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Special Edition: Ethnographic Stories of Disconcertment

Guest Editors: Michael Christie and Helen Verran



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Editorial

The ethnographer in the text: Stories of disconcertment in the changing worlds of north Australian social research

Michael Christie and Helen Verran

This collection of papers grew from a workshop held at the Northern Institute, Charles Darwin University, early in 2012. We set ourselves the task of writing short ethnographic texts that attend to some of the often subtle disconcertments which arise when we as social scientists in the Northern Territory go about our everyday work with Aboriginal individuals and groups. We began our workshop by talking about the researcher in the text, contrasting that figure with the researcher in the flesh. Of particular interest were the conventional writing position of the removed judging observer analyst, and the pervasive practices of distancing, temporally and physically which so often seem to infect and alienate the writer and the writing of social sciences. From an analytic perspective how can we usefully think about the relation between the textual and fleshy figures? The scholarly articles we set as readings for the workshop—Kathryn Pyne Addelson, *The Emergence of the Fetus* (2002), and Brit Ross Winthereik and Helen Verran, *Ethnographic Stories as Generalizations that Intervene* (2012)—directed our focus to ontological issues, bringing in the notion of public problems and the question of how ethnographic stories are generalisations.

As participants in the workshop we agreed to craft and to share short ethnographic stories of our own work as social scientists and to pay particular attention to how we as active participants in the problem of the moment were constituted through its unfolding action in new and unexpected ways. The specific injunction under which these short texts were written was ‘Start in the middle, find and name your disconcertment precisely, articulate tensions, be clear about the change your experience has wrought in you, and stop.’ Not all of us managed to follow those instructions.

Writing from within the rapidly changing worlds of governments, universities and Aboriginal communities in Northern Australia, the texts that follow examine the ontological tensions which arise from, excite or frustrate the assumptions and practices we bring to our work as activist researchers in the application of social science. Why did we choose to work with ethnographic narrative? While all the workshop participants understand themselves as social scientists, most of us do not routinely undertake ethnography. In this exercise we sought to use stories of our work to focus on how new ideas and ways emerge from collective action and how they depend upon

the coming together of diverse subjects and settings. We focus upon how new energetics unsettle, contradict or transform our sometimes thoughtless assumptions. Stories have a special ability to clarify the character of their participants (ourselves, we hope, especially), their histories, desires, imagination, their psychological and emotional states, their aesthetics and their entrenchedness and as well as their searching for the new and the different. They introduce and engage unusual and nonhuman participants. Through writing of our participation in the public problems of the moment as social scientists, and paying particular attention to the ways in which we ourselves are affected and changed as university researchers and students, we hope to open possibilities for new ways of understanding the changing work of academic social science.

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Belonging, being and becoming: Learning within early childhood education in a remote Aboriginal community

Helen Hazard

The preschool

The community preschool was already well equipped with a wide range of materials before it became part of our project with its generous budget for resourcing remote area preschools. Nevertheless in carrying out the project we were obliged to order in even more equipment from suppliers. In fact the storeroom became so full that in the end, the preschool teacher's office was converted as a means to fit it all in. New puzzles, building blocks, games, soft toys, painting materials and so on were added to the play space after each delivery. In this remote preschool in an Indigenous community all but two of the children are Indigenous as is the Teacher Assistant; the teacher and we project personnel are non-Indigenous.

Although cluttered, the preschool room was organised both spatially and temporally. There were defined spaces, areas with equipment that was always present in the room: a mat, bookshelf and puzzles, construction and active play area. Three or four tables were placed down the centre of the room. The day was interspersed with strictly adhered to and generally rather lengthy routines (roll call, daily prayers, teeth cleaning and combing hair, songs and movement, story time). In addition, formal activities were arranged at the tables. These were planned by the non-Indigenous preschool teacher with the aim of developing knowledge and skills that would prepare the children for school. The organisation in a preschool expresses the curriculum, and pedagogy proceeds unobtrusively through arranged material and routines.

Sometimes I wondered if the quantity of resources available, all so thoughtfully laid out to 'greet' the children, and the careful organisation of lessons might not be overwhelming some of the learners here instead of calling them to learn, so to say. Typically, the youngsters began to play, paint or build then having their attention diverted, simply moving to another activity. Often the children did not engage with the conventional 'lessons'. They were not particularly uncooperative but sitting still and silent they waited until the teacher or the assistant allowed them to leave the table.

My job in the project was to collaborate with the teacher to support the preschool children in their emergent literacy and numeracy, with the aim of readying them for school the next year. The focus was on curriculum and pedagogy. On my regular visits to the community, I worked alongside each of the three preschool teachers (all non-Indigenous) who were in charge at different times across the two-year period of the project. I quickly got used to the routine times and would join in the singing and movements; help a child choose his or her toothbrush and comb; read books and tell stories. I would lead discussions about what the children might do that morning; join them in play and sit with them to lead particular tasks.

The childcare centre

Several of the same children who attended the preschool also attended the childcare centre in the afternoon. In this setting, I was training three of the five Indigenous staff, and the one non-Indigenous staff member toward a Certificate III in Community Services Children's Services. I was responsible for training and assessing to the nationally recognized Certificate III standard. Here my focus was on the carers and their routine practices in caring for children. Certificate III in Community Services Children's Services is designed to train carers to run childcare centres as places that nurture belonging, being, and becoming as qualities of children's experience, that is, centres that meet the standards of the National Early Years Learning Framework.

The thing that struck me when I first walked into the childcare centre was how the play space was arranged, especially in comparison to the stuffed-full preschool room. A mat on the floor and a bookshelf, with books askew and sometimes torn; a large laundry basket filled to overflowing with toys, many of which were broken; and child-sized home-corner furniture with few if any play materials. The child-sized table was placed at one end of the room and pulled out when needed for meals. The centre of the room was empty. So that while there was some equipment that was in general familiar to me from visiting and working in many other childcare centres, and indeed not dissimilar to some of the equipment in the preschool, the main impression here was of sparseness.

The children rarely sat and choose a book to read, or played with the toys on the mat. The infants and toddlers were placed in this area and they were returned there when they strayed. The children were more likely to bring equipment into the centre of the room and use it there, together. On other occasions they appeared to be moving around aimlessly. Each day when the children moved outside to play, one and sometimes two activities were arranged on the veranda. There might be painting, cutting, pasting, play dough or water play; all of which are quite typical in childcare settings anywhere in Australia. Bikes were brought out daily and proved to be by far the most popular piece of equipment; they were ridden up and down, up and down the veranda, adroitly manoeuvred around any other children, adults and activities that happened at the same time in the same space.

Typically the children and adults moved together as a group, herding from one activity or routine to another. It was quite common to see an adult complete a painting or construction for a child, particularly the youngest, taking his or her hand and literally leading the child's movements. Even the older children were given verbal instruction and assistance. No child resisted this, he or she

was clearly accepting and comfortable with the adult's help. At other times the adult completed an activity herself or sat playing with the play dough or building with the blocks, without overtly engaging with the child alongside her, but the child would sit contentedly watching the adult, listening to the adult conversation, 'hanging out' together. A very young child might use the smallest brush, attempting to paint, or more likely putting it in her mouth, or using it to paint her body. This was accepted by the adults with no comment, and certainly nothing was done that would divert the infant or toddler from this choice. Later the paint would be washed off as best it could by the adult. At still other times the adults would seemingly leave a child to his or her own devices, sitting apart from an activity and from the children while they talked together. A child might come and go into this adult realm, the adult nursing or kissing the child for short periods before she/he moved away again.

Frequently an adult would yell loudly at a child from across the other side of the veranda, usually when it involved a younger child being hurt or where the action seemed potentially dangerous, but she did not necessarily get up to attend to a situation unless it remained unresolved. For the most part her voice was enough to solve the problem. Sometimes an adult would talk to a four year old about looking after a toddler, allowing him/her to sit on the bike, or have a turn at a truck.

I rarely heard the Aboriginal staff overtly praising a painting, drawing or construction a child had completed, or for his efforts at activities or for other self-help tasks. More often the adults would talk to me about how much a child already knew and could do and this almost always related to their knowledge of relationship to others. Adults would seriously engage with the child in a dialogue about a family matter or a current, local issue such as who was visiting or where another family member was, and even more serious and complex matters such as a death in the family. The older children in particular (4 and 5 year olds) inevitably knew this information and would engage in conversation with the adults.

The children and adults cruised through the day together: noisy, chaotic, disorganized, happy, relaxed, connected and 'normal'. Whereas I found myself behaving in ways that even at the time I felt as 'abnormal'. There I was running around to and from activities engaging with individual children. At one moment moving quickly and quietly to 'resolve' a fight over a bike or to redirect a child who I thought was climbing too high; praising this child for her effort at a painting, arranging reading sessions with that small group, preparing additional activities, singing songs, sitting with children while they ate lunch and so on. I would end the day exhausted and occasionally catch both adults and children looking at me askance.

Moving between

When I visited this Aboriginal community I usually stayed for a week. I moved each day from the preschool to the childcare centre. Each day I found myself leaving a more or less familiar situation in which I had an established role affirmed by the room itself and the schedule, the carefully arranged materials and the routine engagements with the preschool staff and the children, only to arrive in a place where I was out-of-place. In the preschool, despite several reservations, I knew

what was expected of me: singing, dancing, helping children clean their teeth! In the childcare centre I was not seeing care and education happening in ways that I am used to. I was unsure of myself, confused; neither the adults nor children, nor the environment itself, seemed to respond to or know what to do with me, nor I with them. Yet clearly the children were content, they were receiving care and they were being taught and were learning in ways that confirmed and re-confirmed their place in their childcare centre and in their community.

I did not enter these children's centres blindly. I have worked in early childhood care and education including training in the Vocational Education and Training and Higher Education sector for many years. I have lived and worked in the Northern Territory including with Aboriginal people for 25 years. I do not expect 'quality' childcare and education to look the same in every context. I teach enthusiastically about socio-cultural construction and encourage pre-service teaching students to critically consider how their own views on children and families affects their vision of the role of education in society. But now the experience of the childcare has troubled a great many of my received truths: the truth of what a child is, what a teacher is, what education is, what a centre is, and indeed my own role as an academic teacher-educator.

In the preschool, my job, authorised by the enrichment project, was to engage in discussion, to mentor the teacher on practical ideas and philosophical underpinnings about literacy and numeracy in the early years. In particular my task was to emphasise the role of curriculum and pedagogy in promoting amorphous notions of increasing the literacy and numeracy skills of these preschool aged children in order to 'ready' them for school, and thus meet the local and National Curriculum. In the childcare centre, my roles were more strongly prescribed and more clearly delineated by outside authority. The fact that no member of staff held any early childhood qualification gave this engagement a sense of official urgency. I was both provider of educational services and assessor of compliance with standards of the routines enacted by the 'clients' enrolled in Certificate III studies. Being an academic specialising in early childhood in a School of Education I have credibility as quality control agent and consequently I am certified to witness compliance. I am entrusted to attest that carers and places offering care services meet the standards set down by the funding body that provides services for workforce development.

Together the students/carers gathered evidence against the attainment of competencies; evidence of already held skills and knowledge that could be credited as prior learning; we read and talked, took and analysed photographs. They completed written work. I observed them at their day-to-day practice, took notes and lead discussions on quality care as outlined in the training packages and the, at that stage, nascent Early Years Learning Framework. None of the students/carers actually struggled with the content of the training packages and ultimately they satisfied the standards required for the Certificate III. Their practical and written work met the standards across the period of the project, although little work was ever completed outside of my visits and the timeline for the completion of the project was renegotiated twice. The students were keenly interested in the content of the packages and especially in linking ideas they found in the pedagogical materials to their own expectations about children's needs and care. They were open to talk and thoughtful about how some of the ideas and practices presented in the training packages were different from how they might approach the same situations.

They did not reject or contradict the model of knowledge enacted in the national training packages, with its assumptions about what and where knowledge is and how learners and teachers are configured. They never challenged me for teaching to this model of knowledge. But at the same time they felt no obligation to account themselves to it, or to change how they ran their childcare centre in compliance with the spirit of its specific visions. So the carers were happy; they earned their Certificate III, the funding body was happy, the aims of the project had been met. But I am left disconcerted and puzzled. As the observer-analyst within the childcare centre and preschool I was tasked with the job of ensuring quality control. I had expectations of a conventional set of conditions; I took the presence or absence of those conventional conditions as signs of whether or not that centre promotes 'belonging, being, and becoming', and whether the teachers therefore would meet the national standards. This shorthand assumption operates on the view that all children be, belong, and become more or less identically. But this Aboriginal run childcare centre challenged all that.

Belonging, being and becoming myself

Australian childcare centres must be places that nurture 'belonging, being, and becoming' as central aspects of children's experience. The Early Years Learning Framework 'is built around a number of key concepts and principles which require educators to use particular understandings and practices effectively to achieve the desired outcomes... (and is based on the commitment of the Council of Australian Government)...to closing the gap in education achievements between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade' (2009, p. 3). In articulating the slogan 'belonging, being, and becoming' there is an assumption that all children should be subject to conditions that promote their belonging, being, and becoming, since children's growth and development characterized by those modes of growing are universally a good thing.

What is my problem? Both these projects—the funding of a 'professional' to attend to curriculum and pedagogy in the preschool, and the urgent development and offering of a programme of training in Certificate III in children's services in the childcare centre—were developed in the light of the understanding that in the Northern Territory, Indigenous early childhood education is a 'public problem'. As a professional in early childhood education I participate in that public problem. As Kathryn Pyne Addelson has it, as a professional I am a member of the 'ensemble cast' of that public problem (Pyne Addelson 2002, p. 119). The advertent revealing of the universal child who lurks inside the conventional collective practice of early childhood education that emerged as I explored my disconcerting experience of moving between a preschool and a childcare centre in an Indigenous community has me recognising that presumed universal child as also a member of the ensemble cast.

As a philosopher Pyne Addelson wants 'to encourage scientists and critical theorists to reflect on their own participation in the making of our world' (2002, p. 119). In particular she wants social scientists to acknowledge the role they have in constituting 'found' public problems like the public problem of Indigenous early childhood services in the Northern Territory. She suggests we need to examine the effect we have in determining the nature of the participants in the collectives of public problems.

I am interested in the way that the environment and the Indigenous teachers and their students worked together to repudiate the underlying assumptions about the problem and its solution. They did nothing to contradict or undermine the assumptions I brought in my bag and my flesh. They didn't need to. But they undid my own being, becoming and belonging. The public problem turned out to be *my* problem. If I am to go back and participate in good faith, I have to let them (the place and the people) teach me how I (may) have been found as part of *their* public problem, and how that changes me as the ethnographer, educator and quality controller in the flesh.

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Rising to the challenge of SEIQoL-DW... or not

Rachael McMahon

The quality of life measurement and factoid creating tool, known as SEIQoL-DW (schedule for the evaluation of individual quality of life, direct weighting) was generated by European psychologists (mainly) (O'Boyle, Browne, Hickey, McGee, & Joyce, 1993) as a non-prescribed individualised quality of life measurement tool. The tool generates a measure of quality of life totally from the perspective of the individual whose life is represented as they define it in their own words. The quality of life score comes to life as a number, a 'factoid'. The instrument asks the individual test subject what are the five most important areas of their lives, how they are going in these areas represented on a bar graph, and how these areas are prioritised in relation to each other, using a coloured wheel where discs can be moved to show relative to importance (O'Boyle, et al 1993). The task I have taken up in my doctoral studies is to work with others—including Indigenous Australians—to assess the efficacy of this tool to be used amongst Indigenous Australians.

