

# Decolonizing the Landscape

## Indigenous Cultures in Australia

Edited by  
Beate Neumeier and Kay Schaffer



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COVER IMAGE

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## Decolonizing Methodology in an Arnhem Land Garden\*

MICHAEL CHRISTIE

### Introduction

**N**OT SO LONG AGO, I was invited to take part in a government consultancy into the feasibility of a remote Aboriginal community garden. The Crops Forestry and Horticulture Division of the Northern Territory Government was seeking “feedback, input and comment” on a proposal by an international group called Community Supported Agriculture. It was proposed that a *Balanda* (non-Indigenous) gardener would establish the garden at Galiwin’ku, a Yolŋu Aboriginal island community off the north coast of Arnhem Land. On remote Aboriginal communities, unemployment rates are among the highest in Australia, and food prices, because of the transportation costs, are also among the highest. A community garden makes good sense for a range of reasons including community health, employment, and food security.

Having worked coordinating the studies of Yolŋu languages and culture at our small regional university for nearly twenty years, and having been a linguist in remote Yolŋu communities for almost twenty years before that, I knew the community and its people and languages well, and my colleague John Greatorex and I had worked with senior Yolŋu knowledge-authorities as

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\* Thanks to John Greatorex and Helen Verran to their contributions to this work, practical and theoretical. Thanks to the Yolŋu consultants Guthadjaka, Maratja, Garŋgulkpuy, Yurranydjil, Bepuka and Djekurr who patiently explained things in two directions. Thanks to Demala for his insight, authority and good faith. The full report to government and more details of the Yolŋu Aboriginal Consultancy Initiative can be found at [www.cdu.edu.au/yaci](http://www.cdu.edu.au/yaci).

co-researchers on many other research and consultancy projects including health interpreting, financial literacy, educational philosophy, and negotiations over government housing. We were constantly refining what we came to call a transdisciplinary research methodology – one that “takes seriously both academic and Aboriginal knowledge practices.”<sup>1</sup> Yolŋu knowledge-authorities have taught us much about their situated collective epistemologies,<sup>2</sup> and we work together to understand how our research can be generative<sup>3</sup> and how it may help us work effectively within the changing worlds of north Australian research and governmentality.<sup>4</sup>

In each of our previous collaborations we felt we had struggled to find ways to talk to government which did not compromise the methods or epistemologies of Yolŋu knowledge making. This time, now that *land* was involved in a significant way, I was challenged to rethink my own coming-to-be a responsible researcher in the Anglo-European tradition.

### The Box of Vegies

The consultants we engaged were all local Yolŋu whom we had known for many years. All were fluent in their own and other Yolŋu languages and in English, and were all connected through webs of kinship to each other, to the whole population of Galiwin’ku and to their various ancestral estates on the island and on the mainland. The task was simple: using a specially prepared poster, map, and pictures, consult with the community to seek feedback, input and comment on the proposal for the community garden.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Christie, “Transdisciplinary Research and Aboriginal Knowledge,” *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* 35 (2006): 80.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Raymattja Marika-Mununggiritj, & Michael Christie, “Yolŋu metaphors for learning,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 113 (1995): 59–62; and Michael Christie, “Yolŋu Language Habitat: Ecology, Identity and Law in an Aboriginal Society,” in *Australia’s Aboriginal Languages Habitat*, ed. Gerhard Leitner & Ian Malcolm (Berlin & New York: Mouton De Gruyter, 2007): 57–78.

<sup>3</sup> See Michael Christie, “Generative and ‘ground-up’ research in Aboriginal Australia,” *Learning Communities: International Journal of Learning in Social Contexts* 13 (2013).

<sup>4</sup> See Helen Verran & Michael Christie, “The Ethnographer in the Text: Stories of Disconcertment in the Changing Worlds of North Australian Social Research,” *Learning Communities: International Journal of Learning in Social Contexts* 12 (2013): 1–3.

