at different stages of the study (Cox et al. 2014). For those who participated in the documentary, the filming process was explained. Participants were told they would be able to preview a rough cut of the documentary and be given the opportunity to provide feedback and request changes before the final film was screened publically. Raw footage and editing capacities were demonstrated to some participants who visited my office located on the Southern Cross University campus. I originally intended to demonstrate editing capacities in the field, but this was not possible due to limited software availability on my laptop.
However, participants could view unedited footage played back on the camera after filming. The aim was for participants to be fully informed about how the final product might emerge and how they would be represented, and this is an essential part of the ethics process in using visual research methods in a social research context (Pink & Leder Mackley 2012). Participants could also opt out of the documentary at any time and have the option to have their material removed if they changed their minds during the research process, and such preferences would have willingly been accommodated. However, no participants chose to take this option.

**Sampling and fieldwork**

At the suggestion of the community leader, a community consultation meeting was organised to progress the study. All attendees at the meeting expressed their interest in participating in my research. From this starting point, purposeful and snowball sampling (Onwuegbuzie & Leech 2007) was used to recruit the participants. The community leader assembled a list of contributors from diverse Myanmar ethnic groups, as well as different genders and ages, as it was important to him that diverse Myanmar voices were represented in the study. In this context, he was effectively acting as a gatekeeper (see Sarantakos 2005), however I trusted his decisions and I knew that he made them after genuine consultations with community members. Many of those on the original list participated in the research. Some community members on this list were not interviewed for two main reasons: availability (health issues and other commitments), and saturation (at this point I decided to cease fieldwork).

Additional participants were also included after they heard about the study and expressed an interest in contributing. There were 12 main contributors\(^5\) to the study and these participants

\(^5\) There were 12 ‘main’ contributors i.e. those who were interviewed but overall several hundred participants were filmed. I consider them all to be contributors. It is not possible to include exact numbers as filming took place at community events where exact numbers were unknown.
were interviewed on and off camera and observed on multiple occasions, in different settings. Overall, several hundred community members were filmed and interacted with during fieldwork. Some of these interactions were pre-arranged, whilst other participants engaged in a spontaneous way, as they were present during preparation for a community event, or the event itself, when they chose to be part of our research conversation.

Once participants had been identified I commenced a period of 10 months fieldwork with the Myanmar community in Coffs Harbour. In the tradition of ethnography, a researcher will have a clearly delineated entrance and exit to the field (Bird 2013; Sarantakos 2005; Whitehead 2004). This is easily achievable when engaging with a different culture in a foreign land where the researcher has clearly identified the entry and exit points. But when the research community resides within your own community this is not so distinguishable. However, I can identify clear moments when my role transformed from outsider to researcher to friend. My entry to the field was permitted after I was ‘screened’ by a community leader and then invited to meet the broader Myanmar community at an information session. During the session my role was clearly explained and business cards were distributed to acknowledge my professional capacity.

During my fieldwork I would encounter my participants shopping or walking or at the university campus (the same campus where some Adult Migrant English classes are held). I wondered how I would exit the field given that my participants were embedded in my home community. However, an appropriate moment arose after the preview film screening. I was planning to tell the participants that our relationship had changed, as I was no longer conducting research with them. But there was no need for me to state this as participants verbally offered me their friendship and I was able to accept this by telling them they should
no longer consider me a researcher. Upon completion of my doctorate, I intend to continue to work with the community as a volunteer and friend on a variety of projects including assisting in writing grant applications, and possibly the creation of a community cook book.

Another aspect of my fieldwork was a trip to Myanmar in October 2015 which I undertook in order to engage further with participants’ cultural background and to gain an understanding of the physical surroundings and material culture of their country. In the early stages of my research I planned to undertake this trip as I believed I would benefit greatly from smelling the smells, and touching the textures – to taste mohinga (noodle soup) in Myanmar would deepen my understanding of the participants’ yearning for foods from home. I did not wish to endanger any local people and so I chose not to conduct any formal research. My time in Myanmar was spent purely as an observer but it contributed another dimension to my study by allowing me to deepen my perception of the participants’ lives and contribute to a more holistic analysis of their experiences.

**Analysis**

In conceptualising this study, I did not set out to prove or disprove a set hypothesis. This research work is therefore ‘grounded’ in order to allow themes and understanding to emerge, rather than be imposed. Thematic analysis has been used to organise and interpret the collected data (Berg 2009; Perakyla 2005). van Manen (1990, pp. 92-93) speaks of three main approaches to thematic analysis: 1) a wholistic approach that examines the entire text to elucidate themes; 2) a selective approach that requires multiple readings to identify specific statements or phrases that carry meaning about the selected phenomenon; 3) a detailed approach that closely examines specific sentences to provide insight into the lived experience. I have chosen to use a combination of all three as there are times when the
broader context/text provided meaning relevant to specific themes, and others instances where single words or phrases were significant. The same approach to data analysis was used to determine the editing structure of the documentary. Data were assigned to categories based on colour-coding transcripts of on-camera and off-camera interviews, conversations, garden tours and observations. An example of colour-coding can be found in Appendix 4.

By examining contexts/whole texts, phrases and words, I was able to determine the participants’ common themes of interest. I wrote key words at the top of the printed transcripts, coded them in different colours, and then proceeded to develop and explore these ideas throughout the texts. From this point, eight categories emerged as having the most significance for participants: Food in Myanmar, Awaiting refugee status, Challenges for new arrivals in Coffs Harbour, Adaptation to Aussie food, Make a shop behind your house: the role of gardening, Food enterprises, Food and community, and Continuing my culture: bringing home here. In this thesis, these categories present mostly in chronological order depicting the journey from Myanmar, to transition countries, to Australia. The gardening, food enterprise and community connections categories represent activities that happened concurrently but are presented in this order as they flow from individual, home-based activities (gardening); to broader community interactions (selling food, gathering as a community). The final category, Continuing my culture, encompasses all aspects of the journey and has broader implications for maintaining cultural identity through deliberate and successful placemaking.

The Food in Myanmar category highlights the differences between the food experiences at home (in Myanmar) compared to foodways in Australia. It includes descriptions of the social and cultural role of food in Myanmar, as well as ways of growing, ways of cooking and ways
of eating. It explores regional differences in cooking, as well as recollections of food security issues. Photos from my trip to Myanmar are included to add an extra layer to the description of Myanmar food culture/s.

_Awaiting refugee status_ explores the stories told about hardships as an asylum seeker in various locations including the Thai-Myanmar border, and cities in India and Malaysia. I have included both food related and non-food related examples to provide an insight into the participants’ experiences before they settled in Australia. The non-food examples add depth to the analysis by providing additional contextual information on the day to day struggle of asylum seeker life and the disempowerment felt. Key phrases and stories in this section relate to the yearning for food and nutritional deficiencies (‘there was not enough’), as well as the impact of living conditions on well-being (‘we are not happy’), and the threat of violence (‘we were scared’).

The category _Challenges for new arrivals in Coffs Harbour_ presents an analysis of the problems faced by settlers in the context of procuring food. These include their English language ability and how this impacts their capacity for shopping. Participants also discussed their inability to source favoured foods, a common problem. Anecdotes were shared about mistaken identity – including a story told by several women who accidentally bought lamb instead of the preferred beef or pork.

_Adaptation to Aussie food_ includes narratives on interactions with Australian food, likes and dislikes. This includes observations on the blandness of Australian food (‘we cannot eat!’) and the need to always have traditional food after western food is consumed (‘we are not satisfied’). This section also examines the necessary adaptation when traditional food cannot
be sourced or is too time consuming to make. One participant has converted to eating Weet-Bix for breakfast as his favourite soup is not accessible as a breakfast food.

‘Make a shop behind your house’: the role of gardening represents one of the most significant findings of the study, where stories are told about the role of gardening in participants’ lives. Gardening provides a means of accessing rare foods (foods not readily available in Australian retail outlets), as well as a livelihood, an important community function (and form of social capital) and a source of therapy. The name of the category arose from a Myanmar proverb, widely cited by numerous participants.

The Food enterprises category comprises vignettes from participants about their aspirations to develop markets stalls and ultimately restaurants. It also tells of the success achieved by a long established Myanmar family in Coffs Harbour.

Food and community looks at how gathering to cook and share food can enhance community identity and capacity building. This section highlights the important role of festivals in sharing traditions within and beyond the Myanmar community. The function of community shopping trips is also discussed.

Finally, the section Continuing my culture: bringing home here looks at how food engagement can allow participants to reconnect with the past in a positive way to maintain a relationship with home, as well as forge a new identity, in a new land. Despite drawing on positive food experiences from the past, some participants also chose to locate themselves very clearly in the here and now by emphasising the importance of peaceful living, even if it means sacrificing some cultural connections and traditional ways.
Threading through these categories are four key themes: placemaking, embodiment, identity and agency. The role of social capital is also recognised as contributing to the Myanmar community’s food (and settlement) experiences. The documentary was also organised into appropriate chapters reflecting the main categories outlined (‘Make a shop behind your house’ directly correlates with the written chapter of the same name; James makes plans for a market stall relates to food enterprises; We celebrate together depicts stories about food and community) to illustrate these commonly occurring issues in the settler stories.

**Summary**

Focused ethnography, informed by social constructivist principles, is the over-arching methodology employed in this study. It provides an appropriate framework for the use of participatory and visual research methods. Standard ethnographic tools have been utilised including semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The additional tool of walking tours has been used to add depth to the representation of the lived experience, in home gardens in particular, by allowing participants to take the lead and guide the researcher in the participant’s own surroundings. Participatory methods provide a proven approach when working with people from refugee backgrounds as they allow a kind of reciprocal experience whereby participants are equal partners in exploring and defining the research objectives and outcomes. They also foster respectful and ethical research practices. Visual methods capture a multi-layered, textural account of Myanmar foodways. Such an account also offers voice to marginalised communities and can foster a sense of empowerment and cultural pride. The outlined methodological approach was only achievable after a considerable process of community engagement, supported by a community leader who acted as a cultural broker. The outcomes for this project could not have been achieved without the
significant commitment from the Myanmar community members who participated in a well-informed and deeply engaged manner. The results of their work are presented in the documentary and written thesis.
Chapter 4 Research findings and discussion

This chapter presents the key findings and discusses these thematically to describe and analyse the Myanmar community’s lived food experience. The discussion commences by providing a snapshot of issues identified by key informants in the consultative phase of this research. These issues, along with new topics, will be explored with the introduction of summaries and vignettes from interviews and other interactions with the participants. The findings will be discussed and linked to relevant concepts and theories including sociological and anthropological ideas about placemaking, social capital, agency, embodiment and identity.

Perspectives from key informants

Seven key informants with considerable experience working with people from refugee backgrounds in Coffs Harbour were interviewed during the early consultative phase of this study to provide background information. The main theme to emerge from these interviews with was the clear importance of food-related issues in the lives of people from refugee backgrounds. One interviewee identified a real sense of grief in clients who had been disconnected from their traditional and favoured foods. Another key informant emphasised the often unrecognised importance of food engagement for this client group. This conversation set the tone for subsequent interviews where all key informants acknowledged concerns, connections and celebrations in the context of food and people from refugee backgrounds.

Food challenges mentioned by key informants included; lack of knowledge about certain Australian food types, unfamiliar ways of packaging, inability to locate traditional foods, unfamiliarity with the supermarket environment, lack of English skills to negotiate shopping,
and lack of targeted public health information, specific to food choices. One informant told of the disappointment he observed when a whole pig was purchased for a special event but it arrived without the highly prized ‘insides’. This informant also shared an anecdote about the confusion of a new arrival when he saw pictures of dogs on tins of food and commented that Australians seemed to eat a lot of dogs. Another informant suggested the culture shock in connection to food is significant and often goes unrecognised or ignored in settlement contexts.

All key informants stated that there is not enough food education provided to new arrivals from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds in Coffs Harbour. It was asserted that although there are health promotion programs in place, the relatively small size of the CALD community in Coffs Harbour means that they do not get access to programs specific to their cultural needs in terms of food orientation. Health Promotion workers are also under pressure to meet specified outcomes in existing programs and despite the good will and the clear need to offer programs specifically for people from refugee backgrounds, these services are currently not in place in Coffs Harbour. A specific area of concern for several interviewees was the lack of knowledge about the impact of sugary drinks that are commonplace in settler homes. This product choice may suggest a desire on the part of the settler to assimilate by ‘doing what Australians do’. I assumed there might be an aspiration to be seen as having higher status by drinking western drinks (see Renzaho 2004) but when I asked key informants about this they felt it was more about trying something new, then liking it. However, pressure to fit in to eating western ways was recognised as a real issue of concern for people from migrant backgrounds.

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6 The tins of food were in fact food for dogs not made from dogs.
Some other food concerns related to potentially dangerous health threats. One example was poisoning from eating puffer fish; another from eating unsuitable, non-edible plants that resembled herbs from home; a further case was where plants treated with pesticide had been foraged from roadsides. Fortunately, the latter cases led to consultation between Council weed workers and a Myanmar community leader in order to learn more from each other about desirable foods and interpretations of weeds.

Confusion around procedures and rules pertaining to food engagement were also cause for concern for these supporters of the Myanmar community. For example, several key informants mentioned the lack of knowledge about how to obtain a fishing license (and in fact, the need to acquire one). This is particularly problematic for people from Myanmar who come from a culture where fishing is important and accessible. It was also suggested that settlers who participated in formal community gardens experienced some confusion about the rules and regulations. The need to apply to become a member, pay a fee, fulfill obligations, and only visit the gardens at certain hours was viewed by several key informants as being overwhelming and discouraging for people from refugee backgrounds. There was a suggestion that having a locked fence around the community garden dissuaded participation. These perceived disincentives were reflected in the low number of settlers engaging in an established, local community garden (2014, pers. comm., 8 August). Culturally specific initiatives had been trialed to promote multicultural engagement but at the time of research these were yet to be fully embraced.