Lea (2008) defines a factoid as a fact negotiated and influenced by the socio-cultural, economic and political context from which it was derived—definably subjective rather than objective. As a generator of factoids SEIQoL-DW is rather controversial, not least because people often treat factoids as if they are objective measures. Some advocates of the tool hold great hope for SEIQoL-DW as being a sensitive tool for representing individual Indigenous people's stories, values, goals and aspiration. Psychologists who support the tool develop factoids which show the tool in a positive light. Those who do not support the tool produce results which show the tool in a negative light. SEIQoL-DW is supported by my supervisors, who proclaim it as the ultimate tool in Indigenous engagement. In the beginning I was wary and very sceptical but open to learning more about the tool's possibilities, and in retrospect I see that in adopting this tool, we were perhaps over-zealous, projecting too much hope into 'measurement' falling in love (so to speak) with the numbers the tool produced and expecting far too much from the tool. So the quality of life factoid generating tool depicts a schism of (dis)empowerment between those who use the tool on the 'other', the 'other' and the ethnographer whose descriptions and perceptions can also be (dis)empowering for one or all.

A few months into my work with the quality of life factoid generating tool I was involved in a meeting in Alice Springs. I was a member of a team describing the tool to a group of lecturers who taught literacy skills to adult Indigenous people from remote settings. The room we were allocated for this exercise was an intimidating, large board room, with a large table. There was lot of distance

between the lecturers and ourselves (myself and two supervisors) both literally and metaphorically. We had hoped for a more intimate space, and the room layout we found ourselves in certainly did not favour the close informal discussion with the lecturers we had hoped for. Perhaps the literacy lecturers liked things that way. Preliminary discussions between the quality of life factoid research program managers and the literacy program team leaders had ascertained or presumed that the literacy lecturers' teaching had a great effect on their students' lives; the students, they assumed, gained more than just learning to read and write. Hence they passionately believed the quality of life measuring tool would be a boon for the literacy lecturers in showing how efficacious their work actually was. It was my task as the junior member of the team to suggest this to the lecturers. In my presentation I proposed that the literacy lecturers utilise the individualised quality of life measurement tool (SEIQoL-DW) that had been validated for Indigenous people (Chenhall, Senior, Cole, Cunningham, & O'Boyle, 2010) to measure their effectiveness as teachers. I suggested they would be able to capture the previously unmeasurable subjective effects of participating in the literacy course. The factoid as an object was given subjective qualities; the factoid was empowered and transformed beyond its objective qualities of measuring individual quality of life.

The response of the literacy lecturers to what we thought was the good news of our presentations was extremely disconcerting however. For one thing lecturers were very protective over any intervention with 'their' students, a title of ownership they stated, especially protecting 'their' students from research endeavours. They were not going to facilitate access of our factoid generating instrument to Indigenous Australian subjects! And in addition many of the lecturers were passionately against the factoid generating tool as such. They pronounced that it would disempower their students and their students' views. They declared our research frivolous and as of no purpose. While, unlike my supervisors, I was not a passionate 'believer' in SEIQoL-DW I was curious in an experimental way. My own experience of the tool was that using it was informative, and I felt at least that the literacy lecturers might have been able to learn about issues influencing their students. I was shocked by the seeming wall of negativity towards both us as researchers and towards the factoid measurement tool.

A few months later I had my first experience with actually using the tool with a small group of Indigenous students in Gunbalanya. I was nervous about going to Gunbalanya. The students' lecturer was suspicious, and I was wary of her. She had been a part of that unnerving meeting in Alice Springs, I was not sure why she had agreed to co-operate with us. Yet a lot was riding on the successful generation of factoids. A poor outcome either in terms of not producing valid scores, or producing very low scores could effectively end the research project then and there. I was both scared and eager to please. I desperately wanted to impress the literacy lecturer and my supervisors. But oddly I also felt the factoid generating tool needed to be protected too. The tool had developed a life of its own, not just the life given by the instigators or participants of the tool. The tool had developed an objective identity where its use portrayed relative truths. Pondering the idea of relative truths on the way to Gunbalanya, distracted me from my fear of driving long distances on rough roads, which was made worse by needing to cross a notorious crocodile infested river at Cahill's Crossing.

We arrived at the Gunbalanya classroom—a donga which a variety of non government organisations shared. There was a bit of a kerfuffle as it seemed the room was unavailable, although in the end we did get access. The room was small, approximately ten by five metres in size and in desperate need of a paint. The tables and chairs, quite rough and worn, were arranged in a U-shape, and the whiteboard was at the front. There was minimal decoration in the room, no posters, just the table, chairs and whiteboards. It was a hot day and the donga didn't have air-conditioning. My interviewing space was to be down the back in one of the corners. Class was due to start at 9am. The students muddled in between 9am and 10.30am. There were eight students all up.

The literacy lecturer introduced me as being a researcher from Menzies School of Health Research. (The students were familiar with Menzies, like many Indigenous Australians they had already been subjects of research—some good and some dubious, I guessed). I explained to the group that, with their consent, I would be talking about what is important to them, how they are going in those areas and how they related to each other in priority. I showed them the factoid tools—the bar graph and coloured disc. The group did not react in any way to my introduction, though I don't think they were despondent. The lecturer later told me that this was a common response to visiting researchers.

In the next few hours I assessed individual students up the back of the room in turns while the lecturer was teaching the rest of the group. Doing the assessments was not at all what I expected. I began with the assumption that the students would be so eager to tell their individual stories that I would have to ask them to slow down; that we would be running out of time.

I sat down with my first student. His behaviour and responses formed a pattern that was repeated by all the other 7 students I was to interview that day. He was 20 years of age, working with the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) Ranger Group, as most of the students did. He was required to do the literacy/numeracy course in order to be employed by the CDEP. He was happy to do his lessons in the classroom because it kept him out of the mid-day sun. He was very quiet and didn't make much eye contact. Going through the parts of the instrument, he needed prompting before he described five things that were important to him, prompting about how he was going in those areas by indicating on the bar graph, and prompting to be able to show how he prioritised those areas. All his answers were given in single words. While the design of the instrument makes it difficult to do this, I felt like that he was giving the answers he felt I wanted to hear, and that he was very aware that his classmates might be listening. Some students seemed to like doing the assessments, some didn't, but politely so. The factoids struggled to come to life on this day as I had imagined they would. However, perhaps the tool came to life to the Indigenous students as they imagined it would; the tool may have been an expression of the students' as defined by them.

Then a few weeks later I had a vastly different experience with the tool and the factoids it generates. I interviewed a young non-Indigenous man with a speech impediment which was affecting his success in Vocational Education and Training (VET). He had communication difficulties which led to him requiring one on one support with a learner support program worker. He had researched

the tool and developed opinions about the factoid generating instrument before our interview, bringing it to life in his mind. This student saw the factoid his interview would produce as a means of empowering himself. It would be an expression of himself. He would be having his individual goals and aspirations heard for the first time; in his words. In the interview, the conversation between myself, the student and the factoid, went on for an hour and a half, compared to the ten minute interviews with the students at Gunbalanya. The student, male and 19 years of age, was so enthusiastic his rate of speech was high, which made it more difficult to understand him due to his speech impediment.

We had privacy during the interview, which perhaps made the student more comfortable. The interview was conducted in a small and very basic office, one table, two chairs, attached to a trade school practical work area that was empty at the time of the interview, giving us a silent space. He seemed to feel very at ease with me, in stark contrast to the Indigenous students I had interviewed in Gunbalanya a few weeks earlier. Through our conversation about the factoid and what it meant to him, the VET student commented on the richness, depth and strength which he experienced in the instrument. This VET student clearly had spent quite some time thinking deeply about what was important to him, and he was excited by the opportunity of having his voice heard.

What posited a challenge for me were the varied and conflicting responses I had with the factoid tool. Why were the reactions of the Indigenous students so different from the student with a speech impediment? The one word answers I received from the Indigenous students could very well have been the Indigenous students crafting their own way of using the tool. And was the student with a speech impediment empowered because of his own manipulation of the tool? Did the tool actually empower people via encouraging individual perception, as it had been assumed to do? Could the tool be used to measure group dynamics and program efficacy as it was assumed to do, for example in the remote adult literacy program? Were the Indigenous students as a group empowered by the factoid tool? I was conflicted in my thinking about how the tool could possibly be a means for empowerment: conflicted in thinking that the tool empowers individuals or even groups, and conflicted between empowering the factoid tool and its confinable and categorical measurement. It didn't seem like both was possible: empowerment and measurement.

It is less confusing when measurement is understood within the social scheme of knowledge production, and how the tool of measurement is socialised and has agency itself. In this social schema exists the space where the utilisation of the factoid tool is multifaceted and its use presents a challenging discourse of human agency in research. Not only that, the tool itself takes on a life of its own, its own agency. It does this by developing 'facts' that can be seemly and unpredictably (dis)connected to the presumptions of both those who measure with it, and those who are measured by it. The tool is an active participant in the conversation between the researched and the researchers. The factoid tool empowers and disempowers its users, bringing to life the disconcertment between the researchers, the researched and the 'objective' tools that precipitate the disconcertment.

The factoid tool was supposed to be apolitical, though its use gives it agency and a dynamic to define 'facts'; facts that researchers and program workers fall in love with. For instance in the remote adult literacy program, the supervisors hope to measure the unmeasurable effects of the program in the lives of the Indigenous students, The dynamic of research turns what may be an objective 'fact' into varied subject(s) in its making. Again, Lea (2008) defines a factoid as a fact negotiated and influenced by the socio-cultural, economic and political context from which it was derived—definitely subjective rather than objective. It is not only humans who contain power in the dynamic of research. Factoid measuring tools have their own capacity to engage in power relations, brought to life but not the control of the researchers and researched. Understanding the significance of this dynamic was and remains a challenge for me.

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Fire, lamb chops and engagement: Practice and theory entanglements in remote Aboriginal education

Matthew Campbell

It's shortly before 9am on a Monday morning in April 2003. I'm a Land and Resource Management lecturer with the Faculty of Indigenous Research and Education at Charles Darwin University and I'm heading to Pine Creek for the week to deliver training to the relatively new Aboriginal Ranger group, the Wagiman Rangers. The university troop carrier (aka troopy) is loaded up with enrolment forms, course documents, GPS units and maps, my swag, tent, esky and a bag of clothes.

My first stop is Kybrook Farm, an Aboriginal community just south of Pine Creek about 200 kms south of Darwin. It's just before lunch and I begin the process of picking up people and their things for our week together down around Claravale Crossing on the upper Daly River, maybe another 100 or so ks away. I wend my way around the small community of Kybrook farm and slowly the Troopy fills: people, blankets, an esky, plastic shopping bags filled with loaves of white bread, a tin of flour and a number of foam mattresses. We head off, as we drive we listen to some tapes, Johnny Cash mostly, and talk: about weeds, pigs, cattle, lizards, relations with neighbours, erosion, kangaroos, about where things were heading, fencing, cattle yards, employment, income, indoor cricket and things to do.

We arrive at Claravale Crossing in the late afternoon, and I approach Jabul, the old man coordinating the group (and father or uncle to most of them). He has a few things he wants to get done this week. One is to travel north through country still under a land claim to check out a story he's heard about clearing that might taking place. The other is to continue with burning around the Ah Toy block, where we are currently staying. We decide that it would make sense and achieve course outcomes if tomorrow morning we continue with the burning. Later in the week we could go north.

Tuesday morning, after breakfast we head off to burn. We light a series of small fires on the westerly side of a well-worn track which burn their way slowly back to the track before going out. It is the perfect weather and conditions for it: the grass is dry, but not too dry, the wind is light and the day is warm, with the feelings of dryness that accompany the early 'Dry' season in the Top End. There is also enough moisture around to bring on a little dew at night time to help extinguish any remnant fire that remains after we finish.

Upon returning to the camp we talk as a group with Jabul about what we should do tomorrow. Everyone is keen on heading up to the north a little way where we could do some more burning while also looking for the land clearing that Jabul had heard about. We decide that heading north is what we'll do.

Wednesday morning is cool and crisp. I eat my muesli and position my coffee maker in the coals. I sit back in my camping chair and look over some of the elements of competency for the unit 'Undertake traditional burning practices'. As I drink my coffee I look over at the main camp and expect to see everyone doing what they always do: drinking tea, moseying about, talking with each other. And they sort of are, though I have a sense that something is going on which is out of the ordinary. It is not that they are not doing these things, it is just that they are somehow doing them differently: rather than talking as they normally do they seem to be hanging about, looking into the distance or into their cup of tea. Whatever it is it doesn't seem like it is serious, but it is out of the ordinary.

All of a sudden it starts to make some kind of sense as Patrick comes over. He is a young man, one of Jabul and Ivy's sons. He delicately, perhaps even gingerly, explains that Ivy needs to go into Pine Creek to get some more food, and, that as I have the only vehicle I am the one who needs to take her. But hang on, if we do this we can't go up north like we'd planned. I do not know what to say and the look on my face was, I am sure, one of blankness if not some sort of horror! I felt backed into a corner and thoughts run through my mind—snap, snap, snap: this would be so clearly not part of university business, shop runs are not part of my work program; it will cost another \$100 in fuel—how will I justify that; taking Ivy means I won't be teaching, which is what I should be doing; there is no way I can refuse to take Ivy because no-one will do anything until this problem is satisfactorily dealt with (which means taking her to Pine Creek); Ivy should not be going in the university vehicle as she is not a student and therefore may not be covered by the university's insurance policy. These and other thoughts cascade through my mind. Yet at the same time I also feel like the decision has already been made, and I haven't been part of the decision making team (even though, clearly, it hasn't).

'I'll have to think about it', I say, and with that Patrick walks away to report back to the group. I stand there in a state of suspended animation. I feel like I don't have much time to formulate a response. Yet I know that I need some time. I know I am being watched and my not answering is being observed and reflected upon, and would contribute to me being positioned in certain ways by the observers. Yet looking at them it was clear that they are uncomfortable, each in their different ways. They know I could say no, but they must also realise that I'd have to break some rules to say yes. Out of all of them I think that Ivy is the least concerned—she probably knows I'll say yes. Either way I have to make a choice, and I have a sense that the choice I make will determine to a huge degree the nature of our ongoing training relationship.

I do say yes, in the end, and take Ivy to Pine Creek. We lose a day of burning, gain some lamb chops and get to listen to Johnny Cash again. But I also gain insights from two related disconcertments grounded in that difficult moment.

