



Charles Darwin University

Talking home and housing

The ethnographer brought back down to earth

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Special Edition: Ethnographic Stories of Disconcertment

Guest Editors: Michael Christie and Helen Verran



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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.