Key informants indicated that gardening is important in the settlement process for new arrivals, especially the Myanmar community. To this end, several informal community gardens have been or are being established at the time of writing. This includes the use of
private rural land owned by a church leader, as well as a new initiative to set up a garden in a transitional property owned by a refugee settlement service. Furthermore, private gardens in Myanmar people’s homes are rapidly expanding (in both numbers and space utilised) and are providing for their community, as well as supplementing incomes by sending specialised produce to market locally and interstate. Myanmar settlers exchanged sought after seeds amongst community members and horticultural knowledge is highly valued (and passed on). I learnt that several Myanmar gardeners are currently employed at a local school and many from within the Myanmar community work in the local blueberry industry.

The social and cultural significance of food was universally remarked upon by key informants. In relation to growing traditional foods, one interviewee stated ‘it’s about taste’, but more significantly ‘it’s about home’. Taste, then, is not simply a physical experience, it occurs in the context of embodiment that connects us to memory, most commonly memory of place. This aligns with Sutton’s (2001) notion of memory as forming the basis of cultural processes, and memory is deeply connected to taste. Food also connects us to place by bringing people together to share a meal. One key informant from a migrant (non-refugee) background confirmed this by stating ‘most of our ceremonies and rituals are always around food, so yes, initially food was always part of my socialisation or assimilation into the Australian community’. This has been confirmed in the Myanmar community where social activities often take place in the context of food sharing, although surprisingly this is not always Myanmar food. One example offered was where an ‘Aussie’ BBQ was used as means to bring people together socially to share a meal. However, during an observational visit to a

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7 A local settlement service owns a property where new arrivals can stay on arrival until such time as permanent accommodation is found for them.
Myanmar settler orientation session, Myanmar food was cooked and proudly served by a community leader.

Interviews with key informants confirmed the idea that food for this group is inextricably linked to identity and pride; it is also about memory and connection to the past and the present, the old and the new lived experience. These themes will be explored further below by presenting and discussing data collected from participants during fieldwork. I have organised my data into the following categories: Food in Myanmar, Awaiting Refugee Status, Challenges for new arrivals in Coffs Harbour, Adaptation to Aussie food, ‘Make a shop behind your house’: the role of gardening, Food enterprises, Food and community, and Continuing my culture: bringing home here. I discuss the themes and concepts identified earlier as they thread through each category.

**Food in Myanmar**

Food sourcing for people from Myanmar is considerably different from typical foodways found in Australia. In many rural areas in Myanmar the food eaten is only that which is grown or traded. All available private land is used for growing food and crops are planted right up to the doors and windows of homes (during my visit to Myanmar I observed residents leaning out of windows to pick beans and other crops for meal preparations). Food supply is practical, yet limited. Supermarkets do not exist, yet small shops do. One participant from a rural area stated ‘in Burma, not shopping, everyone has a farm and we eat mostly corn and sometimes rice, special times we eat rice, every day we eat corn’. Food markets are present in towns and cities, but supply is generally based on local availability. Another participant told of how in Myanmar, the seasons guide food choices. He also stated that there is a strong belief in the medicinal nature of food, so any food is potentially deemed
medicine or poison. Food is also something that is offered unconditionally to guests (or strangers): ‘since I was tiny, everywhere you go, if you knock on someone’s door and say I’m looking for such and such, they won’t tell you until they feed you. Food means welcome in Myanmar culture’.

Food is also associated with luck (or lack thereof) and its consumption is linked strongly to astrology. Food plays an integral role in festivals which happen at least every month in Myanmar. One participant stated ‘yes, it is said that we have too many festivals [laughs]’.

Prescriptions surrounding food are also present in Myanmar Buddhism, where monks (Sangha) ‘beg’ for food to ward off ego and self-indulgence. Buddhists in Myanmar will therefore prepare and provide food for monks every day. Unfortunately, this is not always possible in Coffs Harbour as the Buddhist monastery is located in a rural area outside of town and there are only a small number of Myanmar Buddhist families in the area. In some cases, these monks need to cook for themselves, so a certain level of cultural adaptation has taken place. It is important to note that the food distribution relationship between monks and lay people is both highly symbolic and potentially political. This was observed in the turning over of the alms bowls in the 2007 uprising in Myanmar, where the Sangha refused to accept food donations from the military as a form of political protest (McCarthy 2008). In their new home near Coffs Harbour the monks are emplaced far from political tensions, in a brick veneer home, with a well-stocked pantry.

Another significant difference in food culture for those from cities and towns in Myanmar is the way in which food stalls provide cheap, easily accessible and culturally desirable meals. *Figure 4.1* depicts the food stall culture and their unique offerings, including multiple types
of tofu, and deserts made from various sweetened rice products and custards. These stalls are situated in the local landscape and are identifiable markers of place.

Figure 4.1 Food stalls in Yangon providing unique, diverse and inexpensive local foods, October 2015

One participant stated that in Myanmar he could walk outside his front door and purchase his favoured bone-broth for breakfast. Mohinga (noodle soup, with fish and banana flowers) could also be bought on neighbouring street stalls (as illustrated in Figures 4.2-4.4) but in Australia it takes considerable time to prepare, and not all ingredients can be readily sourced. Interestingly, changes in food culture are also taking place in Myanmar. During my visit there I was told that mohinga shops (Figure 4.4) now stay open until late at night and serve soup all day, whereas previously, mohinga had traditionally been considered a breakfast soup. This change is accredited to the fact that more women are now working in paid employment and do not have as much time to prepare food in the home. Also, internal migration has meant more single people (young men in particular) are now living away from
the family unit and may be eating outside the home more regularly (tour guide 2015, pers. comm., 16 October).

Figure 4.2 Mohinga broth Mandalay, October 2015

Figure 4.3 Noodle preparation for mohinga, October 2015
Food in Myanmar varies considerably depending on ethnicity and tribal groups, and recreation of these unique dishes contributes significantly to reproducing cultural identity, especially during displacement. This strong differentiation in cuisine was observed consistently during my visit to Myanmar where I travelled to different cities, states, town and regions. In Yangon, the former capital of Myanmar, I was exposed to a multicultural mix of foods from all over the country, reflecting internal migration from various regions. In other areas including Bagan and Inle Lake the food tended to be more regional. After undertaking a food tour in Mandalay, I became aware of the subtle regional differences between the same dishes created in different areas. For example, the staple breakfast soup mohinga varies greatly from Yangon to Mandalay. In Yangon locals say they ‘eat’ mohinga but in Mandalay...
they ‘drink’ it. This is due to the smaller amounts of fish present in Mandalay mohinga which is due to geographic location and increased distance from the fish supply. My local food tour guide told me how much he missed his food from home when he moved to Mandalay from a northern region several hours away. He said the food simply did not taste the same and this difference made him feel uneasy in his transition to living in a new place. This sense of unease clearly would be amplified for forced migrants, especially when they arrive in a country such as Australia, where the food culture could not be more different.

The regional and ethnic differentiation in cuisine was reflected in Myanmar community foodways in Coffs Harbour. During my fieldwork I noticed a distinct difference between Burman/Myanmar and Chin food, with Karen food seeming to fall somewhere in between the two in terms of common ingredients and style of cooking. Burman/Myanmar food typically includes chili and is often deep fried, with extensive use of fish, fish sauce and shrimp paste. Alternatively, Chin food is often boiled with water and chicken is the favoured meat. At various community events I saw the classic Burman/Myanmar meals of pork or chicken curry prepared. These curries were created with large amounts of onion and were seasoned with turmeric and ginger, reminiscent of Indian spices. I also observed that a mortar and pestle was a standard piece of equipment in participants’ kitchens to grind up the various spices. These are familiar tools ‘from home’ that contribute to the act of placemaking in terms of both aesthetics and embodiment. The act of pounding the ingredients and the subsequent aromas that emerged connected the cook to ‘old ways of doing things’. Across all ethnic groups I saw ingredients being expertly combined by-hand in order to distribute the flavour throughout the dish. Interestingly many of the participants put on plastic gloves to do this. Some of these women had completed or were completing food hygiene certificates and had been told it was required. I wondered if they would have done this if I was not filming? It
seems that western concepts of hygiene and risk management have filtered into the settler’s communities and this is one marked difference between food practices there and here.

Many Myanmar settlers in Coffs Harbour come from rural areas with a focus on subsistence farming. Nutritional deficiencies in parts of Myanmar are common (Shwe & Hlaing 2011; Wilson & Mwee 2013) and this poor nutrition is often worsened in transition countries whilst people are awaiting refugee status (Kemmer et al. 2003). Those from Chin State have lived in severe poverty and have survived on a staple diet of corn, rice and millet, with limited vegetables to supplement their food intake. In many cases, severe famine (Chin Human Rights Organization 2008) has prompted families to relocate, and for some the complexity of growing food is a significant factor in their decision to seek refuge. This was highlighted in conversations with participants. One man from Chin State recalled:

And sometimes there is famine…like in the month August, September, October…During these months there is no business at my place, when we need money we have to sell our corn and our rice, then we get money, then we pay our school fees…There is famine every year, so during that time we eat sweet potato, taro and yam…and some people took small bamboo and eat it…When the bamboo flowers many mouse, many wolf come up, they have more population, so they went to our farm and eat rice, corn, millet, all vegetable. So we say ‘bamboo famine’.

Lack of food provides a compelling reason to seek a new home, but it is not simply the impact of famine that pushes those who leave. In Chin State, families have been subjected to human rights violations and are forced from their farms or are required to provide military rulers with specific crops and monetary kickbacks (Chin Human Rights Organization 2008). This situation was confirmed by a participant who explained:
Yes, they took their land. For example, some military took but they didn’t give money…They raped some girls and some women, and if some people not obey the military, the army put inside a cell. There’s no human rights. There’s no freedom.

This pertinent example illustrates the way in which food can be examined through the lens of power (or lack thereof); not just in a critical or Marxist sense in terms of authoritarian control over means of production, land and unequal distribution of resources (Marx 1978). We can also conceptualise the exercise of power in a Foucauldian sense, whereby we can observe the networks reproduced through power relations (Foucault 1980; Hardy 2003). In this case access and control over food sources and land can demonstrate power from above and below. Authoritarian power is present in the seizure of land for military gain. But power from below - hence agency – can also been seen in the decision to flee persecution. If agency can be defined as “the capacity of human beings to shape the circumstances in which they live” (Locke 1978, in Emirbayer & Mische 1988, p. 964), then the actions of all participants in this study demonstrate the capacity for resistance of marginalised people. However, for those who flee, the very long time awaiting a determination on their refugee status (Dudley 2011; UNHCR n.d.b), is also filled with further challenges and violations.

**Awaiting refugee status**

The issues of lack of food and disempowered food choice were compounded further for Myanmar asylum seekers during their years awaiting refugee status. For the participants in this study, the time awaiting UNHCR processing varied from four to twenty-four years. During this time, Myanmar asylum seekers resided in one of three intermediatory locations: Thai border camps; Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; and New Delhi, India. In Thailand, UNHCR, along with various NGOs, supports asylum seekers and provides basic food rations (UNHCR
These included rice, oil and fish paste. Vegetables and fruit were not usually provided and needed to be grown or traded. India and Malaysia, however, are not signatories to the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol (UNHCR n.d.a). In Kuala Lumpur and New Delhi there are no camps and no support is offered to asylum seekers. In these locations UNHCR offices exist for the purpose of processing applications for refugee status but these channels are often closed or only open to people in specific circumstances, such as pregnant women, the elderly and those with severe illness (Alexander 2008). Participants told of the extreme conditions they faced while waiting in these locations, in particular the poverty they endured, the ongoing discrimination, the threat of violence, and the hunger they felt. A participant recalled an experience in India that sums up the negative day-to-day realities of Myanmar asylum seekers:

I helped refugees when they got raped, when they got robbed and badly treated…I report to police and UNHCR office. When I report to police, they don’t want our application…One day in my community one woman got raped and we bring to hospital. After that some police went to her house and arrest three or four young people but they release again. They didn’t take action. So in India there is no security, we are not happy, we not enjoy in New Delhi. We scared.

These human right abuses and deprivations were part of the lived experience for participants in this study; a lived experience made worse with the compounding of multiple challenges, including securing adequate food. With no financial support offered from the Indian government or UNHCR, some participants survived by securing low-paid (illegal) work which provided for basic food such as rice. But others had to make do with what they could scavenge from the markets after closing (discarded food was often left in the gutter). One participant commented that ‘there was not enough [food], it was very hard for me’. Another
participant told of the intense hunger he felt and how he could not sleep at night due to starvation. He commented on how in India people eat rice every day but as asylum seekers they could not even afford rice. When they did acquire rice, they would make it into porridge by watering it down to make it last for many meals. This participant mentioned a University of NSW community development program (see Centre for Refugee Studies 2015) that visited Delhi and treated asylum seekers to ‘good food’ including chicken, rice and vegetables. He stated ‘when they came we were so happy’.

The issues raised above in relation to food inadequacies are of great concern given the fundamental right to food as outlined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1996 Rome Declaration on World Food Security (Food and Agriculture Organization 1996; Mechlem 2004; Renzaho 2002). From a food security perspective that prioritises access, the right to food is clearly not met in these circumstances. This is where an examination of the experience of embodiment can be useful. The lack of [culturally appropriate] food not only deprives the body, it also deprives an individual of their identity. Hence eating is an embodied experience that connects us to identity construction and reconstruction.

Although the conditions in transition countries were very difficult for the participants in this study, there were also some advantages, including the similarities in food culture. In India, similar spices were used to those in Myanmar cooking. When money was available, it was easy to purchase familiar vegetables. In some instances, there were ‘Burmese’ shops making traditional foods like mohinga. Despite poor living conditions and being subjected to abuse, there was some consolation in being able to access familiar food, albeit at very limited times.
This familiarity certainly assisted in promoting some form of placemaking and maintenance of cultural identity.