The first disconcertment was how I felt when I was asked. In the moments that followed the request I felt like I had nothing on which to grasp to give me that feeling of solidity, of sureness, that enabled me to confidently make a decision, one way or another. All of a sudden I found myself in a new space where I didn't know the rules, by which I mean that none of my interactions to that point had prepared me for such a situation. And if I didn't know the rules (or they didn't yet exist), then how could I know the implications of any decision I might make? I couldn't, and didn't know what to do. I hadn't had to confront something like this before. In hindsight I have come to see that my shock possibly stemmed from the fact that this request revealed that my understanding of my position and the work we were doing together was not a shared one. Up until that point I had taken as a given that there was a neat and (I thought) uncontroversial distinction between me (as a representative of the university) and them (as members of their own Aboriginal group). It was not just that I suddenly noticed that I saw myself differently than did the people I was working with. It was also that the moment revealed these categories to be ones that are made by me (notably in this case not us) and my materials: university position, white male, textbooks and curriculum, university vehicle, etc. On reflection, I can also see that, flawed as those categories might have been in terms of understanding what we were doing together, they were crucial in providing me with a stability that allowed me to function. The categories were part of a habit that I had built up over time that enabled me to make sense of why I was there and therefore to keep on doing what I was doing. I can now see that what I am doing most of the time is reinvigorating and redoing the categories that I assume to already be at work (and this I think is what we all do, for the most part). However it also showed me that I need to be open to the possibility that the categories might not make sense, and need to be jettisoned. Importantly this does not mean abandoning the categories with which I work, but be open to them being challenged and renegotiated on the basis of my experiences in the world.

My other disconcertment was related to how I felt about having said yes. On a fundamental level I felt disconcerted because saying yes was a statement about what I thought was important: what kind of person I was and would become. In choosing to align myself with the needs of the group in which I found myself (which meant going to Pine Creek) I was consciously choosing to not go on with the burning. This meant not doing that which was supposedly my 'real job'—to 'teach units from the Resource Management course to enrolled students'. However this version of my 'real job' relies on the prejudice that I am the only one in a position to say what my job is. I am in fact being produced by the situations in which I find myself and whose participants include people, objects, including in this case the vehicle, my physical being, ideas, concepts, and the surroundings, amongst other things. In a sense my disconcertment revolved around the necessity at that point of making an explicit choice as to which system defined me (which up until then I had found ways to weave together). On the one hand I had the university that encouraged me to be the cognitive authority: the one who knew; whose job was to 'deliver' training to those who wanted it. On the other there was a group of people who had seen an opportunity to gain resources and opportunities through signing up for training and considered the work we were doing together to be yet another opportunity to create the world, both social and physical, that drew on the old while welcoming the new. In the end the disconcertment was about relinquishing the fantasy that I was the sole definer of what counted, and the fears that went along with that as an employee of the

university. And to follow up on the earlier point, saying yes was a step to making new categories, new ways of acting, new realities.

I found myself in a moment in which any number of new realities could have been brought into being. The experience enabled me to see the work that I do differently, and with greater appreciation of the work that goes on in social settings within which people are creating themselves and others in an ongoing iterative dance. Seeing myself and the people I work with as participants in collective action, creating the world together, has enabled me to rethink my work and the world that emerges as a result of it. My disconcerting experience, although unique, is (I am sure) similar to ones had by many others who do their work in inter-cultural spaces in places like the Northern Territory of Australia.

So what is going on when we head out and participate in the world in which different languages are spoken and different cultures are being performed? What does doing things together mean for us and for those who come after us? Being conscious of what I am creating, and the choices I make in doing so, enables me to rethink what it means to do my job properly. Critically this process is one that takes place in the moment; I am a participant (not an onlooker) and can only develop a sense of my role, and the responsibilities that go with it in the real world, on a moment to moment basis. Further they are products of the collective action; they are not something that I work out alone. This incident showed me that it is in those things that I try to define myself that are most likely to not work in the hurly burly that is life in the world.

Looking back I can see that all the things I had learnt about the group: their individual members, their country, their history, their aspirations, their attitude to our work together, were produced through social interaction which involved us cautiously finding out about each other, sometimes probing, sometimes sitting back. What we were producing and what it might mean nobody knew, but as we went on together, and found out more about each other, we were more able to both probe more deeply as well as stay silent more easily. And from that point we were able to do new and different things together: to go on together in new ways.

The promise of *milmarra*

Kathryn MacMahon

The room is buzzing with normal early morning student noise: teachers listen to student gossip about a particularly interesting incident at football training the evening before. Another private story is whispered among the young women present. The younger boys in my charge are doing their morning whistling and doing drumming practice on the floor and desks. We are waiting for a new kind of learning event to begin, a workshop which hopes to bring two mathematical systems closer together. We teachers are all nervous as we wait for the first workshop where secondary students and community elders will be working together. There is a strong sense of anticipation in the room. The workshop is to be led by community elders working with our newly appointed *Yolŋu*¹ principal and Helen Watson (now Verran), a well-known and trusted academic from a Melbourne University. The door opens and the principal, Helen and two community elders enter the room. We all listen as the principal opens the workshop at the front of the room. The younger boys I am sitting with modify their drumming to a quiet tap.

The principal then hands the proceedings over to one of the elders. He is a significant ceremonial leader, a *djirrikay*, (a ceremonial leader with full knowledge of *Yolŋu* law). He holds special responsibility for *Dhuwa* and *Yirritja* ceremonial knowledge, the two halves (moieties) of *Yolŋu* society. Despite such an eminent ceremonial position, the *djirrikay* is also a very warm man and a great comedian. His performance has been eagerly anticipated. He begins with a story about his own education. An eerie silence descends on the room. I look around the room and see that everyone in the room is transfixed. He tells his audience that he does not read or write *djorra'* (paper, books) like white professors. His high-level *Yolŋu* qualifications were gained from his elders, his fathers and mothers, uncles and aunts, and from the land. His education took place in the bush. As a young boy he lived with his family in different camps in Arnhem Land. He walked across Arnhem Land on many occasions. Through this education he learnt how to survive on the land. Through attendance at ceremonies he came to understand the law of the land, its song lines, its ancestral stories. He wonders out loud if we, his audience, the students and teachers before him to-day, are ready to travel with him across Arnhem Land on foot. The entire room shuffles around audibly at this rhetorical questions, our bowed heads perhaps admitting that we would indeed prefer a seat in a truck.

I follow most of the *djirrikay's* story, but find myself mesmerized by the intensity of quiet and concentration in the room. For the first time in five years I am engulfed in an uncanny silence. Such

1 *Yolŋu* people are Indigenous Australians, Traditional Owners of NE Arnhemland in the Northern Territory of Australia.

intense silent engagement in regular school activities and lessons is unheard of. Even in our adult education forums and regular Teacher Education sessions there is always lots of noise, gossiping, chatting, laughing, movement for cups of tea and cigarette breaks.

Then the *djirrikay* begins to talk about kinship (*gurruṯu*) connections and the promise system (*milmarra*) in *Yolḥu* society. Within minutes I am lost. One of my closest colleagues, the *djirrikay's* eldest daughter, is sitting next to me. For the past few years we have devised a system to help each other out, depending on the context. I whisper a question to see if I can 'catch up'. She answers with an uncharacteristically sharp reply: He's talking about *milmarra*. Shut up and don't ask me any more questions! I have to listen! I feel disconcerted and quickly assess what I 'know' about *milmarra* to see if I might learn anything from the talk. I thought that *milmarra* was to do with baby girls being 'promised' at birth to adult men. But there is clearly something of more depth here as it finds itself in a maths workshop and has everyone mesmerized. I wonder why *milmarra* is the first performance at the opening of our new curriculum. As I look around I catch a few hesitant smiles from some of the teachers. I note too with a momentary feeling of annoyance that they are taking notes. I have been urging people to undertake this task in vain during professional development sessions for the last two years.

The *djirrikay's* demeanor is becoming more forceful and I bring my attention back to the front of the room. As we watch he begins to scan the room, perhaps to see how we are all taking his talk. He then walks around and has a close look at individual students in attendance. Perhaps we all look a bit shell-shocked for he directs the principal to set out what he is saying on the blackboard. Under his direction a diagram with three columns emerges. The names of eight clan groups unfold with twenty-four names on it under three headings. I'm unsure of the meaning of two of them but I've given up asking for help. I recognise some of the clan group names but not all of them. The *djirrikay* reads his diagram back perfectly, pointing to each name as he moves along the black board. The students next to me are suddenly very excited. They whisper how clever the *djirrikay* is as they assume he has just taught himself to read. I am sitting with these particular boys because their ability to settle down and 'be serious' was a question in the planning meeting for the workshop yesterday. I have not had to shush them or keep them in check for any of the session. Their attention has been focused on the *djirrikay* and they are engaging with what is going on. As I focus on their interest in being a part of the *djirrikay's* session and witness the attention and respect they are showing towards him I become painfully aware of how often they must feel like I am at this juncture in the workshop during their 'normal' school lessons. The idea of a 'normal lesson' makes me wince now. I am realising that *Yolḥu* pedagogy might be something quite different to what I had assumed. My confusion and struggle to concentrate mirrors that of the boys when they try to interact with complicated western knowledge in English, their second language, a language that is only heard in the community when people have to communicate with English speakers. I see now that it is not only a language issue but their lack of connection with the content matter of the Secondary School curriculum.

My confusion deepens as the speaker continues. In the space of thirty minutes I have moved from feelings of anticipation and excitement, and an expectation that I am about to take part in learning

more about *gurrutu*, to knowing I can't interact because I can't fit the categories on the board to specific people I know. A sudden diversion spins everyone around when an important woman in the community known for her expertise and knowledge about kinship practices questions something on the board. After some discussion among the older people in the room the *djirrikay* directs the principal-scribe to make an adjustment. I notice that none of the younger teachers take part in the discussion but they write notes about the conversation.

The kinship diagram has agency of its own and we are asked to join the group we belong in, using the information on the board. I don't know which group to join so I follow two of the teachers I call *yapa* (sister). I do this with a sinking feeling I will end up in the wrong group because they are in a different clan group to the one I am adopted into, and their husbands are from a different clan group. Looking around the faces in the group I can't comprehend the connections with the people in the group. The *djirrikay* walks over and guides me to another group.

In our meeting at the end of the day the principal talks to us about his quest to find a better way to teach mathematics, a way that will make the students more open and appreciative of mathematical ideas in the *balanda* (western) world, yet give them the opportunity to learn about and respect their own knowledge. In tomorrow's sessions we will be exploring connections between the recursion in *Yolŋu* kinship systems which I gather has something to do with the twenty-four clan names on the blackboard and western number recursion. He is clearly very excited and ends the meeting by saying that we are in the process of finding a way of making collective wisdom.

The next day duly arrives and we hurry to get things ready for an exploration of the workings of the Base 10 system, with tens of thousands of straws and rubber bands to tie them up with, and masking tape and labels to make a decimal numeration matrix on the floor. As the students arrive we are amazed to see an unusually large contingent of secondary-aged boys, all combed-up and ready for work. But none of the girls who attended yesterday have turned up. The girls coming in were not at school yesterday. I look at the empty places of the young women who usually attend every day and wonder what is going on.

The workshop in my story was held at Yirrkala School in North East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia in February 1989. My ethnographic account re-performs some of my experiences of cognitive confusion and some exciting moments during the first session of a two-day workshop involving 'bothways' mathematics curriculum development. Some of my confusion results from simply being unable to follow the *djirrikay's* lecture in any depth. At first I thought this was because I could not get my usual extra tuition and English translation on the side. But as the session went on, I realise it is that the depth of the knowledge practices being unfolded is beyond me. As I am trying to understand some of the complexities of a mathematics education which connects recursive *milmarra* connections and Base 10 number recursion, *milmarra* is signaling to me that I have yet to fully understand the work that numbers do. The *milmarra* topic itself is a puzzle. The *djirrikay's* performance showed me that *milmarra* is more than I thought it was. This 'bothways' workshop was a *Galtha* (negotiated starting point) *Rom* (Law) workshop. It is the first *Galtha Rom* workshop to be held at the school so it is a significant event for all the participants.

Marika (1999) unfolds some of the complexities involved in *Galtha*:

Galtha is the place where people assemble, arriving from their different territories to sit for some time with related groups of people, but *Galtha* is more than this. It is a place at which important negotiations are carried out, agreements made and plans formulated. More importantly, it refers to the whole process of meeting, discussion, negotiation, planning, agreement and action. *Galtha* marks the nexus between plan and action, between theory and practice. In a school context, a *Galtha* curriculum relates to how children are related to the land and to their djalkiri, to their foundations (Marika, 1999, p. 6).

As ethnographer-in-the-text I am still immersed within the collective of the *Galtha* workshop and I ponder on the performances which emerged in my writing. Like Verran (2001, p. 5) I hope to privilege and expand on my disconcertment as a way to struggle through our colonizing pasts, and discern new possibilities for our role as non-Indigenous educators involved in *Yolŋu* Education, to find answers to the questions of how we should live (Addelson, 1994) and how we can work together in more useful ways to achieve successful *Yolŋu* education.

Over the five years leading up to the workshop, adult participants in this *Galtha* Rom workshop had taken part in different aspects of research action in the *Ganma* Maths Project (Yunupingu, 1991). This was part of what was then known as 'both ways' curriculum development (Marika, Ngurruwutthun & White, 1989; Watson, 1989). *Ganma* Maths research included many forums and workshops which enabled *Yolŋu* elders to forge the directions for a community-based curriculum and for some very unusual explorations about western mathematics and *Yolŋu* kinship practices and land ownership practices. The *Ganma* Maths research was initiated by Bakamana (now Mandawuy) Yunupingu, the first *Yolŋu* principal at Yirrkala school and Dr Helen Watson (now Verran) a teacher educator, philosopher and academic advisor from a southern university.

The inclusion of secondary-aged school students is what was startling and new in the *Galtha* workshop described here. The stated aim of the workshop was to set a foundation for bringing *Yolŋu* cultural knowledge and practices into the centre of curriculum and pedagogy at Yirrkala School through an exploration of the connections between *Yolŋu* knowledge practices and western mathematics (Watson-Verran, 1992). It began with the lecture on *milmarra* by a *djirrikay*, a ceremonial expert. For the first time in fifty years of schooling at Yirrkala, *Yolŋu* experts are at the centre of school learning. The school is finally welcoming them to the centre of curriculum, no longer refusing *Yolŋu* resources, *Yolŋu* knowledge categories or practices.

Milmarra and *gurrutu* emerged from the workshop in ways that confused me, and clearly had all the *Yolŋu* participants—teachers and students—on the edge of their seats. The headings in the jointly constructed *milmarra* map/diagram threw me; even though I tried to hang on to one recognised category this wasn't sustainable. The young boys in my care wouldn't have understood everything that the senior law man had to say, but they listened and concentrated in the workshop in a way I had not experienced with them before. They were alert to the possibility of being a part

of *milmarra*, of *gurrutu*. They interacted with the *djirrikay*'s performance and found they, unlike me, could develop understandings of knowledge practices they knew about in real life but had never experienced in a formal presentation.