**Challenges for new arrivals in Coffs Harbour**

After arriving in a destination country, people from refugee backgrounds go through many phases of adjustment, which can be grouped into three broad stages as the post-arrival ‘honeymoon’ stage, culture shock, and eventually ‘settlement’ (STARTTS 2014; uscirefugees 2001). A Karen woman expressed positive feelings post arrival, ‘my first impression was I felt like I escaped, I’m free from all the difficulty I have faced in the past’, and another stated ‘I looked in the mirror and I knew I would live longer here’. However, conflicting feelings were encapsulated in the words of a participant who stated ‘at first I feel like heaven. Then I’m not sure if I’m happy or not happy…I had difficulty finding a house, also this is not my country, so I had trouble with depression’. Another participant made the following comments on their arrival experience: ‘we are very surprised, different people, different language, different culture…surprised but after that we are very happy again, we are safe and happy’. Whilst all entrants through the regional humanitarian program will receive some form of orientation about life in Australia, including a five-day pre-departure course and post-arrival education from settlement services (Department of Social Services n.d.b; Refugee Council of Australia 2011), participants in this study indicated they still experienced considerable culture shock. Topics taught in the pre-departure sessions included cultural adjustment and money but there was no specific topic on food. It is important to recognise that small, everyday tasks that Australian citizens may take for granted, such as shopping, can be challenging for people from refugee backgrounds in a new and unfamiliar environment.
Relationships with food play a key role in settlement and many participants recalled negative early experiences with shopping in Australia, such as ‘only my husband did…it was nearly a year before I did it…it was very scary’, and ‘in Coffs Harbour the market is big, I’ve never seen before’. Furthermore, another participant outlined issues with communication:

This is my first challenge because we don’t know how to buy the things…I don’t know how to pay the money…It’s hard because they don’t understand our pronunciation. I want condensed milk but I can’t find. It is difficult for us…I don’t know much English. Easy things I know, like potato and tomato.

Common mistakes relating to the incorrect purchase of certain foods were recalled by different participants: ‘I thought I bought beef but it was lamb. I’ve never eaten it before, so we didn’t eat it’ and ‘I wanted to buy pork but I bought lamb [because you couldn’t read the label?] yes’. Again notions of power and social capital can be applied here in terms of access to information and knowledge (English language skills in particular), which in turn leads to access to desired foods. When people are unable to access preferred foods, agency and empowerment are significantly reduced.

Participants also identified common ingredients that could not be found in their new home. These included rosella leaves, specific vegetables including Asian eggplants, very hot chili, a preferred type of shrimp paste, and banana flowers and stems (an essential ingredient in mohinga). Given Coffs Harbour’s long tradition as a banana growing area, it is curious that the last two ingredients (banana flowers and stems) cannot be easily purchased. However, Australians have not previously demanded parts of the plant other than the fruit. This also reflects a difference in culinary traditions where only selected parts of plants and animals are utilised in mainstream Australian cooking. Conversely in Myanmar cooking, all the different
parts are used in various ways – nothing is wasted. *Figure 4.5* depicts the various parts of the banana plant (fruit, stems, leaves) that are used for different purposes.

*Figure 4.5* Different parts of the banana plant on sale at the markets in Mandalay, October 2015

One newly arrived participant noted that they found similar food types to those they are used to but the taste was not the same: ‘I found rice but not exactly the same as in my place [Chin State] but I can manage. I found corn but it is different. [Fresh] millet I cannot find’. After this interview I made enquiries to a local community garden to see if they were growing millet and although they were not, they said they could possibly grow it if the interest was there. So the potential to source this item was present, despite presenting an initial challenge.

Moreover, another participant described their early food shopping experience:

> When we arrived in Coffs Harbour we did not find the things we like to eat, we only found Woolies [supermarket] food. After a while we made friends who live in Sydney and Brisbane and we found our traditional foods, the kind of food we normally like to eat.
These examples illustrate how both bonding and bridging social capital can provide access to desired foods.

Over time, as the Myanmar community in Coffs Harbour has grown, so too the food landscape has transformed since the early arrivals. For example, in early 2016 I noticed banana flowers on sale at a local market. Many changes have occurred as a result of consumer demands, as well as through the settlers’ expanding garden culture. This transformation has not only served to meet culinary desires, it also performs an important role in placemaking - making ‘here like there’ - by transforming the landscape (gardens), the kitchen (culturally specific ingredients and cooking tools) and the neighbourhood (strong smells of traditional foods). As the settlement journey progresses, adaptation to the local food landscape can also occur.

**Adaptation to Aussie food**

Most participants in this study had tried Australian food but were not enamoured with it, they still favoured their traditional foods. A participant stated ‘I can’t eat Australian food, if I could it would be good…because they don’t eat chili…no flavour at all’. Interestingly the interpretation of ‘Australian’ food was usually American fast food chain offerings, as well as barbeques. Many had tried KFC and McDonalds but always needed to eat their traditional foods after such a meal in order to feel satisfied. A common attitude was that a meal without rice was not a meal. In fact, some scholars suggest that *rice* actually means *food or meal* in some Asian cultures (Bishwajit et al. 2013). One participant commented that he was concerned because he had seen some community members ‘getting big’ by eating takeaway, followed by a traditional meal of rice or noodles. He was also alarmed by the consumption of sugary drinks. Some research (Hadley, Zodhiate & Sellen 2006; Renzaho 2004) highlights
the preference of some new arrivals for processed western foods but this does not seem to be the case for the Myanmar community in Coffs Harbour. One participant stated ‘Australian food is good but if you eat too much it will make you fat’. There is certainly some evidence of food adaptation for the sake of convenience with one participant indicating he ate Weet-Bix for breakfast. He added ‘I would love to eat fried rice and chick peas in the morning, and a kind of naan [bread]. I would like to eat hot soup in the morning…but I can’t find it here…it takes too long…In Myanmar Aunty will make a soup for ten people’.

The realities of location, work commitments and general changes in lifestyle have meant that it is not always possible to eat the traditional way, however, responses from participants indicated there remains a strong preference to continue eating food from home wherever possible. It is essential, therefore, to be able to source such foods, and this becomes possible in many instances by growing your own food.

‘Make a shop behind your house’: the role of gardening

Gardening has had an impact on all of the Myanmar community members in Coffs Harbour, as all participants have some form of home garden, from simple polystyrene boxes filled with herbs to expansive plots bursting with rare jungle plants and trees. Gardening can provide many opportunities in settlement, including a means to access traditional foods, engagement with nature/green space as a form of the therapy, and it can also potentially provide an income. It is also a clear, visual and sensory link to the past and to the traditions of Myanmar ways of life. This was summed up by a participant who recalled a Myanmar proverb which states: ‘if you want to be happy get married. If you want to be happy for life do gardening. If you want to be happy for this life and the next do meditation and mindfulness’. Gardening is therefore also connected to Myanmar spiritual and philosophical beliefs as it is embedded in one of the
three paths to happiness. This participant added ‘so gardening is going to give happiness for a lifetime, and also planting trees and veggies, you’re not just planting for yourself but also for the next generation, you’ve already planted the seed so it’s good karma’. Gardening, therefore, has long term and intergenerational effects and these benefits can already be observed for this community in Coffs Harbour.

The first interview I conducted during fieldwork revealed many of the positive aspects of gardening. This participant explained that it was difficult for him to secure employment upon arrival, despite considerable work experience in the community development/charitable sector. He joined a public community garden to grow the kinds of things he liked to eat and also to provide healthy and economical food for his family. Upon meeting a generous stranger, this man was offered a larger plot of private land to use free of charge in order for him to be able to grow more vegetables and herbs, and ultimately supply local restaurants and markets. The garden provided not only an income but it also offered a refuge and a means to feel happy and productive. This participant stated, ‘if I hadn’t been doing gardening it would be so bad. So I love my gardening. It helped a lot with my mental health and well-being’.

This reasserts the positive role of gardening in promoting psychological benefits, as indicated in the literature (Anderson 2010; Ashton 2015; Brook 2003; Kaplan 1995). The link between gardening and well-being is apparent here and in other interviews with different participants. The love of gardening was easily distinguishable as not just a means of productivity but also as an embodied experience, connecting the participant to home and facilitating placemaking by manipulating the natural and human-made landscape. Gardening also enhances personal wellbeing, an important consideration in the settlement process, as already indicated.
On a practical level the sub-tropical climate, extended growing season and fertile soil in Coffs Harbour make it an ideal place for agricultural pursuits and participants have remarked that it is similar to parts of Myanmar in this regard. Many crops commonly grown in Myanmar flourish here. These include rosella (commonly grown for its leaves), ‘stick pumpkin’ (Asian eggplant), varieties of cress and beans, and an array of trees, including moringa, cultivated for their leaves. Participants also grow vegetables and fruit more familiar in Australia, such as choko and pumpkin, but use all of their components, including the leaves.

One Chin man reported that he has lived in Coffs Harbour for more than seven years, and, along with his family, is purchasing a home on a large suburban block. The land has been planted out over a number of years and is now completely covered in food crops, ‘at first we cannot do the big one, but every year we extend. So now it is completely covered [smiles]’. This participant has undertaken horticultural training and is now employed as a school gardener, cultivating an award-winning\(^8\) food garden with students.

For the Chin man, gardening is about much more than providing food and income. It also represents an important means of attaining health and well-being. After suffering from a stroke and spending several months in hospital, this participant yearned to be back in his garden. He described how this access to green space played an important role in his rehabilitation: ‘It is therapy, yes. Also, for my left side I do exercise. I weeding slowly, good exercise’. He added ‘when I come home from the hospital I go into my garden and I look around my garden, my feeling is good’. But this is not just about access to green space, it also

\(^8\) The school garden has won many prizes in the annual Coffs Harbour garden competition.
represents a way to connect with a familiar and culturally specific land(food)scape. This form of placemaking gives deep meaning to the experience of the everyday, whereby attempts to ‘“feel at home” in new surroundings are helped by efforts to stress continuity amidst change’ (Ho & Hatfield 2011, p. 711). I could have easily imagined I was walking through a garden in Myanmar during the garden tours I took with this participant during fieldwork. I felt this even more strongly after my trip to Myanmar where I saw first-hand how and what was being grown. This is no doubt what this man was hoping to achieve for his family and his community. The garden’s role in promoting happiness, distilling identity and maintaining culture was clear.

Likewise, a Karen man achieved similar benefits by converting his garden in a rental property to a productive source of food and a familiar place: ‘yes, it’s true and also the plants, fruit and vegetables we grow in our garden, it’s like we’re eating food in Burma’. This was revealed in a garden tour where the participant proudly showed me what he grew. Here every possible growing space was utilised, including the front garden, an unfamiliar notion in the ornamental gardens of Australian suburbia. Many small plants were growing in polystyrene boxes, whilst more established trees such as papaya were planted directly in the garden. This participant stated that the weather is very good for growing (and for him – he likes it). He was very happy to receive permission from the owner of the property to develop and cultivate the garden. The first plant he grew was rosella (as also reported by many other participants) and he now has more than 30 rare Myanmar jungle plants thriving in his Coffs Harbour garden. He described the challenge of finding familiar foods on arrival and so he visited ‘here and there’ and travelled ‘here and there’ (Brisbane mainly) and now after five years ‘we have plants we want to eat, now it’s the way we like it’. The creation of this garden was facilitated largely by tapping into local and interstate Myanmar community networks. This man’s
respected position as a community leader enabled this engagement (bonding social capital) and allowed him to distribute these benefits locally.

A Myanmar saying, ‘make a shop behind your house’, previously mentioned by another participant, was retold during this visit. The participant explained ‘it means you do not have to buy things from outside and that shop will provide enough food for your family and minimise costs. It means make your own garden at the back of your house’. This participant added that he only buys onions and garlic, all other fruit and vegetables are grown in his garden. The utilitarian nature of home gardening is clear but such cultivation also links participants to the past and to ways from home, including the farming/growing tradition. It represents an important way to reproduce tradition, and for culture to continue, transform and adapt to new situations.

Despite the very positive feelings and outcomes associated with gardening, it is interesting to note that there is minimal engagement between the Myanmar community and public community gardens in the area. When asked, most participants did not know about the community gardens, did not know where they were, or did not show interest in them. One reason for this included lack of public transport, but even a family who lived a short distance from the garden did not wish to become members. One participant stated, ‘no, no, it has to be your land’ when asked if they could expand their garden’s capacity by taking out a plot at the community garden. Given the prolific nature of the Myanmar gardens, the need for more land might be understandable. However, community gardens are far more than spaces to grow, they also foster community interdependence and resilience (Anderson 2010; Cummings et al 2008; Turner 2011a) and can act as a form of bridging social capital. Perhaps these settlers already have such a strong sense of community provided by cultural/ethnic associations and
religious affiliations that they do not seek another source of community. In a sense the Myanmar community has its own community gardens in the way that many community members share their seeds, cuttings, seedlings and crops. Thus their food culture continues to regenerate through the growing of traditional foods.

**Food enterprises**

Cooking and gardening skills have provided a means of income for Myanmar settlers in Coffs Harbour. During the course of my field work, I often encountered new arrivals who held ambitions of opening a food stall, and ultimately a restaurant. This dream has been achieved by one family who own a popular Thai restaurant. The owner learnt Thai cooking techniques during her seven years in Thailand waiting for refugee status. Arriving in Australia with little knowledge of English, this settler commenced work as a kitchen hand and eventually convinced her husband that they too should open a restaurant. In planning their menu, they conceded that Australians were not familiar with Myanmar food and so decided to opt for the more familiar option of Thai food. But there has always been some Myanmar food on the menu, including boneless duck and chicken curry which are very popular with diners. Despite this expertise and familiarity with Thai cooking, this participant continues to have a strong preference for the Myanmar food from her childhood, including ‘noodle salad you fry with flowers, and tomato and vegetable salad – very nice’ as well as her mother’s ‘soup with smelly fish’. Interestingly, this participant did not actually learn how to cook Myanmar food until she arrived in Australia, because prior to leaving her home country her mother always did the cooking. Her memories of eating Myanmar food remain strong and reproducing these recipes continues to link her to her family and her home country.
When I first visited one family, the father told me about his plans to open a stall at a summer food market in Coffs Harbour. Soon after the first interview he contacted me to say he had a start date in mind and so we met again to discuss his plans. He explained:

At first I was thinking Sunday market but they didn’t have a vacancy, I had to wait, so they gave me the waiting list. So now I try Friday market, only food market…but I have to wait for my certificate…if I have certificate I can go next week….something like traditional food, I will have pork curry, beef curry, soup and crunchy [deep fried chick peas with tamarind sauce].

This man had been planning the stall for six months but needed correct certification and insurance, as well as expensive equipment including a bain marie, a marquee and a trailer. Although the entrepreneurial settler was motivated by the prospect of increasing his family’s income, he also viewed this opportunity as a way to share his culture: ‘if I sell here, everybody can taste our home cuisine…I think our food is more delicious!’ Cooking also continues a family tradition for this participant, as he grew up being taught to cook by his now deceased father who owned a restaurant. ‘Yes, because my father was a good chef, he taught me a lot…that’s why my father would be very proud of me’. Here I observed another example of how evoking memories and familial connections can be harnessed to continue traditional practices in new settlings.

Several weeks later I met this man again, this time at the food market. It was his second time at the market after a very successful first week. In the first week he sold out of some menu items within an hour and was very encouraged.
The first time I selling Burmese soup with chicken, and rice and chicken curry. I think I can sell more vermicelli noodle soup but I cannot. If I make samosa I will sell more, I make 60 or 65. I sell in one hour, all gone, all finished…I feel I can do more, I think like that.

The early success of his stall inspired this participant to make plans to attend other local festivals and events. But his plans were ultimately much bigger: ‘yes, if my shop, now a small one, got a good name, then I do big one [restaurant] after one or two years’ [smiles]. Such ambition provides another example of agency and taking control over one’s circumstances, with the context of structural limitations.

Another participant told of her plans to open a restaurant but at the time of the initial interview she was feeling frustrated with Australian bureaucracy. She stated ‘it’s really hard to open a shop because it requires certificate II or III, not like in India [her transition country], in India it’s easy to open a small stall. In India if we have money we just open a business’. However, this participant acknowledged that she had only been in Australia for one year and she ‘had to try more’. She was determined to create some kind of income through cooking and selling food, and wanted ‘Aussie people to encourage’ her. Once again the idea of sharing culture was mentioned because this was not only a business motivation, it was also about allowing people in Coffs Harbour ‘to know about our food’. By the end of my fieldwork, this participant was excited to tell me she had commenced studying a certificate in food safety and she was on her way to creating a food-related business.

A recent study by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2015) notes the entrepreneurial success of humanitarian migrants in terms of setting up successful businesses in Australia. For this group, business income accounts for nearly 10 per cent of personal income, nearly double that of skilled migrants (ABS 2015). In the instance of food enterprises, such businesses
demonstrate the realisation of personal ambitions, a means of income and a continuation of
cultural reproduction through the traditions embedded in cooking and eating. These food
enterprises not only allow settlers to demonstrate agency and create their own futures, they
also contribute to placemaking by transforming the local food landscape. The presence of
Myanmar food stalls has diversified local offerings, and has also created a new sensory
presence through smells, tastes and visual reminders of another place.

Food and community

The role of food in enhancing community connectedness can be observed at multiple levels
in the Myanmar community in Coffs Harbour; including communal cooking, sharing food
within and outside (non-Myanmar) the community, as well as sourcing hard to come by
ingredients. During my fieldwork I attended many food-related events including the
Thadingyut Festival of Light, Chin National Day and Myanmar community Christmas
celebrations. During these visits I observed the great happiness experienced by community
members when they came together through the preparation of food, and also when they were
able to share their food with the non-Myanmar people invited the join the celebrations.

Celebrating with food at festivals reinstates a connection to home and facilitates the
continuation of traditions and rituals. It also contributes to identity construction and
performance in a new homeland. A community leader summed up the important role of
festivals in Myanmar life: ‘we have 12 months and every month we have at least one festival.
The festival can be different from place to place, town to town, district to district, but every
festival has lots of food, they only make specific food for particular festivals’. In order to
prepare for these festivals, the community will mobilise social networks to create a suitable
feast. In preparation for Thadingyut, community members gathered to cook at a private home
to supplement the food already provided by a Myanmar restaurant owner. For Chin National Day at least ten people cooked designated dishes and then assembled in a church hall for the final preparations on the day of the celebration. For the Christmas preparations about a dozen people gathered to cook on the morning of the celebration; this was achieved, after some community members were shopping and organising until midnight the night before.

At the Christmas preparations, I observed the community coming together on both practical and social levels. Here a group made up of different ethnicities (Burman/Myanmar, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Shan) assembled to make pork and chicken curry, along with green mango salad. One very experienced cook was appointed the head chef but everyone assisted in chopping, stirring, and fetching. At one stage, three women of different ethnicities worked together over a pot to add spices and seasoning. Mats were spread out inside and outside the home for groups to sit and undertake preparations in a comfortable, familiar and sociable manner. Banter was exchanged and the space was frequently filled with laughter. One participant summed up the experience as follows: ‘at Christmas time we meet, everybody is happy’, another added ‘this is the time we are all together. We all work at different blueberry farms, so I’m very happy, normally we can’t see each other…functions like this bring us together’. This happiness also brings with it feelings of both gratitude and sadness, as participants reflected on the lives of family members still in Myanmar or in transition countries. Whilst preparing a huge pot of meat, several participants stated their relatives could never afford to eat like this, so they were thinking of them on this occasion. Once again I witnessed the power of food to conjure memories from the past, as well as forge new ones.

Eating the food presents a further means to socialise. A Zomi (Chin sub-group) man stated that he met people at festivals that he did not see on any other occasion. He also reiterated the
traditional role of food sharing as an important means to facilitate communication amongst communities. He recalled: ‘during our forefather’s time they have sharing and eating. When they eating together they have some discussion on past time and future what will happen, what we have to do, what we have to work in our farm, our village, our community.’

Participants from different ethnicities referred to this social role of food, for example: ‘yes, when we’re hungry we eat but even when we’re not hungry we eat our traditional foods with our friends and to make to new friends’ and ‘the Karen traditionally like to share food and feed friends’. The underlying theme of these comments is that you can exchange knowledge by offering food, so non-Myanmar people from Coffs Harbour (and elsewhere) can have the opportunity to learn about culture through the social experience of cross-cultural dining. This exchange becomes a form of bridging social capital. I observed this at both the Thadingyut festival and Chin National Day where non-Myanmar residents of Coffs Harbour were present to join in the celebrations, experience new tastes and learn about Myanmar culture. This was considered a very positive outcome by a Myanmar community member who stated ‘yes, I am happy, so I want other people to eat our food too…other people are interested in Burmese food, I encourage them to eat our food’.

Another expression of community and social capital is the way in which people get together to coordinate long distance shopping trips. All participants spoke of trips to buy food, usually to Brisbane, Sydney and to a lesser extent Melbourne. Sometimes there is a specific purpose to obtain special ingredients for festivals, other times it is a matter of stocking up everyday pantry items. But surprisingly the distances are not seen as an impediment and they are revealed to have a dual function: ‘sometimes they make long distance trips to get what they like to eat, in terms of price and in terms of what they are finding. The amount of time you
will be travelling you will also be socialising. It’s worth the trip because food is so important’.

The notion of food and community can be further understood through interactions between Myanmar people and other cultural groups from refugee backgrounds in Coffs Harbour. Cross-cultural links have been established through English classes at TAFE and from other settlement activities. This has seen an exchange of different food crops ‘for example, the African people…they show us and we start trying their food. We like it and we show them what we like’. Whilst cultures and traditions evolve over time and incorporate many new features (like new food items), linking back to the past remains an important way to enhance cultural security and strengthen identity, especially for displaced peoples.

**Continuing my culture: bringing home here**

Food not only constitutes a living culture, through the act of recreating and sharing traditional foods, it also represents a way to engage with the present in a new environment. Food is about memory, about reimagining the past in positive ways by embracing the sense of taste. Throughout this study I noted many comments on how food connects participants to their culture and identity, and how important this is in times of displacement. One participant summed this up as ‘culture is your identity, it’s where you come from, the meaning behind’. And food can assist in continuing this identity, ‘yes, it is particularly important, especially our traditional foods’.

The many positive feelings surrounding food were evident throughout this study. One participant simply said cooking Myanmar food makes her feel ‘beautiful’, it reminds her of home and brings back good memories. She added when she cooks it makes her feel proud of
her culture. Further, a Zomi man stated ‘when we have a celebration or traditional festival, we cook our food and we remember our hometown, our culture, our past lifestyle, we remember’.

The dislocation experienced by people from refugee backgrounds can be further compounded by a disruption to their relationships to food. One participant stated ‘I feel like I am disconnected from my food, it’s far away in Burma. I thought when I go back to Burma I will eat a lot of food’. Many participants made similar comments reflecting a yearning for home through food. ‘Of course I miss my home…the day I have that food I feel I am at home but also where I am is my home too’.

Despite the real importance of food in continuing identity and culture, ultimately the desire for safety is more important, as seen in this statement by a Karen woman who spent many years fleeing violence: ‘of course I miss my home when I eat that kind of food. But when we were in our village, we had to flee all time because there had not been a ceasefire in our village…food is important in our culture but it’s not as important as peaceful living’.

Although food is important, and culturally specific foods are desirable, the need for safety is understandably of more immediate importance to these settlers. But this does not dismiss the role of food in enhancing healing, peaceful living and well-being by reasserting community connectedness and support.

**Summary**

This chapter has provided an overview of significant themes and experiences as identified by key informants and participants in this study. These have included the challenges experienced by new arrivals, especially in relation to shopping; the important role of gardening in
promoting wellbeing and a source of rare foods; and the experience of connectedness through community cooking. All of these factors impact distinctly on settlement. They also demonstrate fundamental ways to facilitate placemaking in their new homes. Placemaking is achieved by accessing networks both within and outside the Myanmar community, and this illustrates the important role of social capital for people from refugee backgrounds. Understanding the sociocultural role of food for this group can play a key role in assisting in their settlement experience. What many Australians take for granted as the everyday, shopping and cooking for example, can represent a major upheaval in cultural norms for those migrating from other countries. Greater understanding in this area is essential to truly connect with the lived experience of this group of people, as well as promote positive settlement in Australia. The representation and dissemination of these ideas via film is examined in the following chapter.
Chapter 5 Reflection on filmmaking as process, research and community engagement

This chapter’s primary aim is to reflect on the filming journey. It includes the development of my initial idea to use visual methods, the training undertaken to further my skills and deepen my philosophical approach to filmmaking, film recruitment, filming and editing a project that sought to be collaborative and anchored in an ethical documentary approach (Bershen 2010; Kishore 2015; Nash 2010, 2011), screening and disseminating the stories told, and finally to reflection and understanding impact. I reiterate my justification for using film as part of my research output in order to maximise impact. I also revisit ethical considerations with reference to real life examples encountered during filming.

Preparation and training

When I commenced my doctoral studies I intended to undertake a qualitative research project, presented as a standard social science thesis. However, as I became more involved in my topic, I soon came to realise the more I read and observed, the more I imagined my findings being presented in audiovisual form. This is partly due to the sensory and textural nature of interactions both with food and the film medium itself but also because I had considerable experience in television production so I was able to imagine how such interactions could be captured and shared. Therefore, audiovisual realisations of personal/group food stories were appealing, relevant and seemingly achievable. I was also motivated by the goal and possibility of communicating my findings beyond an academic audience. Further, I would be working with a clearly defined community in my research and I wanted them to play an essential role in creating and delivering the research findings. The potentially collaborative nature of documentary film therefore presented itself as the way forward, allowing me to achieve my diverse, although interconnected aims.
In order to prepare for the project, I completed the Filmmaking for Fieldwork course in the United Kingdom during my candidature. This intensive two-week course was created and taught by staff from the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology at the University of Manchester. The lead teacher Andy Lawrence is an accomplished filmmaker who has completed feature length documentaries utilising observational filmmaking techniques in a social research context (see Lawrence 2015). Lawrence promotes a filmmaking methodology that is grounded and collaborative, and one that seeks to promote deep engagement and understanding. The Filmmaking for Fieldwork approach can be conceptualised as a:

> method to articulate moments of confusion and ambiguity in human action and in how we formulate structures of meaning and perform our identities…[that] primarily seeks a contextualised, personal account which speaks not only to the experiences of the filmmakers and research participants, but also aims to evoke related experiences in the audience.

(Barabantseva & Lawrence 2015)

On the first day of the Manchester course, Lawrence predicted that filmmaking will become as widely used in research as essay writing. This view offered support to my personal belief, and that of visual methods scholars (Filak & Gorisek 2015; Jackson 2014; Mitchell 2011), that more accessible research formats were not only justified but becoming increasingly accepted within academia. During the course Lawrence further explained the appeal and depth of filmmaking in representing reality was because it ‘speaks to the “experience”, things taken for granted, not noted, naturalised in their surroundings – the camera picks this up’ (2014). Filmmaking can also be instrumental in recording processes not otherwise easily described without pictures. This is particularly relevant to food preparation, as illustrated in my film. We observe women and men cooking in their kitchens, and the added layer of sound allows us to fully appreciate food preparation processes by experiencing the pounding of
ingredients in a mortar and pestle, the sizzling of onion and garlic, the squelch of a salad being mixed by hand. The sensory nature of such processes is highlighted in the filmic representation, as is the sensory nature of film itself through its audio visual impact. Film therefore captures the bodily and sensory connections to places and things, not only for the participants but also for the filmmaker and the audience (MacDougall 2005; Pink 2007b).

Another lesson learnt from the Filmmaking for Fieldwork course is the way in which filming an event can be illustrative in understanding the experiences of groups, especially in terms of cultural performativity. The essence of an event can also be captured in a multidimensional, sensory way – the colours, the sounds, the emotions. I believe observational filmmaking is conducive to faithfully capturing celebrations, as illustrated in the depiction of Chin National Day in my film. Here not only do we experience the events of the day (speeches, performances, ceremonies) but we can also observe the complexity of Chin textiles as worn by the participants (Figure 5.1), the sounds of traditional and contemporary Chin music, and of course the preferred foods for special occasions (Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.1 Detail Chin costumes, film still ‘The last refuge: food stories from Myanmar to Coffs Harbour’, February 2015
Such a representation of a Chin celebration demonstrates the way in which film can be particularly effective in documenting material culture, and although this may be a somewhat dated notion, I contend it is still useful and adds depth to the representation of the lived experience. Locating traditional Chin people, in a church hall, in a small country town in Australia (*Figure 5.3*), also highlights the many contradictions and upheavals faced by this group of people. It also emplaces them in the here and now, in their new home.