I experienced a moment similar to Clarke's (2011, p. 16) when 'the sudden visibility of contradiction at the very heart of being an adopted *balanda*' (white person) emerged. I knew only as much as I had been able to take in about *gurrutu* practices over five years, and I realised in the workshop the real depth and complexity of *Yolŋu* social practices and knowledge. *Gurrutu* is the medium through which newcomers to *Yolŋu* lands learn about the *Yolŋu* world by being 'adopted' into a *Yolŋu* family (Clark, 2011). As an adopted clan member of five years I assumed before the workshop that I would be able to participate in whatever emerged. Instead I quickly saw how limited my understandings of kinship practices are. I tried unsuccessfully to make a jump to a formal level of engagement, and to follow the clan relationships being unfolded. But the relationships the speaker talked about were not the close everyday family relationships I lived in the community.

Looking at myself as a learner, I see a typical western teacher and learner, struggling as an individual to 'get more knowledge'. My understanding of myself as a learner progressing along some kind of developmental learning pathway falls over in this workshop. My teacher education studies in the 1970s were grounded in the work of Jean Piaget; his stages of cognitive development were transmitted to us unproblematically, as a map of the way all individuals learn, a developmental theory of knowledge (Addelson, 1994, p. 2). From this viewpoint, knowledge exists as an abstract entity, intact and transmissible from one person to another but in the *Galtha* workshop this idea of transmission of knowledge, with its assumptions of epistemic equality fails. Addelson (1994) defines the premise of epistemic equality as a crucial element in the individualistic perspective of Western epistemology. Epistemic equality assumes that anyone may (in principle) know the facts of the past; anyone may find out the preconditions of the actions, and anyone may be the judging observer (Addelson, 1993, p. 139). The results of the *djirrikay*'s request for his audience to assemble themselves into specifically connected groups reminded me of the way people group themselves when at ceremonies in the community. I knew as I looked around the group I initially joined that it didn't fit any of the groups I normally found myself in at ceremonies. My trouble initially was there was no-one noticing me on the edge of a camp and calling out for me, or gesturing to show me where 'my' group was for a particular performance of a ceremony. The *djirrikay* performed this role for me when he came and took me to the right group.

The *djirrikay* refuses epistemic equality underlying western epistemology as he unfolds *Yolŋu milmarra* practices: there are different meanings for each person in the workshop, depending on their place in the *gurrutu* network. The *djirrikay* is rejuvenating and re-making the network of *Yolŋu* relationships for the participants in the workshop action, making them explicit and alive. As a *balanda* person adopted into the *gurrutu* network my position is strange. Through engagement in this workshop I realise that I will continue to struggle to participate in understanding the action of *gurrutu* practices. This does not prevent me however, from becoming even more committed to its inclusion in the school curriculum as I witness the intensity of the learning experience, especially seeing our drummer boys becoming active participants in the workshop. Willing participation in

the school is unusual for these boys who generally choose outsider status, wearing the badge of 'irregular attenders' with pride. Their attendance on the second day of the workshop heralds an important change in what learning might be for them. The *milmarra* pedagogy also has an effect for the young women who choose not to participate the next day.

As a *balanda* teacher lost in the whirl of *milmarra* names and categories I realise with shock and discomfort that I unconsciously expected to always have cognitive authority in the school. Until this workshop, this assumption was not something I could have articulated. I would, in fact, have been offended if someone had accused me of seeing myself as such a thing as a cognitive authority. I saw myself as an educator actively working in good faith to be humble and useful in supporting *Yolŋu* self-management and ultimately self-determination. The *djirrikay* performing *milmarra* as *Yolŋu* commitment in good faith over long periods of time showed us how strands of relationality emerge out of complex negotiations. As he performed *milmarra* he changed me, the students, and *Yolŋu* education.

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The child under the table: Optimism and melancholy in school-based ethnography

Helen Harper

It's 8.50 in the morning, the first lesson of the day, and I've been observing this class for some 30 minutes before I notice the girl under the table. I don't know when she came in. Was she there from the start? I haven't heard her name; in my notebook I just refer to her as AK for Aboriginal Kid. AK's jar of pencils has fallen over, spilling its contents on the floor, and she is picking them up. Slowly. But by 9 o'clock she is sitting back on her chair, making stick drawings in her book. I'm quite interested in her now, because it doesn't look like she knows how to write, and the teacher isn't paying her any attention.

Earlier, I observed the children arriving in class, a racially mixed group, fair, black, and all the shades between. I felt a kind of bounciness to the morning, engendered by the collective eight-year-old energy. I watched the teacher begin the lesson by calling all the children to the mat. Phil is young teacher, tall and almost athletic, but with rounded shoulders that give him a somewhat severe demeanor, verging on grumpiness. After a quick roll call, Phil began, 'Yesterday you should have finished writing your report. You should begin typing. When you're typing, keep your font the same.' He demonstrated on the interactive whiteboard how to do some formatting, using technical words like 'italics', 'bold', 'arrows.' I pondered how much the kids understood of this. Maybe they had been drilled in this language, and they were taking it all in.

Phil told the children to show him their completed draft, and then they would be able to start typing their final version on a laptop from the laptop trolley. Two children handed out writing books and most of the class immediately began lining up to have Phil check their work. The line snaked away from the front of the room, where Phil was holding court. It quickly became clear that most children hadn't 'finished' their draft at all, and they were sent back to their tables to finish 'all of the questions on the sheet'.

I also observed the arrival of a tutor, Sonya. She was very young and pretty, and seated herself at one of the group tables. One of the girls declared, in a proprietorial way, 'I need help.' Over the next ten minutes, I watched as more children clustered around Sonya, vying for her attention ('Sonya, that's how much I wrote!'), until there were six children at her table. Phil, meanwhile, was still a captive of the queue, and had no time to circulate amongst the children.

Nonetheless, by the time my attention is drawn to AK under the table, five children have earned laptops. One of the tables has become crowded, as many of the children have moved around to sit near friends. A group of girls take a break to count together in Italian (a kind of random activity of group cohesion I guess). They appear to engage lightly with the writing task; I perceive that this is in fact a very social event for them.

Watching children type slowly on small laptops is really rather dull, and I find myself increasingly interested in AK, and the contrast between her behaviour and that of the other children in the class. Phil has now moved himself, and come to sit right next to AK but turned away from her so that he can ‘conference’ with the constant stream of other children still displaying their work. He directs one child sternly, ‘I want you to do your work—come and sit here, you’re not doing anything.’

Sonya is still hijacked by the most confident children; the most crowded girls’ table is now distracted and chatting, and Phil admonishes them by name. He goes over to check one girl’s work, and then returns to his spot next to AK. The two boys at AK’s table chat together, between moments of turning to their screens. AK doodles intently, in silence. Her movements are slow, almost passive, her face expressionless. She makes no eye contact with anyone else in the room. She occupies no social space, draws no attention to herself. She is well behaved. At 9.30 when I leave to visit another class, AK still hasn’t written anything, and no one has spoken to her.

Later, I interview Phil. The stern front has vanished, and he is keen to talk about how he has been getting the children to produce some writing, and particularly how he uses various technologies, which is the focus of the research project I’m ostensibly gathering data for. He presents as conscientious and thoughtful, making an effort to apply what he understands as the standard techniques for teaching children to read and write, while being adventurous in bringing new technology into the classroom. We come round to talking about the range of children in the class, and I mention my observation that some of the children in the group appear to be academically at odds with the rest of the group—‘Like,’ I venture, ‘I noticed a little Aboriginal girl who didn’t look like she could write much—you know, the one seated next to you for some of the lesson.’

‘Oh yes,’ he says immediately, ‘that’s Sheree.’

‘What’s her background then?’

‘Oh well,’ he says, ‘she has really no English. She’s from out bush somewhere, can’t remember where. So the ESL specialist does her best working with her a couple of times a week, but she can’t really join in with the rest of the class when she has so little English.’

This account of a morning in Phil’s classroom is reconstructed from notes I took as data on a research project to record how different forms of technology were being used in classrooms. I had approached this task by attempting to enact the role of neutral observer, aiming initially for objective descriptions of what was happening. These observations were then to be enriched by

the accounts that the teachers gave me in interview. I was not there to judge 'good teacher' or 'bad teacher'; clearly in my mind I had to write what I saw, no more and no less. The primary research question seemed a very simple one: how was the use of various technologies being enacted in classrooms, and did these enactments have any effect on what children learned and the way they were learning? My observations were framed by the competing sets of beliefs or discourses about technology and schooling. Hence, I was primed to look for instances of what Bigum (1998) has called 'booster' and 'critical' discourses. In 'booster' discourses there is an assumption that children will learn more and better with the help of technology. In 'critical' discourses on the other hand, the technology can be constructed as effecting patterns of access and disadvantage in schooling and even exacerbating existing inequalities. Critical discourses also create space for observing that many educators construct technology as neutral, or 'just a tool', and so teachers and others may implicitly assume that the way they use technology has no effect on problems of access or equity in their classrooms.

Using these discourses, I might have woven a number of stories around the account that I have related above. I could have built a story about children working at their own pace, some of them successfully. I might have noted that it seemed more satisfying for these successful children to work with laptops at their table than to write by hand or on an old desktop computer in the corner. I might also have explored the point in the lesson when the technology became sidelined in my attention, and I became more interested in the social space of this classroom. I could have pursued the idea that for the more gregarious children in the class the pedagogical goals had become subsumed for social goals: the laptops enabled a little hub for those girls who were already socially engaged with one another. At the same time the technological orientation of the lesson completely marginalised the child who could not produce the 'ticket' to a laptop, a piece of draft writing. So this child was able to participate in neither the lesson goals nor the social interactions.

Assuming another perspective, I could also have followed Bigum's (1998) use of Actor-Network-Theory (Latour, 2005) to create a story that takes into account the participants, or 'actors', in this lesson, both animate and inanimate. As well as the teacher and the children, the tutor, and the (non-present) ESL specialist, the actors included the laptop computers, the curriculum and the teaching approach (in this case the received way of teaching writing as dominated by a long drafting process). My conversation with Phil after the lesson shed more light on how these actor/participants interacted. Phil's thinking was framed by his approach to teaching writing and by how he interpreted the demands of the curriculum. In Phil's mind, his ability to cater for the needs of different children in his class was limited and needed to be supported by others; and bringing AK to a point where she could participate was a responsibility that had to be shared with others. There was a sense of 'sorry', or 'regret' that this should be so, and a kind of empathy for the child's circumstances, but the teacher did not see himself as the sole responsible agent. The 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of this position is not at issue here. The point is that the classroom was not the only locus or institution which impacted on AK's exclusion; far from it. I might also have considered the role of AK herself in the scenario, noting that she did not need to be constructed as a passive participant. While her inability to pursue the academic goals of the lesson was not of her making, her act of silence and averted gaze cast her with her own agency, as a conscious outsider.

However these stories might have been spun, the task of creating them would fundamentally have been an optimistic one, because the big underlying assumption of such ethnographic storytelling is that it can and will be used to make things better, and that the writing of these vignettes will somehow, at some time and at some point of intervention in the educational system, help teachers teach more effectively.

The problem was that my moment of noticing AK under the table created a feeling in me that was not optimism, but something more akin to melancholy. This in turn fed into a sense of indignation that threatened to falsify my non-judgmental observer's role. And from removed onlooker I became embroiled in a sentient participation.

Here is my double vision. On the one hand, I was juggling ways of seeing schooling and the participants in this classroom to form a coherent story. On the other hand, I found myself beleaguered by an emotional response to the social dynamics of the lesson that felt illicit and highly disconcerting. It was more than the classic ethnographic tension between external detachment and intersubjectivity; and it extended far beyond thinking about how the teacher or students might be feeling, which had been comfortably within my neutral observer's brief. The shift in frame that came from my own feelings was qualitatively different, and it felt like it had no place in what I had imagined would be the sanctioned ethnographic account. Rather, the emergent account was one that would need to carry my affective response as a new participant in the lesson scenario.

Recognising this disconcertment makes me think about where my feelings—of sadness, and that a moral wrong has been committed—should be directed and given form. Normally the feelings can't be voiced. Observing lessons and then criticising teachers in particular is actually a kind of taboo; one cannot ethically accept a teacher's generous open door, and then slam what they do. To allow anything other than a neutral description to surface is not only to damage trust, it is also to betray the assumption that it is most certainly wrong to dump the failure of an entire education system on individual teachers.

So my emotional response is itself frustrated. As a phenomenon without legitimate expression, it becomes a shifting thing that flits about looking for the next level of blame. I don't want to fix on Phil, so my indignation shifts to the principal, the ESL teacher, any participant with agency who seems to have power and appears to make moral choices.

In its confusion, my emotion both avoids and clashes with the taboo of breaking confidence. It briefly finds refuge in the disinterested task of analysing the system, the better to identify the whole structure of disadvantage. But it struggles to escape the role of observer-in-judgement and my sense of admonishment that someone should speak to the child under the table.

The disconcertment has prised open my neutral ethnographer's role, leaving me incapable of dealing with what has emerged from the written account, and incapable of standing apart from it. I am left wondering about the possibility of an emergent response, and how it needs to be crafted. Perhaps it needs to be invitational in nature, premised on an ethnographic task

that is fundamentally collaborative, in which observations are simply the starting point for the representation of many viewpoints and targets of action. In the end, the double vision leaves us all with questions of how we go about seeing the disadvantage in a system, and to whom we direct our empathy and our sense of blame.

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Talking home and housing: The ethnographer brought back down to earth

Michael Christie

The interview

As soon as Miḍiku picked up the phone, I began to feel that this telephone interview was not going to be very helpful. For a start, she refused to speak English, even though I told her that Matt was with me doing the interview, and he didn't speak *Yolŋu matha*. I had known her for forty years, she had never spoken a word to me in English, and she wasn't going to start now. Then for every question I asked, she launched into a long story involving people and places I know which linked me in as someone from her family which had 'adopted' me, but still seemed on the whole to be irrelevant to the research at hand. While listening to her stories I thought about all the work to be done transcribing and translating the interview and sifting through to find out what might be relevant to our research on Housing Reference Groups.

Matt was the co-researcher and we had already interviewed 12 other people for this ARC project, but all in English, and they had all more or less given us straight answers to straight questions. Our research was to do with consultations for public housing in Aboriginal communities, and we had talked to people from the very remote desert, from 'town camps' and from the coastal 'Top End' of the Northern Territory. Here we were in Darwin, at my kitchen table, with Miḍiku hundreds of kilometres away on an island in the Arafura sea, talking on the phone. When I asked (in English) about how the members of her housing reference group communicated information from government to the rest of the community, she told a story about the previous night: about having to make a visit to people on the other side of the island because her husband was busy. ('What's he got to do with it?' I thought, 'He's not on the Reference Group'). She knew that these people were part of my 'family', and we had worked with them previously negotiating access to water resources and land issues for a different government department.

She referred to their home by using the name for their clan's ancestral resting place in her low matter-of-fact voice. I felt I detected a hint of rebuke that I hadn't been back there for some years while she told me that—she mentioned their names—were happy to hear the story about the wheelchair. Which wheelchair? (I felt by now that we were seriously off the topic but at least should ask.) Then started another story about my *dhumungur* who had come home from hospital

in Darwin in a wheelchair. She referred to him only by the kinship term indicating how he was related to me, and in such a way that it would be wrong of me to ask her who exactly she was talking about. I could tell he must be the husband of one of my sisters' granddaughters, but had no idea which sister or which granddaughter.

The relevance of my unknown *dhumungur* to the ARC project came slowly clear when she started telling about working with the Community Housing Officer and the local clinic to negotiate through the Housing Reference Group. And so went on the conversation, each time a story calling up my history with the family, in response to a simple question about the work of the Reference Group.

At the end I apologised to Matt who had sat there for thirty minutes understanding nothing but my questions. I felt quickly that I hadn't really kept up with that part of my family and ashamed that I couldn't work out which *dhumungur* Midiku was referring to. I suggested to Matt that we may need to bracket off this interview from the rest of our data because it doesn't fit into the categories we wanted to work with for a report to government. But then came the uneasy feeling that we were maybe taking the wrong overall approach to the research.

The research

Matt and I were involved in an Australian Research Council funded project on sustainable housing in remote Aboriginal communities. Our small part of this major project involved interviewing people involved in the consultation and communication processes between residents of remote Aboriginal townships, and Territory Housing, a branch of the Northern Territory Government. We were interviewing public servants and Housing Reference Group (HRG) members in half a dozen communities. We had chosen Midiku's community as a Top End case study because I knew most of the HRG members, and had been working with them for many years, and could speak the local language.

HRGs advise the government on such matters as who should be allocated new houses, and whose houses should be refurbished. The houses once belonged to the community through the local Housing Association, but now they have been taken over as public housing, and belong to the Territory government. The traditional owners of the land upon which the houses are built, who used to have a key role to play in housing decisions, now have no special status. They were required to sign a lease of their land to government in order for any new housing to be built or old housing maintained. People who used to decide on allocations of housing through the old community council, now merely advise through the HRG. HRGs are subject to 'Operational guidelines' to do with the structural arrangements like membership and frequency of meetings, making clear that Territory Housing makes the final decisions on the priorities for housing. The HRGs only advise. HRG members are not paid, so it can be difficult to find candidates in each community—or a quorum for a meeting—often in places many hours drive or a plane journey from the government office. Our research was aimed at improving the effectiveness of HRGs through interviewing people at all levels of community and government, and making recommendations for changed practice.

Other researchers on this major project, looking at the physical resilience of different housing materials for example, would find interviews of little use to them. But we were interested in the ways in which people at the interface between government and community make decisions and go about their work. It is a messy project, with pressures from all directions, and we are still working to finalise it.

Bringing the ethnographer back to ground

Midiku keep telling me stories in response to quite simple questions. I felt frustrated that she was wandering off the point, using the interview time to catch me up with some of the latest developments, and gently to admonish me. Her stories were drawing me into something wider and deeper than the simple procedural matters that we wanted to address in our research. I felt compromised both as an academic researcher, and an adopted member of the *Yolŋu* community.

By starting with the story of the previous night, the HRG emerged seamlessly as part of the collective life of Midiku's community, and merely as one of the myriad configurations of people and place which make her who she is. She made clear how she was herself only invested in the HRG as part of her day to day life in the community, and this who-she-was gave her a particular authority in the matter. We find her acting on behalf of her husband, sitting with particular kinfolk, and mentioning in the midst of all the discussion, the outcomes of the HRG meeting earlier that day. To her, both the HRG and the 'community' come to life only in the work of her going to visit our relatives. The ancestral work of going on with people-places is primary. By referring to specific people and places, to which she was related, she marked her particular authority to speak about the HRG, as well as a particular way of understanding the HRG as in a sense continuous with ancestral work. Hers was not a voice from nowhere that told the facts about the HRG on this particular community, but the voice of a close relative using a conversation about housing to keep me informed about the unfolding of *Yolŋu* community life, and through that, who I was coming to be.

Having established her authority, Midiku used her stories to dissolve some of the certain categories which she could see I assumed with my questions, by making the HRG as somehow peripheral to the ongoing creative production of *Yolŋu* life. She refused to give a straight factual answer to any question because she didn't want to endorse any faulty presumption of *Yolŋu* life as being especially enabled by the institutions of government. To tell a story was a polite way of giving me a very generative answer while still subverting my presuppositions. Her story allowed her to ignore or unsettle the *a priori* integrity of the HRG and its positioning as the primary vehicle for productive negotiations over housing, and to present as emergent the ongoing engagement of bureaucrats and community members working together, sometimes productively, sometimes acrimoniously, sometimes consistently with the proper outworking of *Yolŋu* life.

By telling a personal story of the traditional owners and the wheelchair, she spoke of the HRG not as a formally constituted organisation, but as a group of individuals connected to the community by kinship, an ethics of care and concern, respect for traditional owners, and regular visits to each others' camps, making housing decisions work in spite of rather than because of bureaucratic ministrations.

She could tell by my attempts to be businesslike (talking English, telling her about the consent form, arranging payment) that I was in a sense representing or reproducing that sort of governmentality, so she quietly but firmly exposed some leakages in my categories. The formal structure of the HRG notwithstanding, she made clear that the effective decisions on the ground were being made by people not formally part of the group (her husband, the landowners, for example) for the benefit of people not primarily part of the government's concern (my 'granddaughter', the wife of my *dhumungur* in the wheelchair, for example).

Now, having established her authority and revealing the HRG to be an outcome rather than a cause of working together, she took the opportunity to tell the whole-of-community story. Here, she used her stories to subsume the agency of the HRG in the wider agency of the unfolding of *Yolŋu* life and place in good faith. She subverted the idea that the HRG was a new and isolated institution in community life, something put in place to solve a problem which couldn't be solved by traditional means. To her the HRG was just another way of talking about and formalising ongoing work of making community life together with an increasingly authoritarian government. Her story enabled her to continue identifying and articulating alternative connections, while joining up a current problem with an ancestral imperative to do with land and kin with which she knew I was familiar.

For example, even if it is quite clear in the 'operational guidelines' that the traditional owners of the land on which stands the community have no special status in HRGs, she made clear to me that she saw it as her responsibility to keep them informed and active, and her matter of fact telling made it clear that she assumed that I would see it that way too. If the land owners weren't kept informed of what was happening, there was a danger that they may (again) refuse permission for access to the water. Her story subtly made clear that it was important that the traditional owners receive a visit, membership of the HRG and 'operational guidelines' notwithstanding. Everyone knew that Territory Housing had withdrawn the decision-making power from the traditional owners and the HRGs on the grounds that they couldn't be relied upon to take into account the special needs of particular families referred to them by the Department of Health, for example. She wanted to make clear that the traditional owners were happy that the young man had been allocated a house, because he was in a wheelchair and his wife is finding it hard. She was demonstrating to me that the HRG members do important, often unseen work which keeps traditional authority alive. She had gently, subtly reopened the closed questions of the rights of traditional owners, the complexity of their representation, the fluid nature of authority (between herself and her husband for example), and the ongoing concern of senior cultural authorities to do the right thing by people in need. She probably was only vaguely aware if at all, of the operational guidelines governing her membership, and it was clear to me that they were by no means operational.

Not only do the traditional owners need to be kept in the loop, but so do other potentially affected people. For example the owners of the land where the water bores supply the townships need to be consulted. She made clear that affected people need to be spoken to directly and immediately and by people connected to them in appropriate ways. She made clear that the housing officers who work with the health professionals to prioritise people with special needs need not and should not exclude traditional owners and elders from decision making on the grounds that they may

not make the best decisions. On the contrary, the only just and workable decisions would need to involve them. And she made clear that communications with the community were made by individual HRG members acting as responsible kin (rather than *ex officio*) to redress a lamentable situation where the exclusion of traditional owners as a special category of the HRG membership seriously undermines the ongoing governance of people and places.

The ethnographer refleshed

Midiku hadn't deliberately set out to establish herself as a particular sort of cognitive authority who would undermine my received categories, and hugely complexify the field of research. But she had deliberately set out to implicate me in the research in a new way.

She used her stories to make sure that I understood myself to be special part of the collective action of negotiating good housing in her community. She made clear that an honourable *Yolŋu* system of care and concern continues to be at work in spite of rather than because of the efforts on the part of Territory Housing to make HRGs accountable. Some way into the conversation, it became clear to me that the visit the night before had nothing particular to do with the HRG—but provided the opportunity for furthering its work—integrated with the ongoing and ancient business of building community life together. Referring to my *dhumungur*, she implied that she was undertaking the negotiation partly on my behalf, and for my benefit. The HRG is effective only insofar as it is part of the ongoing work of keeping people and country alive by responsible action, and Midiku made clear that this was my problem as much as hers. The storytelling process locating authority, dissolving received categories and forging new connections can be seen as a critical form of truth telling, participating in collective action, working a metaphysics of emergence.

The knowability and vitality of the world is preserved and renewed by the creative acts of storytelling. This is not denying historical truth, but revealing its epistemic conditions and the special epistemic work of storytelling. Being active and aware, and bringing people and ideas together produces a flourishing world. It subverts and negates the proposition, implicit in the HRGs and in fact our research project, that the past was chaotic, the present difficult, but the future can be good, if we work together to adopt a more focused instrumental approach to housing. Storytelling, Midiku made clear, brings the past and present together in new ways for working on the fraught questions of housing in crowded communities. She refused through her storytelling to become intelligible to the categories of my research, but implied and performed an always ongoing solution to such intractable problems.

By telling this story about stories I can begin to think through where I should be going as an academic researcher with a commitment to community. Midiku turned a research interview into a chat, catching me up on relatives I knew (or should have known) and their relation to place and to history. In doing that she was making me into a different sort of researcher, one who was unable to stand aside as a 'professional stranger'. In her world, there is no such thing as a professional stranger which is why as a young teacher, I was 'adopted' into her family when I first arrived on the island 40 years ago.

How do I take seriously her vision of the work of the Housing Reference Group? First by remembering that the real Housing Reference Group is an effect of the collective action on the part of many *Yolŋu* (members and non-members) and bureaucrats (on the ground and in the office) and others beside. While the bureaucrats may see the HRG as a solution to a difficult problem, I was encouraged to see it as a framework imposed from outside which nonetheless could be taken up by *Yolŋu* in good faith as a small instrument in the work of going on together. There is much that Territory Housing could do to facilitate this, but it would require some fundamental changes. For me as a researcher Miḍiku's story became a lesson in minding that I do the theory of postcolonial research, as I struggle with the practice of working two worlds honestly, openly and in good faith. In her warm flat voice Miḍiku was telling me that there aren't two separate worlds—one of my research and one of Aboriginal daily life. In our conversation, Miḍiku and I were each refigured in relation to the public problem of Aboriginal housing. She had to remind me.

We still haven't finalized our draft research report but I have some urgent background research to do on the *Yolŋu* side, and some serious thinking about my work as a researcher to do before I can sit down in good faith with Miḍiku to talk it through with her.

The dead as participants: challenged by the *Yolŋu* Aboriginal child learner at Gāṅgaṅ

Helen Verran

Wurran, the black-legged crane, is painted on the outer east-facing wall of the school building at Gāṅgaṅ. Its wings are outspread; its head atop the long neck turned to one side. Many of the children who learn in this building are wurran; maybe this is their mother-place. South west from Nhulunbuy, it takes about half an hour in a light plane to get to Gāṅgaṅ. Gāṅgaṅ is in the homeland of my mothers' clan. Years ago I was adopted into the Marika clan, as part of being put on-notice that the work I was about to undertake as a teacher-educator and mathematics curriculum developer involved learning to be subject to, as much as teaching/learning/being what the subject is. On this visit I was to learn that in the past, my lot, Australians of Anglo descent, had taken a fatal interest in this new family of mine. I was to experience profound disconcertment over what is considered proper as the content of a junior primary school reading primer. This had me seriously reconsidering the role of the dead in curriculum and its development, and the agencies of objects in the *Yolŋu* world. The numbers of a new maths curriculum, the dead of Gāṅgaṅ, the problem-solving figure of the teacher educator/curriculum developer, the children who live happily in the present at Gāṅgaṅ... all suddenly seemed on a par, mixing up together in the same cultural space. I could no longer find a basis for discerning what entities I was supposed to know and how. I did not even know what to do with the befuddled wonderment that assailed, me sitting there, silent on the verandah.

I have arrived in Gāṅgaṅ along with *yapa* (sisters) who are teachers. We've come, together with other gurrutu, (kin folk from other clan groups), other teachers, both *balanda* and *Yolŋu*, for a workshop. We are involved in negotiating means for incorporating *Yolŋu* knowledge into the curriculum of *Yolŋu* schools. We see ourselves as working at a fundamental level thinking about how the logic of the *Yolŋu* world can be expressed in classroom lessons, connected to but also separated from the Western logic of the orthodox primary school curriculum. We are making what we call a *Garma* curriculum. From a *Yolŋu* point of view this involves negotiating in particular places at particular times with particular people present. We were told by elders to call such negotiations *Galtha Rom* workshops. We began with the maths curriculum. The new curriculum has at its core the insight that the property of recursivity is shared by the numbers of Western maths and the elements of gurrutu, the formalised *Yolŋu* kinship system. Although their lessons have been informed by this thinking for only a few months, already children in Yirrkala school

are scoring better in the Territory-wide tests that have recently been instituted in the Northern Territory school system.

Buildings of corrugated iron sheets held up with bush timber flank the airstrip. A teacher from the school meets the plane, and accompanying us on the walk to the school building he tells us that these buildings were retrieved from the first Gāngan settlement established in 1970, over there to the west, closer to the river. They were moved when the airstrip was built, east-west across a small rise. Houses with sand verandahs face outwards from the communal shower and telephone box. The Telecom logo seems oddly out of place—so orange. Set on a small hummock over to our right and behind us as we walk, screened by bushes, a steel tower with its dish and an array of solar panels. The light green colourbond school buildings face each other across a wide connecting verandah where we'll sleep. It funnels the breeze into the classrooms through open louvers. As we select our sleeping positions a young woman, mother for me, promises that tomorrow she will show me country.

At smoko the next day the plane brings more visitors. Aboriginal teacher education students in their final year of training have come to observe our workshop; Tiwi, Warlpiri, and Goulburn Island people. After lunch we visit the lagoon, seemingly the centre of life in Gāngan, a wide deep waterhole where the sweet fleshed baypinja (saratoga), lungfish and large barramundi live. We strangers all wade in along with the children. Our hosts don't, and we are teased. When our sweat, the sweat of strangers, is carried downstream, a tremendous storm will blow in—the place is cared for in that way. We impetuous visitors retreat back to the edge, and to no-one's surprise a storm does blow in later in the afternoon, whipping the sheets of butchers paper on and through which our negotiations are being conducted off the wall where they've been secured with masking tape.

Work is done for the day. I am trailing behind a mother of mine from another clan; I have learned to call her *Nāṅdi*. She's someone I know well since I've worked with her in the past. She's head teacher of the homelands schools collective. I hurry and stumble in an effort to catch-up without shouting for her to slow down. She has set out with the serrated bread knife, and I have little notion of what she is looking for. I'm curious. I want to call out, but I'm worried about the sounds that will emerge from my mouth. I so easily embarrass myself when I try to talk. I rehearse softly as I hurry along, and at last feel able to sing out. With some relief I hear approximately the right sounds emerge; she turns and slows her pace.