*Figure 5.2* Food served at Chin National Day, film still ‘The last refuge: food stories from Myanmar to Coffs Harbour’, February 2015

*Figure 5.3* Chin National Day, Coffs Harbour Baptist Church Hall, film still ‘The last refuge: food stories from Myanmar to Coffs Harbour’, February 2015
A fundamental method taught in the Filmmaking for Fieldwork course was to film a combination of testimonials (formal and informal interviews), processes (i.e., cooking) and significant events (like festivals) (Lawrence 2014) in order to represent an issue, topic or a group of people in various contexts and from different perspectives. This technique informed my approach to filming throughout my study.

The knowledge and experience I acquired in this course was also influenced the way I worked with participants and how I/we represented their stories. During the course in Manchester, Lawrence described filmmaking as a dance between the filmmaker and their subjects. He also added ‘you are not the leader, you are led’ (Lawrence 2014). I find this analogy to be most useful in describing my own journey in this project. I continually sought direction from the participants to ensure their stories were being created, not mine. Of course I am an active participant in the process; a process that recognises filmmaking as a continual journey of negotiation, interaction, collaboration, timing and performance.

**Film recruitment**

Initially, it was my intention to interview all of the study’s participants off-camera and then ask them to consider being part of the documentary once they were fully informed of the process, had the experience of being interviewed by me once, and could offer informed consent. I had expected that only a small number of participants would want to appear on screen, and so I set my sights at filming at least two or three of the participants over the course of my fieldwork. After spending some time getting to know the participants at meetings and other social occasions, I was surprised to discover that everyone wanted to appear on camera in the documentary. At first I felt this would be too complex and that too many voices would be competing to have their stories heard. I was unsure as to how I would
develop a clear narrative if there were too many contributors. My inclination originally was to focus on the stories of fewer people in order to be immersed in their experiences and achieve an in-depth study of their food interactions. However, on reflection, I would not do this differently if working on a similar project in the future. Given the grounded nature of this project, I opted to be led by the community and interview a larger number of participants than originally anticipated. I can credit some of this enthusiasm to appear on screen to the community leader who explained and discussed my project with the participants at length and offered his full support to the aims of my work. Once we reached agreement as to who would be interviewed, I met with the community leader regularly to organise interviews and observation times and places, and interpreters if needed (usually the community leader himself, although other community members also assisted).

I had initially asked the community leader to consider being interviewed on camera as I felt that his own story was fascinating and he had many relevant food observations and connections in his settlement journey, but he declined to appear in the film. This was partly because it was important to him that the participants were speaking for themselves (rather than through their nominated representative) and he thought the process of telling their stories would give them confidence and help them to feel more settled in their new community. The community leader, who has lived in Coffs Harbour for more than 10 years and has very well established networks, did not want to overshadow the stories of some newer arrivals. Also, I suggest, as a community leader often in the spotlight to represent the Myanmar community, he had more at stake if the representation turned out to be undesirable or problematic in any way.
However, after completing filming with the participants I felt that I needed one more
interview to link some of the content and provide necessary contextual information about the
community’s diversity and their food traditions, how they came to be in Coffs Harbour and
what their experience of settlement was like. I asked the community leader if he could
recommend someone or if he would consider doing it himself - he immediately agreed. I did
not apply pressure to persuade him to take on this role, he did not need any convincing. I
believe that the fact that he was present at most of the on-camera interviews and observations
enhanced his desire to appear on camera. This familiarisation of the filming process meant he
knew what to expect. He had also seen the initial footage gathered and had seen how I was
already starting to construct a story from the material. Also, I believe the role of linking the
story was more appealing to him than sharing his own, more personal story. Such negotiation
fulfilled my expectations learnt from the filmmaking course I attended in Manchester, as well
as in writings on ethical and collaborative filmmaking (Nash 2010; Pink 2007a).

Although I had faith in the community leader’s ability to support me through this project (he
had assured me on multiple occasions ‘we would make it happen’), I did at times worry about
being able to represent the myriad stories on screen. My initial concern was about reaching
an agreement with participants to appear on camera, as reflected in this journal entry: ‘feeling
anxious, another sleepless night – what if I don’t have a project?’ (8 September, 2014). Such
a concern was also present for my assessment committee at my doctoral confirmation (the
presentation of a full research proposal before reaching the end of the first 12 months of the
PhD program). Although my research proposal was accepted and I received positive
feedback, a condition was imposed that I write up an alternative research plan in the event
that the Myanmar community did not want to be part of my research and they did not want to
appear on camera. Reflecting on this now, I can see that this was a very real possibility. As
indicated in my ethics section, security concerns can continue well beyond fleeing persecution. Would my participants be worried about where the film would be distributed and who could find them in their new home? With this possibility in mind I considered alternative approaches including working with a different cultural group or anonymising participants by blurring their faces or framing them out of shot. However, this was not necessary due to the enthusiastic agreement of participants.

Other sources of uncertainty were when interviews and observations were cancelled, or schedules changed by the participants or the community leader. On some occasions I would be told to go to a certain address at a specific time, but I was not always aware of exactly who or what I would be observing. In these instances, it was usually a cooking activity, where women from different ethnic groups would be preparing their evening meal. Such occasions provided an excellent opportunity for me to interact with the participants in an informal setting, and to have a meaningful, embodied experience of their food interactions via smells, sounds and tastes.

Sometimes I expected to be able to film an event but at the last minute plans changed and instead I observed without the camera. Early on in my fieldwork, it had been organised for me to film food preparation for a festival but I received a last minute phone call advising that this was no longer possible. I was later (much later) advised that the person who lived in this home was concerned that her house was not attractive enough and was reluctant to have me film there. Although such times did cause me considerable stress I needed to trust that this project would happen and it would happen on the community’s terms. This is, after all, the essential nature of a participatory and community led approach. As my relationship with the community deepened my partners became less self-conscious and freer in providing consent
to film, and I became more attuned to when I should film and when it was more appropriate to engage off camera.

The filming process

Paul Henley, Director of the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, University of Manchester (who, incidentally, conducted a master class at the Filmmaking for Fieldwork course that I attended), describes the contemporary ethnographic filmmaking method as one that aims ‘to combine an ethnographer’s interest in documentation with the narrative and aesthetic conventions of cinema as it has developed in the West in order to communicate a particular understanding, a particular vision, of a cultural reality’ (in Flores 2009, p. 94). This quote describes my aspirations in this study and the kind of documentary I was aiming to create. I commenced filming with the desire to create sensitive and respectful personal and community stories of refugee settlement. Before filming commenced I had mapped out a rough structure that involved the representation of three participants’ stories. This would involve explanations and interpretations of life in Australia through the lens of food and how it provides links to culture of origin, continuing traditions, and also how it can be examined as an indicator of the resettlement experience and successful placemaking. My intention was to focus on stories and character development to depict the participants’ lived experiences in their new homeland. However, with such an enthusiastic response to my invitation to be filmed, I now had more than nine willing participants sharing their stories. I decided to simply film and see what emerged in terms of storylines and/or themes, rather than having a pre-determined structure for the final product.

Despite the enthusiasm for being part of my film, once filming had commenced I soon realised that some of my participants were not comfortable with being on camera and tended...
to give very short answers to my questions, not the in-depth reflections I was hoping for. Partly, this can be attributed to the necessity for using an interpreter. Thus the process became more stilted. But after four interviews had been completed it was apparent that my project would evolve in the way it needed to and I had little control over its direction. When it came time to edit, it was obvious that there was a valid place for the short responses in setting up arrival stories and recalling challenges. Again, although a little daunting at times, I valued the nature of grounded research, so the stories that needed to be told emerged by themselves. Once I accepted this notion, it opened my mind to the idea that my film might not be the product I had intended to create early on in my research journey, but by letting go of any predetermined ideas about structure I was more likely to discover unexpected insights and stories that were worthy of being shared.

When applying an ethical documentary approach (see Bershen 2010; Kishore 2015; Nash 2010, 2011) it is important to consider the participants’ feelings both during and after filming. After completing interviews and observations at one participant’s house she told me she was worried I would not use the footage in the film. I asked her why and she said she did not think she was good enough and I would need to do it again. I assured her I would use the footage, with her permission of course. This reassurance invoked a happy and somewhat emotional response in the participant. In this context it is important not only to maximise sensitivity with regard to participants’ feelings about themselves but it is also essential to recognise potentially unequal power relations in filmmaking, as noted by Nichols (1991). In order to counter such potentially unequal power relations, I offered participants the choice of filming location to be filmed, somewhere they were comfortable. On occasion this may have

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9 I almost always gained a strong sense of the ‘usefulness’ of footage during filming, and I knew this interview would clearly add to the narrative.
resulted in less than ideal lighting or sound but the comfort of the participants was a priority for me.

In employing an observational approach to filmmaking I chose to use small, non-obtrusive camera equipment. This included a Canon XA20 HDV camera, which is relatively lightweight while still producing professional quality images. The camera works well in low light situations allowing me to rely on natural light throughout. This camera has the capacity to mount/attach external microphones via XLR inputs and therefore record high quality directional sound, at least in optimal conditions. Before purchasing this camera, I trialed a larger Sony HDV camera, similar to those used in the Filmmaking for Fieldwork course. However, I felt that the smaller camera allowed me to remain less obtrusive in certain situations I expected to encounter, such as filming in small kitchens and attempting to be discreet at community events. Although image quality may not have been at the highest possible level, that might be achieved with a larger camera, this camera kit nonetheless provided everything I needed to embark on my project. Although I am happy with the captured footage, I do believe that with more experience and confidence I could have been able to extend this equipment even more to its full potential. However, technical expertise is not the only consideration when examining a filmmaker’s creative output. Personality traits and values should also be considered in the evaluation of cinematographic performance.

I can identify distinct personal limitations upon reflecting on the filmmaking process. These limitations relate to the final product in terms of possible missed opportunities and technical

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10 On numerous occasions I was confronted with sound recording challenges, including traffic noise during garden tours/outdoor interviews and loud background noises (television and music) in some homes. I intervened minimally in altering these environments as I did not want to interrupt the ‘natural setting’. The use of subtitles has meant that content has not been compromised in this context.
standards. In observing the final edited version of my documentary I can recognise how things could have been done differently in order to produce a better product, in terms of production values. There are minor issues with sound quality at times, some instances where more shots could have been pursued, and some interactions that would have added more to the film but I did not capture them on camera. Lighting presented further technical challenges. Although I was familiar with the principles of three point lighting\textsuperscript{11} (BBC Academy 2015), I did not want to alter the participants’ environment, nor impose myself, so I chose not to use any external light sources during filming. It is, however, a standard technique in observational filmmaking to use available light (de Jong, Knudsen & Rothwell 2011; Lawrence 2014). This is not to say however, that you should not strive to capture well-lit, aesthetically pleasing images, it merely means that you do so by utilising natural light sources.

During my time working in television some years ago, I had been exposed to the desire to get the story ‘no matter what’. Fortunately, my television experience was in public broadcasting where ethical conduct was still seen as an aspirational ideal. However, I frequently circulated with camera crews who were determined to ‘get the shot’ regardless of the method used. In my early days in television as a camera assistant I would be encouraged to be aggressive and jump in to mark my territory in order to get the best possible sound. My colleagues would not hesitate to ask a subject to repeat something if there were any technical issues (passing traffic for example) or to rearrange furniture in order to achieve the best possible lighting and framing. The camera would always be present and in stand-by mode, and opportunities were not passed up for fear of imposing oneself. However, in the process of filming for this project

\textsuperscript{11} A standard approach to interview lighting, whereby three light sources are used to illuminate the interviewee’s face, eliminate shadows, and separate the subject from the background
I was aware of opportunities to film (and get great shots) when I made a deliberate choice not to film, or times when I could have asked the participants to re-say or re-do something to appear better on camera. I chose not to do this as I was always endeavouring to capture the natural goings-on of everyday life.

One example was where the child of an on-camera participant was jumping on a trampoline in the background during an interview. For optimum sound I should have asked the child to stop jumping during the interview but I did not want to interrupt daily life (or deprive the child from a fun activity) so I chose not to do this. In another instance, I had spent several hours with a participant interviewing and observing her while she cooked for her friends. I was invited to stay and share the meal but declined because I felt I had already taken up enough of the participant's (and the translator’s), time and I felt they would be more relaxed if I was not there. This was, however, the first interview I undertook and the more I progressed with my fieldwork the more comfortable people became with me and the less I felt I was imposing on them.

Towards the end of my fieldwork (February 2015) I filmed the Chin National Day celebration mentioned earlier, a three-hour long community event. I filmed for most of the event but when everyone ate together at the end of the festivities I filmed a few shots then put away my camera and joined in the celebration. At such times I felt I needed to give the participants a break from the camera, so they could enjoy themselves unreservedly and not feel self-conscious by having a camera present. By this stage of the fieldwork many of the community members knew me quite well and I felt as though I had a legitimate place at their celebration table without imposing on their generosity to share more stories. I have no regrets in the way I conducted myself during the gathering of my research and once again this all
related to my prioritisation of ethical and collaborative engagement with the film participants, albeit at the expense of slightly compromised production standards at times.

**The editing process**

After completing eight months of filming\(^{12}\) the time had come to put down the camera. I had gathered more than 10 hours of footage and this needed to be constructed into some kind of thematic order to analyse and document its significance. At the beginning of the study I anticipated that the final edited film would be around five to ten minutes, expecting that this would be long enough to sustain interest in the topic and it would be an appropriate length for the information gathered. However, the filming had developed in some unexpected ways, including the emergence of a personal and inspiring story of one participant’s ambition to establish a Myanmar food stall. I filmed this participant on multiple occasions and was able to witness on camera the realisation of his plans. The presence of this content allowed the film’s duration to be extended to its final duration of 25 minutes.

In the analysis phase of the study I colour-coded the hard copy transcribed interviews and observations to highlight common themes (see Appendix 4). To create the script for the documentary I then cut and pasted different sections of the transcripts in order to group common themes to create scenes within the film. The paper script was rough and transformed considerably during the edit but it did provide a loose structure to allow for the stories to evolve in a logical way. With the bones of the film in place, I then proceeded to shorten and lengthen the participants’ responses, as well as rearrange the order of interview and observation excerpts. I then fleshed out the documentary by inserting visual sequences of the

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\(^{12}\) *Fieldwork took place over ten months but I did not film for the first two months*
participants in various settings, from cooking to gardening to celebrating. Over a period of many months the visual and audio layers of the documentary were assembled and fine-tuned. As I edited the film I always placed respect for participants at the forefront of my mind. I did not want to misconstrue their intent or take responses out of context. I also considered the interests of my potential audience and so sought to create a documentary that was informative, educational, engaging and entertaining.

It is important to acknowledge that editing is indeed a highly selective and subjective process, and decisions about what to include and exclude can be problematic. David MacDougall (1998) acknowledges the dilemmas of representation when it comes to the editing process. He believes there is much that can be lost in transforming the rushes (raw footage) into highly polished pieces of production for audience consumption. He suggests that by editing rushes you can potentially lose ‘qualities of spaciousness, context, and historicity’ which translates to a loss of ‘excess meaning’, ‘interpretive space’, ‘sense of encounter’ and ‘internal contextualisation’ (MacDougall 1998, p. 216). Whilst these are all legitimate expectations for a film claiming to facilitate social research (such as this study), the reality of seeking a wide (academic and non-academic) audience means that a sense of progression is needed and sacrifices must be made in order to engage effectively such audiences. My film, as a hybrid ethnographic film/social issue documentary draws on influences from traditional and contemporary ethnographic filmmakers but in seeking to also engage a non-academic audience it has adopted some principles and production techniques from mainstream media. One of these techniques relates to pace; my film moves quite rapidly from person to person, issue to issue, place to place, and does not offer the extended breathing space of traditional ethnographic films. This is, in fact, one of the main elements of my film that I would change if I were to re-edit. I feel that the film moves too quickly at times and I could have made
more use of extended observations and let some scenes develop more slowly. Here, I can blame, to some extent, my many years of experience as a television editor. Although I gave myself permission to break the rules, not all rules were so easily shaken.

But not all challenges related to content and stylistic choices. Although I had considerable editing experience, technology has changed enormously in the last decade (the time that had elapsed since I last worked in television), and so I needed to reskill in order to complete the project using industry standard software. I chose to edit my film with Adobe Premiere for Apple Macintosh computers. This is considered to be the best option by industry standards. After negotiating to receive the desired hardware and software, I encountered numerous technical challenges during the edit. An example of this is when I uploaded my first clips and discovered there was no sound. With limited technical support, my frustration is illustrated in the following journal entry:

Some technical issues with editing this week – no sound on my clips. After lots of time and investigation, discovered the editing software needed updating! Thank goodness it was simple. I had a few moments where I questioned the wisdom of doing a film – but I know it’s what I need to do to communicate my research. (7 November 2014)

I encountered similar problems later in the editing process where only some clips had sound (corrupted clips). On completion of the project I had multiple problems outputting the final film at the desired high quality. Fortunately, by this time I had identified a knowledgeable technical advisor (as well as multiple online forums) who were able to work with me to achieve desirable technical outcomes. Despite these challenges, I continued to edit a full version of the film and once I had achieved my aims of depicting insightful and engaging food stories, I chose to exhibit my work.
Sharing stories

Doctoral research with a creative or production element will generally be presented in the context of an exhibition, performance, or other creative or design form (Adams et al. 2015; Milech & Schilo 2004; Yeates 2009). In this instance my film is part of an ongoing exhibition process through various screenings from private, local contexts; to national and international festivals. The starting point for dissemination was to screen the first full edit of the film for participants to seek their feedback and approval.

Participant feedback and local screenings

When I felt confident that I had a high quality full edit of my documentary I sought feedback from the community leader who had assisted me throughout the project. I invited him to a private screening of the film and asked for his unreserved evaluation. Specific questions were: had I captured the essence of the participants’ relationship with food; was everything in the film accurate (especially in relation to translations/subtitles); and was the film informative and enjoyable to watch? Importantly, I wanted to uphold the values of ethical filmmaking and sought to share the power associated with making choices about the representation via editing.

Feedback from the community leader was positive. He was pleased with both his own representation and that of the community members. The community leader had one small request: that I include a map of Myanmar to educate people about its location. I added this map and included some contextual information at the beginning of the film to provide more information for potential viewers with little background knowledge of Myanmar and Myanmar settlers in Australia.
The next step in the feedback process was to have a screening for all of the film participants. The community leader was once again helpful and assisted in organising a group screening. Unfortunately, one participant had moved to Perth, Western Australia (a considerable distance from Coffs Harbour) and another participant was unwell and not able to attend. The rest of the participants attended and a meaningful conversation ensued after the screening.

Prior to the screening, I was nervous about how the film would be received. I knew I had done my very best to represent the participants in an authentic and respectful way, but only they could assess my success in this. During the screening, I observed the community members enjoying the experience of seeing themselves and their friends on screen. There was much laughter and backslapping as each participant appeared. The end of the film was followed by enthusiastic applause at which point I applauded the participants. The post-screening conversation started with participants revealing how shy they were about being on camera and how they were nervous about seeing themselves. I asked everyone how they felt watching the film and they all replied very positively. Responses from participants included the following:

‘Everyone likes it because we are naturally a part of the film – we appear as the way we really are!’

‘It made me feel happy and proud of my culture’

‘You made us look beautiful’

‘The film gives the opportunity to share our food with others’
During this discussion I was reminded of Lenette, Cox and Brough’s (2013, p. 2) observation of a woman from a refugee background watching her own co-created digital story, where at the end of the screening the authors observe ‘she is now laughing with pride’. Such comments reveal the potential for emotions to be embedded in telling and sharing stories. The positive emotion felt in this case was integral to a project that not only sought to ‘do no harm’ but to ‘do good’, to offer something to participants in exchange for their time and contributions. To provide them with a meaningful record of their research participation. In this case I believe the aims of this project were met by the way in which the film enhanced feelings of community pride and empowerment.

After the post screening discussion with participants, I proposed that we have a public screening at the university campus as part of an upcoming cultural diversity festival, Southern Cross University Fusion Festival. Initially, I had hoped to follow the screening by offering some Myanmar food to audience members. The participants were very keen to do this, as it provided another way to share their culture with the local community and strengthen their connection to place. However, in the planning stages for this event it was decided not to pursue this idea for several reasons: one, it would be a considerable amount of work for the participants and I wanted them to attend the screening as honoured guests, not busy workers; and two, bureaucratic red-tape associated with the Festival made it difficult to offer food to the public without addressing insurance and risk assessment issues. Instead a festival grant was secured and platters were provided from a local gourmet food supplier. The screening was still a food event, unfortunately not a Myanmar food event.
Strong interest in the film allowed the Southern Cross University Fusion Festival screening to occur on two campuses in different geographic locations. The main launch screening on the Coffs Harbour campus was well received by an estimated audience of 120-150. Most of the participants from the film attended this screening (Figure 5.4) and were able to sit and witness their stories amongst an audience mostly unknown to them. Feedback from participants was again positive. The participants stated that the public screening further enhanced their pride in their culture and said it made them feel good to share their stories and experiences. Local publicity (see Appendix 6) in the lead up to this screening meant that there was a diverse group of people in the audience. Attendees ranged from those with SCU affiliations, to those in the health sector, as well as refugee supporters, family and friends, and non-connected members of the Coffs Harbour public.

![Figure 5.4 Film participants and the filmmaker at the SCU Fusion Festival launch. Copyright 2015 by Trish Lovegrove, reprinted with permission.](image)

Unfortunately, two film participants were not able to attend the Coffs Harbour screening due to an important Church commitment, whereby many members of the Chin community were involved in welcoming a newly arrived minister. This also meant that numbers of Chin
people attending the screening were lower than anticipated. This was disappointing for me as I really felt there was considerable value in the participants viewing the film with a wider audience to see their reactions and hear their feedback. However, I was approached after the screening by a minister from the same church who sent apologies and suggested that there would be interest in having a dedicated screening for this group. This screening subsequently took place in December 2015 and was well attended by the Chin community. It would also be appropriate to have a screening at an event such as the Chin National Day celebrations, where the community comes together in large numbers and invites non-Chin people to attend. This would further meet the aims of disseminating the film to diverse audiences. This was also achieved by inclusion in film festival screenings in a variety of local, national and international locations.

**Festival screenings**

Initially, I planned to screen the documentary publicly after submitting my work for examination. I imagined the screenings would form part of the post-study phase of the work. However, positive participant and audience reactions to the film inspired me to share these stories earlier and with a more far-reaching audience. Miller and Smith, whilst acknowledging the importance of the creation process in participatory media, stress the significance of targeted dissemination where ‘global audiences are encouraged to move beyond passive media consumption to engage as active participants’ (2012, pp. 331-2). Here I will reflect on the role of dissemination in the context of film festival selection.

The numbers of film festivals both in Australia and internationally have grown significantly in recent decades (Stevens 2011), with most countries, cities and regions participating in various forms of thematic film events. In order to share the stories depicted in my film with a
wide audience, I entered film festivals relevant to themes presented in my work. Given that one of my research aims was to share my findings beyond an academic audience, I set up an account with FilmFreeway, an online film festival submission repository. This opened up my screening possibilities to potentially thousands of festivals around the world. However, on close observation I realised there were only a limited number of festivals appropriate to my film, and hence I went through a process of assessing suitability and likelihood of selection. As a qualitative researcher, my inclination was to select festivals with direct links to my work rather than submitting to more generic festivals that may have a larger audience. I also utilised specific online networks (International Visual Sociology Association, Filmmaking for Fieldwork, and various ethnographic film networks) to further fine tune my festival-entry strategy.

To this end, I submitted my film to relevant festivals including Viscult Ethnographic Film Festival (Finland), Colourfest Film Festival (screened around Australia for Harmony Day\textsuperscript{13}), One with a Movie Camera: Marburg International Ethnographic Film Festival (Germany), Antropofest (Czech Republic), Ethnografilm (France), The Quebec International Ethnographic Film Festival (Montreal) and several others yet to finalise selection. At the time of writing I have been successful in gaining selection in all the above named festivals.

Viscult in Finland was of great relevance as the 2015 theme was ‘food for thought’, an exploration of the interconnection of food and culture. For this screening I participated in an introduction and Q & A session via Skype (Figure 5.5). The festival which ran over three days was streamed live and brought together filmmakers and audience members from various

\textsuperscript{13} Harmony Day is an Australian Government initiative to celebrate cultural diversity. Events are held annually to coincide with the United Nations International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (Department of Social Services n.d.a).
locations, including Finland, Italy, Netherlands, Russia, Spain, England, Portugal and Australia. After the screening, my film was also used by the Festival’s organising university as a teaching resource, whereby students contacted me to ask additional questions about my film to deepen their understanding and analysis of my project. For Antropofest my film was translated into Czech, as was the introductory video clip I provided to the festival organisers to provide background information on my project.

*Figure 5.5* Mandy Hughes speaking via Skype at the Viscult Festival of Visual Culture, Finland, screenshot from [http://snapwidget.com/v/1095091055998698611](http://snapwidget.com/v/1095091055998698611), October 2015

I travelled to Paris to attend the Ethnografilm festival (*Figure 5.6*) in March 2016, as the director of the festival emphasised the desire for the filmmakers to be present in order to discuss their work, as well as be informed and inspired by the work of others. On the opening night, festival partners from the International Social Science Council and the Society for Social Studies of Science, spoke enthusiastically about the potential of film as an engaging social research tool. I found this inspiring, as were the films that followed in subsequent days.
After the screening of my own film (*Figure 5.7*) I participated in a panel discussion to further share my findings and film journey.

*Figure 5.6* Mandy Hughes, Ethnografilm Festival, Paris. Copyright 2016 by Trish Lovegrove, reprinted with permission.

*Figure 5.7* The last refuge screening, Ethnografilm, Paris, March 2016.

Although I have indicated my desire to reach non-academic audiences, the vast majority of the festivals I have applied to are in fact of a mainly academic nature. But they are also international, from geographically and culturally diverse countries, and have audiences made
up of academics, students and the general public. Many of these festivals offer free screenings open to the community. So in this regard, the stories in my film are being disseminated widely. The fact that the film has been selected in these festivals by academic panels in different countries suggests that the themes and issues in my documentary have cross-cultural appeal. The application of these stories to other multicultural (in many case settler) communities in other parts of the world can also be identified. Hence, it is possible to recognise the cross-cultural, transportable and transferable nature of film.

Acceptance into academic festivals has been important as a form of peer review and acknowledgement that the film has academic substance, as well as broad appeal. However, the most important festival screening in the context of this study is Colourfest, a film festival that screens in more than 30 locations around Australia as part of Harmony Day celebrations. Importantly, the Festival operates in all Australian states and in locations specifically chosen because they have significant populations from refugee backgrounds, including Logan (QLD), Wagga Waga (NSW) and Coffs Harbour (NSW) (Colourfest 2015). As a free event, this means the diaspora stories are easily accessible to regional communities, and settler communities in particular.

In traditional media production the final edited version of a film or story would be the end product, the final destination. But in the context of this study, the film product is only one part of a dynamic and evolving dissemination process. Observing, analysing and interacting with participant and audience reaction to the film continues to extend the scope of this research. This screening phase has been important in terms of assessing impact for this study, as are audience post-screening reflections and interactions.
Understanding impact

One of the aims of this study was to disseminate participants’ stories both within and beyond an academic audience. My central motivation was to share stories in order to promote cross-cultural understanding, encourage feelings of cultural pride and to potentially impact policy change in order to make more appropriate food support services available to regional humanitarian migrants. Documentary was considered an effective way to meet these aims. But now that the film has been completed and distributed how do I assess success and ultimately impact?

Currently, there is considerable interest in measuring impact for documentary films dealing with social issues, hence suitable frameworks and evaluation tools have been developed for this purpose (Chattoo 2014; Learning for Action 2013). These tools can assess how people feel, think and act post-viewing. This Ecosystem of Change approach (Action Voice n.d. in Chattoo 2014) is interested in how ‘storytelling influences individual attitudes and behavior, [as well as] the collective actions that lead to policy or other institutional change’ (Chattoo 2014, p. 5).