We are looking, I am told, for a particular sort of small tree whose inner bark is stripped off and used for making a particular sort of string. Near the bottom of the airstrip mother *Nāṅdi* dives into the bushes and the bread knife becomes an axe to cut down three sturdy sticks about a metre long. As thick as a child's wrist they are full of sap, and surprisingly heavy and pleasant to handle. Seated back amongst the others around the fire, the stick ends are bruised and the bark frayed and stripped. The perfectly white and naked sticks are discarded, flung aside. Later these become crutches in the hands of a young girl, causing laughter as she imitates one of the teachers who

years ago lost a leg to leukemia. They look a most satisfying toy and I feel an odd surge of envy for the child both for having such toys and for being so embedded, so respected it seems, in her family.

Several of my mothers separate the inner and outer barks, then using the back of an axe head—awkwardly for she is sitting and the axe is heavy—one of them crushes the inner bark against a flat stone, cring.... cring.... cring.... Later my brother uses the same axe head to straighten the bread knife, re-flattening the serrations. Among the group of women, mothers and sisters I sit and separate out the flattened bark into strips—so satisfying to sit with bundles of fibres growing in one's lap. But of course not all bundles are equal. Some are regular in width and length, in other bundles, like the one in my lap, the fibres are ragged and lumpy. Accreting the bundles is enough for most of us, satisfying our enthusiasm for handcraft. I watch as the more determined and the more skilled produce fine string by rubbing two fibres on their thighs. I don't try. I know from experience that I'll get a chaffed and sticky thigh and lumpy useless string.

Young men walk by in single file calling out and being called to. They carry coloured creels of fishing line on their heads, baypinṅa swinging from their hands. Later two girls hand over plump parcels of thick moist paper-bark tied neatly with strips of banana leaf. Baypinṅa steamed over a slow fire. The parcels are still warm, the flesh is firm, white, and sweet. We all end up with sticky fingers.

As promised, my young plump mother shows me country. The *yati* (ceremony ground) with its huge tree, the river. About halfway along the lagoon we visited at lunchtime we stop at a sandy spot, naturally clear of bush, dominated by a large, shady fruiting tree. 'It was through there', my mother indicates, 'Along that rise you see there across on the other side of the lagoon, that Bilarni (Bill Harney) and his men rode'. She points back towards the *yati*, 'All the men were doing men's business, way back there...' This is the story of a 1920s massacre in which the Dhalwaṅu clan was very nearly wiped out; from which today it still struggles to recover. As she goes on, tears begin to stream down my cheeks, quite unbidden. The place becomes its history. My young mother gestures, making a map of the horror, pointing out the landscape features that had their place in the killing, the dying, the surviving. The hollow water lily stems through which some of those who take to the water breathe; the huge rotting log behind which the rifle shooters kneel; the trees behind which the Dhalwaṅu men stood as they prepared to throw their spears. The shots crack noiselessly around me. Invisible children fling themselves into the water as it remains undisturbed. The young woman, member of my adoptive mother clan, becomes a distressed crane, dragging her broken legs, furrowing the sand we stood on.

Later back at the schoolrooms, my guide goes into the teachers' store room and brings me a small green covered booklet. The story she has told me has been written down in both Gumatj and English. It has gruesome amateurish line drawings illustrating it.

All the men were at a private ceremony site in the bush nearby. The children and women were at the camp. The other women and children had gone gathering yams, berries, goannas, and freshwater turtles.

None of them knew that a party of men with guns were riding towards the camp on horses. They were led by Bill Harney, a yellafella from the Roper River area. The armed band of men rode into the camp and shot the older women. The men heard the shot[s] from their gathering spot and ran to see what was happening at the camp. There they saw their wives being shot dead so they attacked the killers with their spears. The rifles were too much for the spears and they were driven back to a large lagoon nearby. Some of the men who went in the water were shot and killed.

Meanwhile other women were shot and killed at the camp. Some escaped with their children, where they were joined by the men who escaped. The other young women, children and men were captured by [the] men. Bodies were lying everywhere. Those in the bushes watched as Bill Harney and his men started their journey back, taking with them the captives, back the way they had come from.

That was not the end of the story though, Bill Harney returned the next year and collected the skulls of the people he had murdered. He later sold them to a museum in southern cities and made a lot of money (Yunupingu, 1981).

When I'd finished reading this small book, my young guide, a teacher at Gängaṅ school, mentioned that among the children it was one of the most popular reading primers, even though they, as a homelands school, did not have a bilingual program. 'It's taught so many children to read English!' she enthused.

The odd bodily feeling of profound wrongness which that remark evoked in me is certainly the most vivid memory I retain of that maths curriculum workshop. Many years later I still puzzle over that bodily felt disconcertment on being told that the story of a massacre is enthusiastically used as a text in a primary school reading programme.

Predictably, I had cried when faced with the place of a massacre, I was strongly affected by words uttered and gestures enacted in a place where years ago entire families had been slain. It was around the time my mother was born as the very first Australian in my family, setting her apart from her Scottish brother. It is not unexpected that on experiencing something of the rich family life within which children grow up in *Yolŋu* homelands I feel delight, and even an odd sense of envy, remembering my own lonely growing up in a family almost destroyed by the experience of emigration. Perhaps I should be sceptical about the veracity of reports of skulls being sold to museums after a massacre in the twentieth century, although it had certainly occurred often in earlier times. These are emotional responses expected of anybody. So too perhaps is the upset over hearing that a reading primer which matter-of-factly relates a massacre that occurred at a place almost within sight of the school, is a favourite of children, highly instrumental in their learning to read.

But there seems at first to be a difference in this latter episode of upset. This disconcertment concerns the professional educator. It arises from within the circuit of the professional work I was in Gängaṅ to do, whereas the other emotional responses do not concern the professional. But

is that a valid separation? Surely the point of my being taken to meet the dead of Gāṅgaṅ means that they too must find a place inside the new maths curriculum alongside the numbers that have already been unsettled by being rendered just another instantiation of recursion, and now must be further disturbed by those dead at the hands of men, who no doubt had numbers as their familiars.

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Paper work

Anthea Nicholls

The story I am about to tell takes place in a small town in a remote part of Australia known as Arnhem Land, in the NE of the Northern Territory, home of the Indigenous *Yolŋu* people. Each of these towns is more commonly referred to as an 'Indigenous Community', a term which tends to overlook their diverse constitution of *Yolŋu* peoples brought together by the outworking of many, often external agencies. They are also the home of numerous *balanda*, the non-Indigenous people who work here as teachers, nurses, tradespeople, bookkeepers and managers of the various Western institutions which are integral players in these towns: the town council, the school, the clinic, the store. In this story I am at the Women's Centre, where local women are employed by the council to work with and support other women in the town. I used to be a teacher in the school, but at this time I am a researcher, an ethnographer with a particular interest in how computers are getting on in this town, as some of its newest and most surprising residents.

It's 10.00 am and I'm sitting at a desk in a small besser brick building equipped with several of these desks, some air cons, a scattering of children's toys, several unused sewing machines and here on the desk, a computer. There is a lull in the usual morning frenzy of requests for help with transferring money between bank accounts and as I push back my chair I see several pieces of blank A4 paper on the floor. Blank paper can be rare here so I reach to pick it up, but as I go to discard the one on top with a foot print, I see it isn't blank paper; on the other side there is the imprint of a brief form: a place to write one's name, bank account number and address and another place for two signatures. They are blank forms but one signature is already in place, with the tell-tale suggestion of photocopied biro.

I sort of smile inside as I tear the papers up and put them in the bin. I know the signature. I know why it's there, even though in the past I have torn up these sheets in front of people, saying, 'This is illegal. We can't do this. This person is signing to say, that they know this (other) person. They are who they say they are.' ('I am an approved elder of this community. You have my name on a list and here is my signature!') But still I find these photocopied forms on the floor and in the desk drawer.

I have been here on other days when these pre-signed forms haven't appeared, when people have gone off on long trips on foot across a hot dusty town in 90% humidity to get that legal signature. I've done a fair bit of that trudging myself, and seen something of what people are doing when they aren't making their way around our hot town. Yes, there's a great deal of resting to be done in these conditions, but there are also kids to feed, shopping and washing, vehicles to repair, the current funeral to attend (every evening for a week). And I've been here long enough to realise that this

is only the visible tip of the huge busy-ness of living as part of a town where everyone is related to everyone else, where obligations, ceremonial and mundane, are real and must be worked. So when I've seen the photocopied forms I've felt sympathetic. And yet still justified. After all, we (us people, the forms, the signatures, the fax machines and the people at the bank who will receive the signatures) are all behaving *legally*.

As I turn away from the bin where the shredded forms are settling in with other papers clearly displaying people's names, their bank account numbers and signatures—discarded once the transaction is over and the importance of the paper has been replaced by the prospect of the money waiting at the store—I glance at some papers on the other desk. They are time sheets, for this week. The one on top has already been filled out and it says that this person (whom I haven't seen today) has been here from 8.30 to 12.30. It has been signed and now the form is awaiting another signature, that of the workplace supervisor, the worker's older sister.

I know these sisters. I have known them for years. I've sung Christmas carols in *Yolhu* Matha from old missionary hymnals on a rug outside their house on Christmas Eve. I've been to heartbreaking funerals where the older sister is a lay preacher and her gentle Christian sermons at the graveside have somehow integrated themselves into the week's grieving through traditional dance, song, clapstick and *didgeridoo* and the ancient ritual of throwing oneself on the ground, beating oneself with rocks.

I've spent hours with these sisters, too, pouring over computer screens, trying to solve the problems of old computers mixed with our inadequate computer skills. We are really fond of each other and call each other *ηama* and *waku*. I'm a mum to them. They are my 'daughters'. Now the smile inside me turns to a sort of ache. I really feel like a parent now.

The feeling is like a stop. It elicits a memory of something I read in a journal of the Danish Philosopher, Kierkegaard. He wrote that he knew what it felt like to be a chess piece when someone says, 'This piece cannot be moved.' I even notice that I can picture the place on the page where it says this in my copy of the book.

It intrigues and comforts me. But why should I need comforting?

I have just the language for describing this moment. It is the language of a world where humans are paramount in all things: their needs, their explanations and their virtues. But curiously, while humans are paramount and distinct from things, they need things to maintain this distinction; specifically things called numbers and written words. And paper is very useful for keeping these in place, especially certain types of names, called signatures, and special kinds of numbers called time and money, and special kinds of paper, called books; places from which the words of a philosopher, a wise person, can be revived and performed. (I'm turning to the paperwork inside me to find a response to the paperwork on the floor.) I've done my homework; I know that something as fragile as paper can only hold the world in place because of another sort of work which has been done, translating that world into a sort of office (Latour called it a laboratory) where words and

numbers, diagrams and tables can represent us all: people and land masses, creatures and feelings, relationships and acts. It's the recognisable work of scientists and bureaucrats and the kind of world that certain kinds of moralists love. In it there are recognisable 'marks', completely mobile and translatable, by which we can judge the ethics of others. Standing by my *waku's* desk in her workplace I understand these moves. But I know I am in trouble. Like the chess piece I feel I can't make any of my normal moves.

I do have, however, another resource, another familiar set of vocabulary to help me. It's the language of relativity, of Olivier de Sardan's 'social logic'... of 'walking a mile in their shoes'. I know I haven't moved from my humanist, protagonist, stand point, and I have an uneasy feeling I should have, but by now I am enchanted by my understanding. Aren't my sisters acting in good faith, keeping the community running, keeping the money flowing, keeping the signatures coming? It's a different approach to doing the world but this is a very different place. Surely this way of thinking should mitigate my disconcertment.

But it doesn't. Instead I find myself caught in a powerful dualism. It's an either/or description of the situation in which I am left having to choose, having to flip-flop between worlds. Or rather, the signatures have made me a split personality: both *ηama* and mother.

The effort tires me so I sit down in the empty room, trying to access more familiar paperwork. If I recognise this stop for what it is, or rather, for what it can be, I see it as the apporia, Appelbaum's 'moment of poise', which he says, offers a choice (Appelbaum 1995, p. xi). But it is *choice* which flaws me, which produces this enervation. It seems to be a choice between parent or *ηama*; the parent who knows what's right in the *balanda* world, because it enables banks to do what they do well, which *Yolju* want them to do, or the *ηama* who is starting to belong because she has been taken by the hand into a world of new relationships, understandings, obligations and challenges, including the challenge which is experienced by each *Yolju*, of living as a member of a large family, in houses designed for a few people, in conditions of extreme heat and humidity.

But if I take up Appelbaum's challenge (albeit sheltering in air conditioning) I have to accept that *choice* is inevitable, and that maybe the choice is between dualism and something else. In particular, I need a way that might take us all forward, and not just me. I am aware of another way of thinking which I can also access through my internal paperwork. It's couched in the language of the Actor Network Theory (ANT) writers. It is particularly relevant at this moment in my disconcertment because these writers have made it very explicit, that their first movement (in being true to ANT) is to reject dualisms. They reject them as something given, as places to start out from. Their second move is, as they put it, to follow actors: all the characters in the drama of the worlds we inhabit and seek to understand, and to watch what they are up to. Their third move is to describe what is happening in terms of these actions, which the ANT writers call 'translations'. They are teaching us to use a language free of its former associations, its imbedded dualisms: not active humans and passive things, moral *balandas* and struggling *Yolju*, just actors, involved in transitions. I've been following these particular actors (the ANT writers) for some time and so I am familiar with something they have noticed in their own long histories of following all sorts of actors, in both the

developed and developing worlds. Latour said it this way, making up a word to help us understand his point. He says, that if we look this way, none of the actors in a particular network of connected translations,

... ever think either illogically or logically, [morally or immorally] but always sociologically; that is they go straight from elements to elements until a controversy starts. When this happens they look for stronger and more resistant allies, and in order to do so, they may end up mobilizing the most heterogeneous and distant elements, thus mapping for themselves, for their opponents, and for the observers, *what they value most, what they are most dearly attached to* (Latour 1987, p.205, interpolation and emphasis mine).

I watch myself this way, sitting by my *waku's* desk. I am attached to the network of innumerable translations that have made me who I am. I am imbedded in a world which translates itself into numbers and signatures at the hint of a controversy (numbers and signatures mobilizing heterogeneous and distant elements). But I sense my *waku* and I know she is doing exactly the same thing, and in the process mapping for herself, for her opponents, and for her observers, *what she values most, what she is most dearly attached to*.

This feels like the same thought I had several minutes ago, but in this moment of tension, something breaks. This is not (or doesn't have to be) a reversion to the choice which has just been paralysing me, because the dualism has gone. My *waku* and I are doing the same thing. By mapping for ourselves what we value most, what we are most dearly attached to, we find ourselves in different worlds, overlapping and contradictory, but we perform these worlds in exactly the same manner. We always had the opportunity for understanding, and for dialogue based on understanding, but there is something new here. Where we tried to understand each other's worlds from two different stand points, where morality (based on the testimony of marks on paper) is the domain of one and the powerful agency of kinship the domain of the other, with huge either/or choices to be made, we now have the chance to talk about morality and ethics together and the networks which perform them and the translations we need to perform together to engage in certain networks. It is a potential path forward.