Firstly, it is important to define what we mean by impact and how it is differentiated from media effects theory, which, according to Napoli (2014) focuses more on individual, short term responses to the media consumed. In contrast, media impact is considered to be more long term and potentially far-reaching, demonstrating audience engagement that might include further interactions with the media product/producer and/or the issue represented after the initial viewing (Napoli 2014). Such impacts can have clear social value and contribute to ‘improving the well-being of individuals and communities across a wide range of dimensions’ (Napoli 2014, p. 6). Such aspirations fit nicely with the aims of this project.
Comments from audience members post-screening reveal potential impact in the capacity for reflection (at the very least) and the possibility of engagement. These include:

‘I learnt so much about the Myanmar community’

‘It made me feel that I would like to get to know some of these people’

‘The film is valuable in providing the community with insight into the problems faced by those new to our country’

Such comments reveal the educational (and humanitarian) quality of storytelling and audiovisual media in particular, as well as its potential to evoke empathy and support for new arrivals. This is especially important in contemporary Australia where a toxic and politicised debate continues over the plight of asylum seekers (Every 2007, 2008; Klocker & Dunn 2003; Lueck, Due & Augoustinos 2015; Rowe & O’Brien 2013). Many audience members told me that they were shocked to hear that some of the participants in the film had lived in refugee camps for more than 20 years. Others stated that they did not even know we had people from Myanmar living in Coffs Harbour. This verified comments from a key informant in the early stages of my work who suggested that people from Myanmar had a very low profile in Coffs Harbour and did not have the same presence as people from African countries. This further justified the aims of my project to promote cross-cultural understanding.
Other post-screening actions took the form of audience members requesting DVDs of the film so they could show other interested parties including teachers, members of refugee support networks and political groups. After the screening I received a request for copies of the film to be used as a resource for students in a local high school, more than 20 copies were also sought by English language teachers for their own interest and to use in the classroom with new arrivals from different cultural backgrounds. This last example reinforces the value of community building through shared experiences. It would be expected that new arrivals from diverse countries could all relate to challenges faced in sourcing preferred foods in their new home, as well as the way in which taste can connect them to homeland and positive memories, and how food is deeply embedded in the practice of placemaking. The same can be extrapolated to all people from migrant backgrounds, as revealed in audience comments from Indian, Phillipino, Thai and Lebanese Australians who said they had very similar experiences in yearning for their cultural foods.

In the case of my film, I would also argue that the potential impact is not only on the audience and what can become of their actions post-screening but also on the participants themselves and the broader Myanmar community, even those who did not participate in the study. This can be identified in the comments from participants after the screening in terms of how they felt happy and proud of their culture. Other benefits are confirmed when we look to the literature on the therapeutic power of telling and sharing stories (see Dyregrov, Dyregrov & Raundalen 2000; Gubrium 2009; Hiruy 2009; Lenette, Cox & Brough 2013). I also believe that audience engagement will impact positively on the broader Myanmar community as more people in the local area will now seek them out to learn more, develop their understanding of this group and offer support. A key informant who attended the Fusion Festival screening stated:
I think that this is a significant film/process in the development of the local Burmese/Myanmar community because it gave people an opportunity to both participate in and reflect upon their shared experience. It is also powerful in that it has enabled them to realise how their individual settlement journeys into the Coffs Harbour coastal culture have been similar across the various Ethnic groups. (2015, pers. comm., 9 November)

It is also hoped that post-screening action might eventually extend to the policy domain through the provision of more targeted food orientation and specialised community garden programs. These issues arise in the film as significant challenges which could be lessened with additional support. Capturing these challenges in audiovisual form provides a compelling tool to lobby for such services. Those affected are speaking on their own behalf, telling their own stories, rather than having these issues communicated through a third party in written form.

In considering the impact of social issues documentary it is essential that we reflect on what it is that we hope to achieve in terms of dissemination. Is the motivation audience reach (numbers) or is it about meaningful engagement? Whilst the current literature on assessing documentary impact highlights the development of a variety of online platforms that can assist in assessing impact (Chattoo 2014), many of these tools are complex and are dependent on quantitative measures (number of views, for example, for an online film). Many such tools are social media based and include detailed information such as where a film has been viewed (by country/region). Figure 5.8 demonstrates international audience reach for my film. Blue shaded areas represent countries where the film has been viewed. It should be noted that the film has not been made publicly available online, so these viewings have been
made by those provided with the password, for example festival selectors and other interested parties.

Figure 5.8 Geostats from Vimeo, [www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com), June 2016

Whilst this is interesting and potentially useful information, it is also somewhat superficial. As a qualitative researcher, I believe impact is reflected in the genuine feedback from participants and viewers, as well as their follow-up actions. Admittedly, media interest in my project inspired me to set up a facebook page to promote the film. However, as the film is not freely available online (due to festival agreements\textsuperscript{14}), such promotion is not intended to create a spike in viewer numbers. I have deliberately avoided using any of the facebook tools designed to ‘boost’ my page and attain a wider audience. Instead it is hoped that it will reach the ‘right’ audience, that is people interested in Myanmar food culture, people from Myanmar, and people who support refugees by the targeted sharing of the page. Indeed, having people interested in hearing and seeing these stories is a measure of impact, but

\textsuperscript{14} In order to be eligible to enter most festivals a film must not be publically available online.
ultimately it is more about what is taken away from the film and reflected on to garner action to support marginalised people.

**Summary**

Andy Lawrence asserts ‘the ways in which self-reflexivity are implemented in a film point to the broader intentions of the author’ (Lawrence 2015, p. 49). So, in writing about my filmmaking process, I have sought to consider my motivation, my relationship to/with participants and my role in reproducing their stories (both from a production perspective, as well as an ethical one). The decision to represent my key findings in documentary form arose from my conception of food processes and preferences as highly sensory experiences, that could be captured authentically through the use of an equally sensory medium – that of film (or high definition video, as the case may be).

The process of achieving this goal commenced with attendance at the Filmmaking for Fieldwork course in Manchester in order to upskill and increase my confidence to embark on the project. Throughout the course I was exposed to a philosophical approach that promoted collaboration and respect for participants in assisting them to share accounts of the lived experience. This was done through observational filming techniques capturing processes, events and testimonials. I believe I was able to translate this effectively into my own interpretation of this approach, one that was suitable for working with people from refugee backgrounds in a reciprocal and ethical manner.

Despite some challenges and the need for adaption along the way, the filming process was successful in achieving the aims of the project. After the film was completed, I consulted the community leader as to appropriate opportunities for screening. I sought his opinion on
particular festivals and other screening opportunities. I always advised the community when
the film had been selected for particular festivals as I consider the final film to be very much
their product as much as it is mine. In an effort to raise some funds for the Myanmar flood
appeal, I made DVDs and offered them to the community as a potential fundraiser. The film
was also given to the community to screen at their own events and celebrations.

Ethical filmmaking lies at the heart of the study in order to recognise and address unbalanced
power relations in filmmaking and represent the participants as the experts on their lives, as
demonstrated in their stories. These stories have been shared through private, local, national
and international screenings. Impact can be recognised through the comments made by
participants and audience members, as well as through post-screening actions. In the end, the
most significant aspect of the film component of this study is the recognition of the film
participants as producers and performers of knowledge. Whilst acknowledging my role in
orchestrating the film, I deliberately kept my own presence to a minimum in order to focus on
the participants stories. By sharing this knowledge we learn more about others and seek to
empathise with their lived experience.
Chapter 6 Conclusions

In this final chapter I revisit the research questions, as well as the aims and objectives of the study in order to demonstrate how the project developed, and met the desired outcomes. I summarise key findings and draw conclusions about the value of the research for participants, the researcher and various stakeholders, including those working with people from refugee backgrounds. These key findings on the significance of the sociocultural role of food for the Myanmar community of Coffs Harbour, and the expression of such through visual research, demonstrate the important and original contribution to the field of refugee studies. Limitations are also acknowledged, including the nature of this research as taking place at a specific time and geographic location, and with a small sample size from members of particular ethnic groups. Theoretical limitations in connection to the application of placemaking, social capital and well-being are also acknowledged. In concluding the study, I look to the future and offer recommendations that would enhance settlement processes and deepen understanding of the research population, as well as promote cross-cultural understanding in broader Australian and international contexts.

Research questions

The following questions underpinned the aims of the study: what social and cultural factors influenced food choices for Myanmar refugees (settlers) in regional Australia?; and how were visual research methods utilised to benefit the research participants, as well as educate and engage service providers and the wider community? These questions had sufficient scope to explore the topic within the framework of the study and were explored in both the written and documentary outputs. I will now demonstrate the ways in which the study has met its aims and objectives.
Aims, objectives and outcomes

The fundamental aim of the study was to explore the sociocultural dimensions of food choices made by people in the Myanmar community living in the regional Australian city of Coffs Harbour. Each objective is outlined below and responded to by outlining the way in which this study has addressed each issue.

Understand and share knowledge of the significant role of food

The study documented positive and negative food interactions made by the Myanmar community in Coffs Harbour. Some of the challenges faced by this group include their inability to source traditional foods not found in their new home, navigating new food systems, and experiencing a general feeling of disconnection from their culture of origin after often a long and difficult journey seeking refuge. Settlers expect challenges in a new and unfamiliar culture, and similar experiences have been documented in previous studies (Bird 2013; Ewen 2012; Franzen & Smith 2010; Hadley, Zodhiate & Sellen 2006; Hiruy 2009; Renzaho & Burns 2006). However, my study provides a new contribution to this field by depicting the unique experience of a multi-ethnic community located in a regional Australian city. In this context, the Myanmar community has developed strong links within its own community and in the broader community, independent of support services. These networks enable settlers to source desirable foods on a daily basis, as well as when they come together to celebrate with food at special times like festivals. Such experiences enhance community connectedness and strengthen cultural identity, and are achieved through the development of social capital.

Myanmar food experiences represented and analysed in this study have been shared within
and beyond the community by utilising a participatory/collaborative approach and disseminating the findings widely via visual methods (documentary). Audience members have admired the community’s resilience and expressed a desire to learn more about the people and the cultural practices depicted in the film. Utilising visual methods allowed this knowledge to be shared and created a sensory, multi-layered depiction of the lived experience of Myanmar people in Coffs Harbour.

**Examine and understand socioeconomic factors that impact food choices**

By observing and engaging with the Coffs Harbour Myanmar community in various natural settings (in homes, at work, at festivals and special events) I have been able to explore and understand a range of factors that determine food choices. These include how English language ability, place of residence (potential to grow food, access to fresh food markets/specialty shops/supermarkets), and capacity to travel in order to source foods from far-away places (cities with larger Myanmar/Asian populations) can affect an individual’s and family’s ability to obtain personally and culturally preferred foods. For example, upon arrival some settlers found it difficult to purchase desired foods due to limited English language skills. In these instances, the foods were available but inability to read labels or communicate with supermarket staff meant that certain purchases could not be made. However, as all new arrivals are provided with free English language courses and tutors\(^\text{15}\), language issues are overcome in most instances.

Additionally, some participants felt limited by the infrequency/expense of regional public transport and so found it difficult to travel to a preferred shop at desired times. Most urban

\(^{15}\) The Adult Migrant English Program in Coffs Harbour provides ‘home tutors’ for students unable to attend classes due to illness, carer responsibilities or other reasons that prevent class attendance. I am a volunteer tutor for this program.
Myanmar people would be accustomed to purchasing food from markets on a daily basis, quite a different concept from the Australian ritual of the weekly shop. Interestingly, although limited funds post-arrival can make travelling long distances (to Sydney, Brisbane etc) difficult, the Myanmar community-connectedness found in Coffs Harbour means that resources are frequently pooled (car-pooling and home grown produce) to ensure all community members are able to source desired foods, especially for festivals and other special occasions. In this instance the community is not hindered by regional disadvantage. Building social capital in this community has effectively supported new arrivals through these challenges.

**Consider whether or not access to desired foods can contribute to well-being**

A distinct finding in this study is the way in which access to desired foods can enhance settlers’ well-being. This was demonstrated in participants’ explanations of how eating and cooking traditional food makes them feel reconnected to their culture. Another example is how sharing cultural foods makes them feel proud of their culture. Gardening has also been shown to promote feelings of well-being in a number of contexts, including but not limited to the settler experience (see Anderson 2010; Bishop & Purcell 2013; Brook 2003; Cummings et al. 2008; Lee 2001; Parks Victoria 2012; Sampson & Gifford 2010; Turner 2011a). Enthusiastic gardeners from Myanmar have adapted to their new environment by utilising all available space in both owned and rented houses (polystyrene boxes were commonly observed) for growing preferred and hard to source foods such as rosella, various leafy greens and multi-coloured small Asian eggplants. All of the above interactions with food present opportunities for enhanced well-being as they are embodied experiences; interactions where the mind and body come together to remember by tasting, touching, smelling and manipulating preferred and familiar ingredients. Cultivation of traditional foods also changes
the landscape, making here like there, and facilitating active placemaking. This aspect of promoting well-being is an important area of study and should be further explored in relation to settler populations.

**Contribute to a feeling of empowerment through use of visual methods**

Through a process of ongoing consultation and collaboration, a documentary film was produced representing the Myanmar community’s food stories. The documentary was screened privately for the community leader, followed by a screening for all participants, then disseminated through local, national and international film festivals and other screenings. The feedback on the film has been positive from participants and audience members with varying connections to the Myanmar community. Comments from film participants suggest a sense of empowerment was attained by the way in which the film made them feel proud of themselves, their culture and their achievements in settlement. Whilst there are many examples of how ethnographic or other documentary films can explain diverse lives and promote cultural understanding, I believe the film created in this study is unique in terms of subject matter, therefore contributing significantly to the field of refugee settlement, food and Myanmar studies. Developments in digital and information technology have allowed these stories to be told to diverse and targeted local and international audiences, thus further demonstrating the study’s impact.