I don't think it will be easy for either of us, but it is a reason for hope; it is how good faith works. As I shut the door on the cool air in the Women's Centre and head off into the heat of the town, I feel I can breathe a little easier.

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An ethnographer searching for the hybrid economy finds she's been doing it all along: Pandanus, participation and perseverance

Emily Munro-Harrison

I find walking to work in the morning is peaceful and is a good opportunity to look around town while everyone sleeps. I stroll up the red-dirt road for about 200 meters, and over the bridge spanning the small creek that runs through the middle of town. As I cross the bridge I notice wild horses standing in the creek not far from me. I cross the street, trying not to spook them. Turning left at the airport road, I walk past the childcare centre, aged-care facility, the shop, the medical clinic and the only roundabout in town (which no one adheres to). Two petrol bowsers announce the Mardbalk Art Centre and its adjoining radio broadcasting hut. Arriving out the front of Mardbalk I am greeted by one of the artists employed by the centre, and her dog Suzie, a much beloved and adored-by-all fat little dog with black fur and white whiskers. Suzie is sitting on a chair like a person. The only dingo among the domestic dogs in Warruwi is standing inside looking at me, along with the pointy nosed dog belonging to the Supervisor at the Centre, and the small, nervous looking dogs the PhD student has adopted. The rule the Shire has about no dogs in Shire buildings seems not to apply to the art centre—not that anything could be done about it if it did apply—the door to the art centre is always open and the dogs come and go as they please.

The centre is divided into five main rooms: the gallery and weaving/painting area, the screen-printing room, the small 'kitchen' and bathroom, the store room, and the only air-conditioned room, the office. In the office the manager is sitting at the desk, on the phone, staring at the computer screen—she is on hold and waiting to speak to someone about the internet connection, which is out of action, again. A blast of cool air-conditioned air washes over me. Another artist at the centre arrives, opens the office door—she checks to see if the kettle is full before switching it on.

I join the youngest artist in the centre on the couch. I guess she is about my age; she says nothing.

'How's it going?' I ask, and then remember the general response this question elicits.

'Huh?' she asks, furrowing her brow at me.

'How are you?' I try again, feeling foolish, as I have begun to learn that this kind of question is not a typical morning greeting here.

'Oh, I'm ok.' She gives me a look that tells me this is an unusual thing to enquire about. There are many times throughout the course of a day that this kind of interaction occurs. I try to pick up cues where I can, but I often fail—so I have been working on trying not to feel too hopeless or sensitive.

For the most part people are fairly tolerant of my well-meant blundering, but keep their distance from me and my annoying questions. My commonplace enquires that are part of my understood categorisation of 'polite greeting' and a form of social lubrication are not received as I intend them, and so far have been serving to highlight my 'not-from-here-ness'. I have started to become aware of my assumptions—the shadow of my own unconsidered knowledge and understanding of the world is becoming more visible as it reveals itself and follows me through my time in Warruwi. I know that I am doing things wrong, missing social cues and common understandings, but I don't know what exactly it is I am doing incorrectly. I find it difficult to pinpoint, I feel frustrated with myself, exasperated and disconcerted.

The women employed by the art centre trickle in across the morning, a slow and steady process involving lots of tea, biscuits and cigarettes. Eventually everyone is here, and the women sit on the ground in the gallery section of the art centre, on mats in a circle, along with the dogs, the dried pandanus, ghost nets, rope, twine, scissors and assorted other things. I position myself on the edge of the circle, and say nothing. I watch as the women make ghost net bags and sculptures. The women use synthetic twine to sew two edges of netting together, with a stitch that looks remarkably similar to crochet. The artists closest to me is making a large turtle, the woman opposite me is making a bush turkey.

I pick up a piece of ghost net and feel its salt-encrusted roughness, I examine the discoloration at the ends of the net, where the green has faded almost to white due to the sea, salt and sun. The turtle being made to my right is from the same netting I am examining. The younger artist points to a section of the turtle and the artist I am sitting next to nods, they don't say anything.

Ghost nets are ropes and nets discarded from fishing boats around the north of Australia, and from places further north, like Indonesia. These nets tangle and kill sea animals, and wash up on beaches. Finding another use for them is a positive step in reducing the damage they do to the coastline in the north of Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Rangers across the north coast of Australia have removed over 8,000 ghost nets to 2012 (Ryan, 2012). The GhostNets Australia programme is managed by the Northern Gulf Resource Management Group and is funded by the Federal Government and by sponsorships and donations.

The ghost net too has a story... For years it can travel across different oceans carried by currents, waves and wind. Frayed by the giant washing machine sea, encrusted in barnacles and seaweed, within it entangled bleached bones and living things, Taiwanese

toothbrushes, the odd children's toy, lures, floats and driftwood, it eventually heads for the coast. Rangers or community people find it and pick it up or dig it out of the sand, put it in a dinghy or in the back of a ute, take it to town. Hands form it into a new object and that object has its own story. It has been places, it tells the whole ghost net story, the community's story, the artist's story. That one object made by those hands contains it all (Ryan, 2012).

The use of ghost nets as a fibre for weaving and producing artworks is a form of environmental management. Some of the Community Development Employment Program work that occurs includes the collection of ghost nets from the shores of Goulburn and surrounding islands. Using this waste material to make art to sell to a wider audience is an exercise in up-cycling and is contributing to the maintenance of the shorelines and the revenue of the art centre and individual artists' incomes. It is evident that this practice is an embodiment of a hybrid economy—which is why I am here—and what I am supposed to be looking for in my research. I'm working as a volunteer in the art centre as part of the research. Producing art using ghost net materials is an adaptive exercise in ingenuity; an example of the taking up of new technologies by remote communities. Employees of the NGO GhostNets Australia have visited several Top End communities to introduce the use of this material into art practice. They recently visited Warruwi and spent some time with the artists at Mardbalk running weaving workshops, which were clearly a success.

The only male artist employed by the centre greets me by nodding. I am pleased and surprised and smile in response.

'Why aren't you joining in?' He asks—making a sewing gesture. I am taken unaware by this question and make some meek noises of protest.

'I'm happy just watching,' I say. He doesn't take no for an answer.

'Hey, why don't you show her how to do it?' he demands. The youngest artist looks at me, amused. The supervisor looks at me—she looks unhappy about this request and gestures to one of the other artists.

'You do it' she says loudly, pulling rank as Supervisor. Looking displeased, the woman making the turtle moves over so I can wiggle into the circle a bit more. I sheepishly gather some ghost net, and let her point to the things I already know I need—needle, twine. She doesn't actually instruct me on the technique, so I watch and copy. After a while I get it and attempt to make a bag from the ghost net. I show the younger artist the product I made when I am finished. She inspects it and laughs in a friendly way. I feel relieved.

So far, at the end of each day, when I am back at the art centre manager's donga (the temporary portable accommodation common in many remote locations across Australia), which she has kindly allowed me to stay in with her, I try to write about what I have learnt or observed—what kind of

'hybridity' I have found or have been told about. So far I have not written much. The information has not been forthcoming, and the artists don't seem to be that interested in my research.

Today though I endeavour to push through. I have decided to make the most of my time at Mardbalk, and to take part in as many activities with the artists as is possible. At around midday, everyone leaves for lunch. Later in the afternoon I will be the driver in a small expedition to get pandanus leaves, which the women use to make baskets, dilli bags, floor mats and sculptures, and which are the main product of Mardbalk. In preparation for that I look for the Esky, I fill it with ice and water and load it into the back of the four-wheel drive 'troop carrier'. In the print room I find a stash of old mailbags, which are used to carry the spikey leaves of the pandanus. Just in case, I also put in the tools for collecting roots and berries, which are used to colour the pandanus (axe, shovel and green bag).

At 2pm, I hop up into the troop carrier and drive around town looking for the artists. I can see one of the women at the shop, but I already know that she generally won't get into the car unless someone else is already there, and it's just me at the moment. She will also usually refuse if the eldest artist is in the car. I stop to ask her anyway, she shakes her head and tells me to go get someone else first. I drive to the eldest artist's house, climb down from the car, and knock on her door. Her driveway has been washed away in the wet season rains. I inspect the driveway whilst I wait for someone to open the door. Her four-year-old granddaughter opens the door.

'Is your Grandma home?' I ask. She stares back at me with giant eyes and I hear someone in the next room call out for her. The eldest artist appears at the door. She slowly lifts herself into the front seat with me; her granddaughter hops in after her and sits on her lap, staring intently at me. Her daughter and son-in-law climb in the back of the car. The seating in the troop carrier is done discretely and the care that goes into it could easily be missed. I discern that there are strict kinship rules at play here. Another artist has told me about rules that dictate where people decide to sit, and son-in-law and mother-in-law are not meant to sit next to, or interact with each other. I put the car into reverse. The two side mirrors of the troop carrier are missing so I rely on the people in the back to help me negotiate the treacherous section of driveway.

As we drive around town another couple of times, some more people get into the back of the troop carrier. I am not sure how hard to push on who should or shouldn't be coming, so every time I pick someone up I ask the people in the back if we should go yet. Often this question is followed by silence. I am asking everyone and no one in particular at once and people tend not to respond. We spend about an hour doing the rounds and picking people up. Finally I get a 'yes' so I take the one road out of town and let people tell me which way I should go.

Today we have ended up in a hot, stinky, humid clump of pandanus trees. The tall grass conceals the ankle-deep warm, slimy water and sticky mud. I wade through the grass and mud after the eldest artist, holding the mailbag for her pandanus while she carefully selects and picks the leaves she wants to take. I look around and notice that one of the women has already collected a large

amount of leaves. The eldest artist stops at a small clump of trees and uses a long stick with a hook on the end to pull down some spikey pandanus fronds. She yanks a couple of leaves from the middle of the clump, and they slide out. She inspects them carefully, discards most of them, and puts about four into the bag. I sling it back onto my shoulder the way I have seen the other women do it, and we move deeper into the bush. No words are spoken between us.

One of the women is watching me and says, 'Help the old lady.' She uses her hands to mimic the motion of pulling leaves down with a hook stick. I look at the pandanus trees, and at the eldest artist, I ask her if she wants me to try and get some for her. She looks at me strangely, but then nods and hands me her hook stick. I line myself up in front of one of the plants and try to hook the middle leaves. I am struggling. I push the stick around in the middle trying to get past some of the other leaves, and finally I manage to hook the leaves I am after. I can hear the women giggling as they watch my attempts. I am starting to get a little flustered and frustrated, I can feel sweat trickling down my back from the effort. I yank the leaves down; it takes two goes before they are in reaching distance. I try and pull out the leaves the way I have seen the women do it, but I pull the ends off the fronds. One of the women tries to help. Eventually I get enough purchase (after getting a few prickles in my hand) and manage to pull out a clump. The eldest artist inspects my handy work, and shakes her head. 'No good,' she says. I try to joke about it, and she smiles politely. We head on to another clump. One of the artists hooks her stick on a small plant and gives it a tug. The whole plant comes off the stem. Everyone laughs, the eldest artist tut-tuts, but has a smile on her face whilst she does it. I begin to feel a little more at ease.

Someone makes an executive decision—we are to go home now. Nothing is said, but everyone heads back to the troop carrier. I am not sure how everyone knows at the same time what to do, my understanding of non-verbal communication is woefully lacking here. The bags of pandanus the women have collected are neatly strewn on the ground next to the car, and I help load them into the back of the vehicle. I watch as a swollen bag is flung into the back, and someone sits on top of it. I try and slide a bag in carefully. The rest of the bags are loaded in and I jump in the front, and wait for directions. My genuine lack of directional ability is of great amusement to the women, who seem utterly perplexed by my clear affliction (perhaps as there is only one main road on the island).

As we head home, the women laugh every time I ask 'Straight ahead?' at every fork in the road. Eventually we are on the airport road, and I know where we are and how to get back to people's houses. 'I know where we are now!' I announce happily, to a roar of laughter from the back. I drop the women and their bags of pandanus leaves off at their various houses, I wave at the art centre manager who is sitting out the front of our shared donga, enjoying the cooling of the afternoon, on my way to drop off the pandanus collecting materials at the art centre.

The ethnographer in search of the hybrid economy

Professor Jon Altman has been discussing the idea of the 'hybrid economy' or a 'livelihoods approach' to economic development of Aboriginal communities for more than a decade. It is

something he recalls first becoming aware of in 1979, when undertaking his PhD research. This awareness came about when Altman noticed the centrality of the 'customary' economy in the livelihoods of the people living at the Kuninjku outstation in western Arnhem Land (Altman, 2005). Altman's hybrid economy model builds on the conventional 'state-market' or 'public-private' economy model, recognizing that there are different sectors in place across Australia. The model recognizes that there is a third sector within some Aboriginal economies, either within geographical communities, or in organisations like Mardbalk Art Centre. This third sector is what Altman terms the 'customary' economy. The customary economy is not necessarily monetized, but is based in customary modes of exchange and activity, such as hunting, fishing, gathering and cultural activities relating to country and place.

When I arrived in Warruwi to volunteer at Mardbalk Art Centre, I intended to watch the hybrid economy in action. What I found while trying to do this was very different. What I was hoping to show through my research is that there are multiple ways of being and knowing which are generally overlooked in Australian politics, in favour of a 'mainstream' mono-cultural approach to policy and economic development. This approach is dismissive and destructive of other cultures and knowledge systems, implying that there is a 'correct' way to be. A way in which I hoped to explore alternatives to this approach was through my observations of the art centre as an hybrid organisation. Although I thought I understood the general concept of the hybrid economy and hybrid organisation, I had no idea what to look for, or what kind of role I might play.

What I found was my own awkwardness. Not knowing how to interpret signals, signs and conversations. Sometimes people would tell me a story and I didn't know why, the context or what I was *really* being told. My attempts to ask questions to learn did not elicit responses that I was expecting. On reflection, I see that through my research I exposed my own organising categories, ways of understanding the world and assumptions about how to learn and seek knowledge—an ironic conclusion revealing the multiplicity of knowledge transfer, given my research topic. I wanted people to share stories with me, and I assumed the information I sought from people would be given to me in neat responses to crude and clumsy questions. Through this narrative I can see that I repeatedly stumbled over the way information is conveyed, that teaching and learning occurs without prior announcement, not in response to direct requests or demands, and that it happens in multiple, varied, and for me—unexpected ways.

When I sat down to learn how to make the ghost net bag I was instructed in a particular way about the kinds of tools I would need, and I was permitted to watch the artists as they made their various creations. I had a strong sense that I was not to ask questions, and what I was to make, and how, was up to me. I watched, I waited and then I tried out what I was seeing. When I went out into the bush to collect pandanus with the women, a couple of times I was handed things, and with non-verbal communication I was instructed to have a go. Without fail I was clumsy and failed in the things that the women made look so easy. When I asked questions as I struggled, the women looked confused by my inability to just do it. When I stopped asking, listened, and took instruction, things happened differently. I was able to collect pandanus, even if it was not the most elegant execution. I was able to take part in the circle, weaving a ghost net bag with the women.

But I had to watch myself, reflect on my own actions, and take note of things that seemed not to be well received. I felt like the unpeeling of my assumptions and acknowledgment of my ignorance or ineptitude was just the start of learning to be an ethnographer in the hybrid. It was also the start of being a hybrid ethnographer, at once observing and taking part in the activities of the art centre.

At first, when I started to recognize that my role was not as I had assumed, I tried asking questions in different ways. When this approach did not yield the information I assumed I (or indeed anyone) could know, I stopped asking questions. On reflection, I can see that I kept attempting to remove myself without realizing that I was doing it, I felt I had to be an observer of happenings within the art centre. I thought I could observe the hybridity I sought to show in my research.

When I stopped trying to capture the hybridity in text at the end of each day, and started participating in the daily life of the art centre, I started to feel more at ease, like I was a part of something. I realised that I could not separate what I was seeing and learning from what I was doing. In order to learn, I had to do. In order to be able to understand a small piece of people's daily life I had to acknowledge my disconcertment, and stop trying to gain knowledge by asking for it. I did not really start learning until I stopped talking and started 'being' a part of the art centre and the community. I could not understand until I put myself in the picture. That is where I found the hybridity.

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The generative role of narrative in ethnographies of disconcertment: Social scientists participating in the public problems of North Australia

Helen Verran and Michael Christie

Introduction

In this volume we have presented a collection of nine ethnographic narratives of disconcertment. In this concluding paper we as editors pause to reflect upon the work these stories do in the learning community of Northern Australian social scientists that emerged out of the workshop which gave rise to the stories. There we focussed on both ethnographic writing and the changing work of social scientists in the differing policy regimes that have played out in Australia's Northern Territory over the past thirty to forty years. We discussed together the ways we as social scientists, autoethnographers in the flesh in the exercise posed in the workshop, reveal new possible worlds when we (re)write ourselves as ethnographers in the text. Before we turn to considering that process we tease out a little of our theoretical background: the public problem and its participants.

Public problems in northern Australia

When we refer to public problems, we are thinking in terms conceptualised by philosopher John Dewey in *The Public and its Problems*, first published in 1927 and his only book on political theory. Dewey troubles the notion of a direct relation between publics and problems within the political sphere. By the beginning of the twentieth century, when managing complex technological problems became the role of the state, it began to seem that the roles of the public—the *demos*, the common people—had been overtaken by the technological reach of the state. Instead of directly participating in public problems, publics seemed instead to become *subject* to public problems named and defined by professionals—experts. Technocracy it seemed would inevitably replace democracy. Dewey set out to reconceptualise democratic politics to show that it can very well cope with and respond to the complex public issues that emerge in technologically sophisticated polities.

Imagining a generative relation between publics and problems, Dewey complicates the conventional understanding of causation between them. Publics, Dewey argued, are called into being by issues,

as much as issues are called into being by publics. It is not the case that in their social processes of normalising, political subjects identify problems that they demand politicians attend to. Nor is it the case that the ruling elites produce technological solutions to problems that then subject the public, forcing compliance through normalising procedures. While both those normalising forces are relevant, the relations between publics and problems is less direct than either account implies. Publics and problems co-produce each other in an 'other space'. Dewey suggested this 'other space' as a politically sensitised community which moils often inchoately around a public affair; he sees a public emergent in a sense of public crisis or tension, and on-going challenge and counter challenge in articulating the issue (Dewey, 1991, pp. 27-29). In proposing the notion of a political community Dewey was developing a notion of community as almost inadvertently clotting amongst those affected by the issue, often with disparate interests, often irreconcilably different.

Kathryn Pyne Addelson extended and elaborated Dewey's argument concerning the political community, naming his imagined 'other' space of public problems as collective public performance or enactment. In her 2002 paper (set as a reading for our workshop) she proposes public problems as the workings of an ensemble cast: 'It is the ensemble casts that determine the nature of public problems and frame the question how should we live?' (2002, p. 130). The ensemble cast of a public problem consists of subjects as much as objects: humans (professionals and activists participating alongside those who are neither), and non-humans (rules and regulations and technological objects). Raucous and quiet subjects, and virulently normalising and benign objects must mix up together with us in emergent enactment.

Our stories of disconcertment reveal the mutual emergence of both particular problems and particular publics in small fleeting moments of our everyday work as social scientists in north Australia. Our question is how to understand the agency a social scientist who has a professional engagement in this work might (or might not) have. In attending to this question we turned to the social science methodology of autoethnography, and set ourselves the task of writing ethnographies of disconcertment. We take the disconcertments which beset us as emergent from a particular sort of public problem, one in which experts (social scientists) and Aboriginal people come together and work in good faith to address Addelson's problem of How Should We Live?

What can we say about the public problems of our concern? We have picked up the theme of normalisation as a public problem from an insightful paper examining the policy shift expressed in Australia's 2008 'National Indigenous Reform Agreement' (Sullivan, 2011). Sullivan sees the new policy era as characterised by 'the intention to re-engage the state and its Indigenous peoples, and normalise their relations within their communities and with the wider population' (2011, p. 3). Noting that the current policy is not officially called normalisation, (and that the present government prefers 'closing the gap'), Sullivan insists on the term since he intuits the intention of the reform agenda as 'that Aboriginal people are [now] required to reflect socially, culturally and individually an idealised profile of the normal citizen established by the remote processes of bureaucratic public policy making' (2011, p. 3). There, in a general sense, is the underlying public problem: normalisation. We find it not only in government policy, but also all around us in our

work as social scientists. This sort of policy change implies social scientists need to be sensitised to the forces of normalisation—and how they participate in the normalisation process.

In assembling these texts as a collection for publication in the *Learning Communities Journal* our suggestion has been that one way to understand the texts as a set, is to see them as auto-ethnographic stories portraying social scientists struggling within and against particular regimes of normalisation associated with a wide range of public problems, and in the process suffering disconcertment.

Ethnographers in flesh and text

The ethnographers in the flesh, the postgraduate students, the academic teachers, and the researchers, who are all paid to do social knowledge work can, in our view, all be seen as struggling within and against particular regimes of normalisation associated with a wide range of public problems. In the processes of story telling, of making narratives about the work they do as social scientists caught up in this or that policy response to this or that problem in Indigenous communities, they emerge different, as ethnographers in the text. Unlike the actual social scientist (the disconcerted ethnographer in the flesh who in her thoughtful participation in collective action is a very specific ‘observing/observatory unit’), the ethnographer in the text is a generalised figure. The ethnographer in the text is a generalisation generated in the practices of narrative. What sort of a generalisation is this ethnographer in the text? And, as a generalised figure can she/he change anything? Does she have any potential to intervene? We suggest first and foremost that this generalised figure of the ethnographer in the text can change the ‘observatory unit’ of the actual ethnographer, the learning social scientist. The ethnographer in the flesh can learn from the ethnographer in the text. Secondly we suggest that by revealing the collective workings of public problems the ethnographer in the text also has the potential to intervene in the public problem, perhaps to loosen the ontological knot, perhaps to enlarge its ensemble cast.

In our collection of stories, what links ethnographers in the flesh and in the text? We suggest disconcertment. Through storytelling of disconcertment, the ethnographer in the flesh might be imagined as being everted to become ethnographer in the text. What is this disconcertment that we propose is inevitably experienced by the democratically inclined social scientist, especially those working in Northern Australia where involvement with Aboriginal Australian communities is common? Disconcertment is experienced as a moment of existential panic—being suddenly caused to doubt what you know. The metaphysical commitments that lurk unacknowledged in your very person as a modern knower of the social come suddenly into the foreground revealing themselves as assumptions with no possibility of warrant.

In the ethnographic writing workshop in which the pieces assembled here originate we struggled to sensitise participants to disconcertment of this sort. It can be identified as epistemic disconcertment (Verran, 2013). Verran has been noting and describing such moments of epistemic disaggregation since she first experienced it in Nigerian classrooms in the 1980s (Verran, 1999, 2001) and then later in her work with Aboriginal Australians (Verran, 1998, 2002, 2004), and has

previously suggested that its cultivation is crucial for postcolonial knowledge work (Verran, 2001, 2009, 2011). Others, too, recognise its significance in more ordinary situations (Gregory 2009, p. 265; Instone, 2010, p. 99; Law & Lin, 2011; l'Anson & Jasper, 2011).

Let us see how this works in this present collection. In our commentary below we point to the tensions created between the ethnographer in the flesh—necessarily an absent presence in the text—and the ethnographer in the text, a figure that is a very immediate presence in all the stories. Disconcertment can be construed as the name for the tension constituted in the story between the absent presence of the ethnographer in the flesh and the present presence of the ethnographer in the text. In pointing to this process in the stories collected here we emphasise the potential for learning that the storytelling has enabled, and briefly articulate what we see as having been revealed about the public problem the social scientists found themselves participating in.

Kathy McMahon and Helen Verran's stories both tell of life in a previous policy era, working within what Sullivan (2011, p. 3) describes as a 'vision of a semi-autonomous, decolonised and modernised discrete realm for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, where they would largely manage themselves in culturally appropriate ways'. Both were working, collaboratively with Aboriginal people on the local but public problem of developing 'culturally appropriate' curriculum. Both delighted in a normalising imperative coming from the elders of the Aboriginal people who had adopted them into their kinship network. Appearing as ethnographers in the text many years later, they speak of how graciously and firmly they were guided through the unthought-of processes of becoming a learner-social scientist in place. Nicholls and Campbell are (in the flesh) working in a more recent era, and now within regimes in which the normal is inscribed in the rules and processes of internet banking, and the delivery of vocational education (respectively). As ethnographers in the text, they too reveal the complex moral dilemmas which arise working in collective action between the ancestral agendas of the Aboriginal people with whom they share the public problem of remote Aboriginal community sustainability, and the banal practices by which the normalising institutions of our new governmentalities operate. Christie's humiliation at the gently admonishing hands of his adopting relation in the flesh, gives rise to a reflection in the text on collaborative research possibilities, developing a revision of the normalising drive of government-Indigenous negotiations around remote housing. The community members are all on side but clearly resist the normalising effects of the social science methodology he prosecutes through his phone interviews. He has a lot of catching up work to do at his old home community before he can help to build good collaborative ways to get (new) government and (old) community to work together. All these writers have their 'observatory unit' radically expanded (to include among other things, themselves), as (in the flesh) they struggle to write the effects of disconcertment into their texts.

Also reflecting upon her academic research in an Aboriginal context, Rachael McMahon struggles in the flesh with a seemingly innocent diagnostic tool which sets people scurrying in various directions, and we find her in the text reflecting upon the normative potentials of a generalising instrument and its attendant practices—even of one designed to legitimise distinctive Aboriginal life ways. Munro-Harrison on the other hand, *arrived in search of* such a legitimising instrument—

'hybridity'—and found it, not out there somewhere, but coming to life in her faltering fingers and clumsy movements, embodied and emergent. And later, the generative ethnographer in the text also emerges embodied as an effect of the tiring day-to-day helping out in a remote Aboriginal Arts Centre and its community. Hazard and Harper both entered their fleshy ethnographic scenes as experts—Hazard implementing and accrediting a new national learning framework for 0-5 year olds in a remote Aboriginal community, and Harper as a member of a large research team investigating the life of digital technologies in Northern Territory primary school classrooms. Both were distracted, disconcerted and (in the text) impressed by an Aboriginal world obviously revising this new normalisation. Small engagements (or disengagements) with silent young Aboriginal children who spoke no English made these ethnographers wonder what they themselves were becoming, and how they needed to rethink the work they do. The disconcertments of these four authors moved instruments, ideas, methodologies and policies (respectively) from the background into the ensemble cast, intimating to the ethnographer in the text a changing world to understand and to handle, carefully and generatively.

Why narrative?

We see our stories revealing new ideas and ways to do difference collectively as they emerge from collective action. We see how new ways of going forward together depend upon the coming together of diverse and unusual subjects, objects, and settings. We focus upon how these new energetics disconcert, contradict and transform our thoughtless assumptions. Stories have a special ability to clarify the character of their participants (ourselves, we hope, especially), their histories, desires, imaginations, their psychological and emotional states, their aesthetics and their entrenchedness, as well as their searches for the new and the different. Through narratives, the ethnographer introduces and engages unusual and nonhuman participants.

Narratives allow us to work with the generative power of diversity and difference, the unpredictability of the world as it unfolds, and the ways in which new predictabilities emerge and solidify through the faltering looping processes of gestures and responses. A focus on disconcertment allows our autoethnography to address quite specifically and empirically on a new vision of a particular public problem (although as we have seen, public problems in the Aboriginal worlds of northern Australia are often subject to radical redefinition). Narratives reveal how in particular moments grand theories and ossified practices can be broken down by small disconcertments, disagreements and accidents, which in turn may reveal the very beginnings of new orthodoxies and obdurate practices.

And yet our narratives also make clear that not just anything can happen. Disconcertment is not random. The action in each story is bounded by where we find ourselves, who we are, why here, what for, and the (mostly invisible) rules—physical, psychological, linguistic, social, ideological, legal—which constrain us. The unfolding world is not planned, pre-determined or directed, but neither is it random. The disconcertments which we describe are strangely constitutive of the relation between the ethnographers in flesh and text, and they have their generative effects on us, and hopefully our readers. They actively constrain the rules and the settings which we first saw as

constraining them. Our ethnographic stories turn the conventional analysis inside out. The action does not so much take place within a context of a (reified) organisational culture; the action *is* the culture. Self-organising patterns of meaning and power are consistently created and recreated in the living present, the ethnographer included. It is these eversions we seek to uncover in our ethnographic stories of disconcertment.

Ethnography of disconcertment as tension between flesh and text

This then brings us back to our beginning and the relation between the textual and fleshy figures of ethnographic analysis. Our odd suggestion is that the ethnographer in the flesh can and should learn from the ethnographer in the text, who comes into focus when we work up narratives of disconcertment. Recognition that the good faith ethnographer is an *outcome* of collective-action comes starkly into focus in such stories and leads us to ask about the ethical dispositions of the fleshy analyst. How to position oneself as ethnographer in a particular time and place, one sensitised to disconcertment, in order to be open to becoming a generalised ethnographer in the text who proceeds in good faith? Disposition to openness in collective action re-emerges and evolves as networks of articulation, commitment and engagement as we struggle on together.

Openness sometimes leads us to spill open feelings, to bring up difficult questions, to become suddenly anxious, silent, or angry. Reflecting on these bodily felt disconcerting moments as ontological disconcertment we can no longer see ourselves as a step away from the action, judging observers of a world 'out there'. We ourselves change, as do the settings where we work, and the practices of ethnography. We are not working towards a grand theory or with a grand hope but towards a clearer, agreed understanding of the moments of effectiveness (and futility) in keeping things open enough and solid enough in our work together.

The democratic social scientist imagined by Addelson following Dewey is the professional who actively works against the normalising of technocracy (politics through objects) but also against the normalising of a simplistic politics dominated only by subjects unmediated by objects. This social scientist recognises that he/she participates as part of an ensemble cast in which he/she is primarily outcome, not direct author. The democratic social scientist imagined by Addelson sees her/himself as simultaneously both author of and subject to an emergent normalising that is the outcome of participating in collective action. Addelson's normalising is then quite different to the technocratic normalising that Sullivan identifies as a virulent force within the new Australian Indigenous policy era. And this difference explains our diversion through the figure of the ethnographer in the text.

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