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16 Some audience members had existing connections to the Myanmar community whilst others, especially overseas festival audiences, had no connection whatsoever yet expressed their enthusiasm to learn about the Myanmar experience.
Limitations

Although many of the lessons learnt from the research participants could be applied to other settler and migrant groups, the Myanmar community in Coffs Harbour is a unique population comprised of many different ethnicities, with significant social support in place in a number of settings. This group has benefitted from the social networks cultivated by the early-arrivals (ie. those people originally from Myanmar who arrived in Coffs Harbour more than ten years ago) and church groups. The community has been strengthened by the commitment of its leaders; leaders who want to promote the ideal of a multi-ethnic, tolerant and inclusive community. This motivation to embrace diversity is surely influenced by pre-settlement experiences. This group has been supported on arrival by the local settlement services but informal community resources (knowledge and produce sharing etc) account for a significant contribution to positive settlement in this region.

Growing food has been important in the lives of the participants in the study. But it is important to remember that Coffs Harbour is a sub-tropical area, ideal for growing a range of different food types, especially traditional foods from Myanmar. Not all settler communities would be able to benefit from this growing capacity and so results in other regions of Australia (and other settlement destinations like the United Kingdom and North America) would not be expected to be comparable.

The study has used qualitative methods, with a small sample size of 12 main participants. Some might consider this to be a limitation, however in seeking an in-depth and authentic understanding of the community and developing collaborative relationships, it was necessary to limit participant numbers. The study therefore offers a representation of the lives of some people in the Myanmar community in Coffs Harbour.
A personal limitation is my inability to distance myself from participants. I have spent considerable time worrying about my new friends and the day to day challenges they face. My research therefore has limited objectivity. However, I felt it was far more important for me to develop genuine relationships and I believe this is how and why I was able to achieve the level of access I did. I also acknowledge the possibility of developing potentially dependent relationships, as outlined in Huisman’s (2008) ‘Does this mean you’re not going to come visit me anymore?’ and sought to avoid this eventuality by clearly outlining my role at different stages of the project.

My study also contains theoretical limitations. Placemaking, social capital and well-being were identified as key theoretical ideas in the introductory chapters (pp. 12, 15-21), as these theories help to explain the social phenomena associated with food experiences for the Coffs Harbour Myanmar community. However, this research did not endeavour to advance theoretical understanding. Instead, these concepts provided a contextual framework to inform the researcher, guide the research process and locate the findings. The applied nature of the research was appropriate in order to document the sociocultural experience of food for people from Myanmar, inform local policy, and promote community knowledge and connectedness. These were the primary aims and objectives of the study. My contribution to knowledge is therefore confined to these boundaries.

It is important to recognise that all research has limitations, as it takes place at a specific time, location and with a selected group of people. This research captures a snapshot of the lives of some members of the Coffs Harbour Myanmar community at a time when considerable community connections had already been made. As already indicated, the geographic features
of Coffs Harbour are conducive to growing preferred foods, but it is the unique social make-up of the community that has promoted the growth of social capital that has facilitated access to these foods.

**Future directions**

In considering future directions, the notion of empowerment must have prominence in supporting settler food access and choices. This is where the promotion of food sovereignty can be immensely powerful, because it ‘is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems’ (Viva Campesina 2007). In the context of the refugee journey, there is an increasing desire to promote asylum seeker participation in the day to day running of camps, including food distribution and agriculture (The Border Consortium 2015). But the vision of truly empowered food provisioning remains intangible for many in asylum limbo. However, for some people, including participants in this study, it is achievable post-settlement. This would however vary from location to location and there would need to be the capacity to support this desire for empowerment, as well as a favourable climate for growing preferred foods. In Coffs Harbour, the social and growing conditions are favourable and this goal is tangible.

People from Myanmar, now resident in Coffs Harbour, have faced many extreme challenges in their long journeys seeking refuge. They have been subjected to various forms of trauma and abuse, famine, poverty and uncertainty. Many have spent extended periods in refugee camps or in cities awaiting an answer to their applications for refugee status. Once positive outcomes have been determined they begin the next phase of their journey: settling into a new and unfamiliar environment in a foreign culture. In all of this uncertainty, food can
represent a constant; a reminder and means of reinstating cultural identity. It can also constitute further challenges when familiar, traditional foods cannot be sourced. Although transition time in Thailand, India and Malaysia presents its own challenges, at least there is some familiarity in terms of the provision of Asian food products; similar vegetables, herbs and spices. Arriving in Australia represents a whole new experience. Although settlers receive some pre-departure education on life in Australia, this does not prepare them for what lies ahead. In order to make this transition more successful the following recommendations are made:

1. Develop detailed and appropriate food orientation programs for settlers in regional areas. This is currently provided by some organisations in cities but these programs have not been extended to regional settlement areas. Such orientation needs to be culturally specific and should include information on appropriate places to source traditional ingredients.

2. Provide assistance in setting up home gardens, such as a starter kit with seeds/seedlings and a planter box. These kits should also include information on how to source hard to locate items and community contacts to assist in this area. These kits could be developed by the Myanmar community, and other settler communities, with the support of grant funding.

17 Australian Red Cross has undertaken extensive cultural food mapping in Brisbane, for example. This program, however, is not available nationally (pers. comm).

18 I have recently been approached by a local health organisation to assist in developing a food orientation program for people from refugee backgrounds.
3. Better promote access to local community gardens, including providing maps and information about the gardens via local settlement services.

4. Develop meaningful partnerships between community gardens and settlement services to identify appropriate opportunities for multicultural and culturally specific gardening events.

5. Consider making community gardens more cross-culturally friendly by streamlining the bureaucratic aspects of membership. Make community gardens more accessible by removing fences.

6. Promote and value the use of collaborative visual research methods with people from refugee backgrounds in order to deepen a commitment to promoting marginalised voices and sharing settlement stories that can educate, engage and entertain diverse and far-reaching academic and non-academic audiences.

It was always my intention at the outset of this project to complete a study that would contribute positively to the lives of those involved, as well as have an impact and reach a wide audience. It is hoped that some of the recommendations made might be pursued (possibly by the Myanmar community and myself) in order to enhance settlement experiences for the better. Some of the lessons learnt from this study can be applied to other settler groups already here or coming to Coffs Harbour, as well as other regional areas.

Throughout this study my commitment to grounded, qualitative research has been reaffirmed. I believe that such an approach can only develop by learning to be patient and allow trust to
develop slowly but meaningfully. Throughout this research I have been privileged to observe and engage with participants in order to learn more about their daily experiences. I have learnt much about the values held by this community. I have sought to document this information in an ethical and reciprocal manner, and as a result I have developed friendships that I will always value.

It is appropriate to close with the words of the significant and generous community leader (Figure 6.1) who guided me throughout this project: ‘you can survive with any food but to live well you need food you like and are culturally connected to’. This effectively sums up the relationship between the Myanmar community, and other settler community and migrant groups, and their food encounters in their new homes. Settlement should not just be about living, it should be about living well. And food plays an important, multi-faceted role in achieving this goal. It is so much more than meeting nutritional targets. One participant in the study stated ‘you have to respect food’, it is a conduit for cultural continuation and transformation, and potentially a means to achieve happiness and well-being. Food becomes a symbol of home and a means of placemaking and emplacement, an essential goal in positive settlement. Stories about these interactions should be shared widely in order to further understand and support the complex settlement journeys of people from refugee backgrounds. This study hopes to contribute to such understanding and sharing.
Figure 6.1 Mandy Hughes and Htun Htun Oo, Myanmar community leader, Coffs Harbour, Australia. Copyright 2016 SCU Media, reprinted with permission.
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Appendices

Appendix 1 Major ethnic groups of Myanmar

Source: Martin Smith: Burma - Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity
Appendix 2 Information sheet for participants

Southern Cross University

Information sheet for participants

Title of project – ‘Burmese journeys: the role of food in regional refugee settlement’
My name is Mandy Hughes and I am conducting research for my Doctor of Philosophy Degree at Southern Cross University. I also teach at Southern Cross University. Before this I worked for Australian Red Cross in community programs. I am seeking volunteers whose country of origin is Burma to participate in my research about food choices. I would be very pleased if you would consider taking part in this project.

What is this research?
The research will look at how people from the Burmese community in Coffs Harbour make choices about food. This will involve looking at the cultural significance of food, talking about Burmese traditional food, the social role of food, food preferences, thoughts on ‘Australia food’, the role of gardening, any difficulties encountered when buying food, and ideas about how to make access to food easier in a new and unfamiliar home.

What does this research involve?
This research will involve participation in interviews, group discussion, observations and filming carried out by the researcher. The observations and filming might take place in your home, supermarkets, markets, gardens or at other suitable venues agreed to by you. I intend to edit the filmed research observations into a short documentary. You will be shown the footage that has been filmed and be able to choose whether or not you wish for footage in which you are identifiable to be part of the documentary. You will also be given the opportunity to film for yourself (video diary) if you would like to. You will be provided with training should you wish to pursue this option.

My responsibilities to you
If you experience any discomfort in the process of this research then suitable counselling options will be made available to you. However, as this research has negligible risk it is not anticipated that you will experience any negative consequences. You have the right to leave the research project at any time. This research will take place within the Coffs Harbour CBD, so there should be minimal need to travel. However, if you do need transport, this will be provided. Refreshments will also be provided where appropriate. At the end of the project you will receive a DVD of the documentary. A screening of the documentary will also be held at a public venue and you will be invited to attend this celebratory event. It is intended that the research will promote an understanding of Burmese cultural identity in the Coffs Harbour community and beyond. It will capture the stories of participants in terms of their relationship to food. It might identify any gaps in the provision of food education and services in Coffs Harbour and encourage the development of appropriate services and programs.
Publication
This research may be published in academic journals and names of participants will be anonymous and personal information kept confidential. Video footage and written records of this research will be held in a secure office at Southern Cross University for a period of 7 years.

Participant’s Consent
If you wish to be part of this study, please fill in the attached form and return to the researcher in the attached stamped, self addressed envelope.

Inquiries
Should you have any questions please contact:
Researcher: Mandy Hughes
Phone: 66593945
Mobile: 0421251610
Email: amanda.hughes@scu.edu.au
Principal supervisor: Dr Angela Coco
Phone: 6620 3038
Email: angela.coco@scu.edu.au
Co-supervisor: Dr Lisa Milner
Phone: 66593916
Email: lisa.milner@scu.edu.au

This research has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Southern Cross University. The approval number is ECN-14-087.

If you have concerns about the ethical conduct of this research or the researchers, the following procedure should occur. Write to the following:

The Ethics Complaints Officer
Southern Cross University
PO Box 157
Lismore NSW 2480
Email: ethics.lismore@scu.edu.au

All information is confidential and will be handled as soon as possible.

Thank you for considering being part of my study. I hope to meet you soon.
Yours sincerely

Mandy Hughes
PhD candidate
Southern Cross University
Appendix 3 Sample interview questions

1) How long have you lived in Coffs Harbour? Can you describe life for you in Coffs Harbour?

2) Can you describe where you lived before you came here?

3) Can you tell me about the food you like to eat?

4) Can you describe ‘Burmese’ food? What are the key ingredients?

5) Is there any food that you like to eat that you can’t find in Coffs Harbour?

6) Do you grow any of your own food? Why/why not?

7) Can you describe what it’s like to ‘garden’? How does it makes you feel?

8) Can you describe what it’s like to go food shopping in Coffs Harbour?

9) Do you go to Growers’ markets? Why/why not?

10) Do you know about the Community Garden? Are you a member or would you like to become involved? Is there anything stopping you from being involved?

11) How important is food to you?

12) How important is the social aspect of food ie. sharing food with your family/friends/community?

13) Is food an important part of any special celebrations or traditions? Can you give examples.

14) How is food is connected to your identity, that is who you are in terms of your cultural background etc?
Appendix 4 Sample colour coding for data analysis

6 Feb 2015 visit to garden and interview

4.11.47 2007, February I arrived here – use this one

4.12.05 We came in 2007 February

4.12.49 I’m not the Burmese people but we are Chin. ...I am Chin people. And Chin is one state of Burma and our Chin people stay in Burma, some in Bangladesh, Indi. I am Chin people from Burma

Before I can agree I stayed around 10 years in Malaysia

Left Burma in 1995

4.14.22 What was it like when you first came to Coffs Harbour?

We are very surprised, different people, different language, different culture ...surprised but after that we are happy again, we are safe and happy

4.15.03 What was difficult when you first arrived?

The language, we can’t talk English because now our kids can say English well, our whole family our kids...when you go shopping, at first we arrive we can’t drive, don’t have job, can’t speak English...slowly, slowly the children grow up, it’s good.

Was it difficult to find food?

Yes, really hard to find because our people like vegetable, here vegetable you can see in the supermarket but some you can’t find here...first we buy beans, a lot of people from Asia grow and sell,

4.16.50 did you have access to a garden when you first came

I found a gardener job at the school and I go to horticulture course four years and when I finish I go to our school, I start to garden...but the veggie garden I do when I young I doing time ago but when we go to our place in Burma we don’t sell, we not buy the vegies and the food, everything we grow.

What did you grow in Chin state?

A lot of vegetables, mostly ginger, chilli and now we grow here like eggplant, we can eat the salad and we can cook, if ripe change of colour this is very good food (hands to me)

Corn, most is rice, we grow to plain and some corn and sweet potato, something like that and a lot of beans.
Appendix 5 Sample page from reflection journal

8.9.14

Went to James’ house

Arrived & expected just to meet James but Kham
him (community leader) was also present. I was extremely
pleased to meet him as many
people had suggested I talk to
him. He asked me many
questions and had been at a
Myanmar Association meeting
the night before when quanta
had been asked about my
project. After an hour of
meeting he agreed to offer support
and sought to connect with
the community to source participants
and interpreters. Very glad
for this support! I
didn’t do much of an interview
instead I was interviewed!
This was great and I fully
understand where they are
coming from. Kham wants to
protect the community.
Appendix 6  SCU Fusion Festival poster for launch screening, created by the SCU Office for Equity and Diversity, August 2015

More than 300 people from Myanmar have settled in the Coffs Harbour region, with some having spent more than 20 years in refugee camps.

They fled their homeland with little more than their memories and stories to continue their traditions. Food plays an important role in maintaining their cultural identity.

This film was made as part of Doctor of Philosophy research in the School of Arts and Social Sciences at Southern Cross University.

Coffs Harbour Education Campus Hogbin Drive, Coffs Harbour

When: Thursday 27 August at 5:00pm, light refreshments to start

Where: Lower D Block Theatre

See the trailer at: https://vimeo.com/131377673