The consultants gathered together with John to make a plan. Everyone agreed that it was crucial first to talk to Demala, a senior ceremonial figure from a significant clan group, who is recognized by everyone as the expert Yolŋu gardener. They met with Demala, who told them to “think about the land first.” Each piece of land belongs to particular people, is managed by particular other people, and everyone else has one kind of relation or another to that place. When we listen to any new idea, Demala said, we need to begin with the connections we already have.

In agreement, Gotha, an elder from a related clan, told the story of the old days when we used to have harvest festival every year, people bringing their clan-based produce to the church to celebrate their life together – as well as the produce of the mission garden. Demala reminded them of how the old mission garden had eventually been taken over by the community council, and the Yolŋu felt “run over,” and drifted away. Gotha agreed – unnegotiated projects are “like cyclones which come blowing through consuming energies and plans.” Over the past few years, the Northern Territory Emergency Response – commonly known as the ‘intervention’ – has been seen as taking away from Aboriginal elders even that small amount of negotiating power they had with governments. Starting with the land and working together with the right people, said Demala, “makes people feel strong and valued.”

Thinking about their connectedness to land and to kin, the consultants divided up the community for consultation into the extended family groups to which they belong. Over the following two days, discussions were held at key clan authorities’ homes, outside under a tree, the senior people on the ground, and other people of all ages sitting or standing slightly further away listening, concurring, or making comments when they had something to say. The meetings were held in the various Yolŋu languages of those involved.

For a researcher in the Western tradition, these consultancy meetings often seem to lack focus. Apart from the ongoing problem of how much to pay the senior knowledge-authorities for their various contributions to the research (whose authority guarantees that others will speak forthrightly and in good faith), so much of what people say from such a perspective seems irrelevant to the problem at hand. Again it was time for tales of the ancestral and missionary past, often nothing to do with gardening, like the long diversion into the fate of the mission fishery. It made us worry about getting consensus, and pulling a well-negotiated plan together for government.

But as they worked their way towards the garden, the Yolŋu groups began by making agreement on the conditions of concern in which the garden may

emerge: poor quality and expensive food, healthy and unhealthy connections to ancestral lands and to each other, poor relations with government, disaffected children and unemployed adults, the community history and before it the mission history, including the ongoing productive (and largely unrecognized) garden already at work under Demala's authority and labour.

By the time each group got down to discussing what the government really wanted to know – technical decisions about where the garden should go, and what it should grow, and general agreement for families each to pay \$30 a week for a box of fruit and vegetables to be delivered to their house – the decisions were very conditional. “Of course a community garden is a good idea,” was the consensus, “but if government wants to come in and set one up, it must be properly negotiated and build on what we already have. We all know what happened to the Red Cross project and the G— garden at M—.” I did not really know the history of those gardens, but it was clear from the stories that they were introduced by well-meaning outsiders, and had failed because they had not been properly negotiated. And, worse, the pressure from the outsiders to make people participate and get to work before we had all come to a workable agreement generally caused disagreement leading to an impasse. Yolŋu refusal to act until there is broad authoritative agreement on action is often read as indolence.

Wherever the garden is placed, the old people made clear, the land belongs to someone. The way that people relate to the vegetables would be understood in terms of their kinship links to that land and its owners. The old ‘mission farm’ site now recommended by the government is not land to which Demala has a custodial connection, so it would be difficult for him to farm there. Not only does Demala need to be properly related to the land, but people who work with him need to be involved through their kin links to the land and to Demala. But everyone needs to be involved – people started talking about the school and the women's centre and the clinic, all of which would need to be brought into the action to build the community together.

Such enthusiasm, such firm principles for the unfolding of a properly negotiated community garden, but no firm plan of how to go on together with government. Back in Darwin, we struggled with the report from the consultancy. There had been seven different family meetings, on seven different sites. Each extended family made up of a good number of intermarried clans had been keen on the idea, so long as the garden could grow, so to speak, from Demala's established initiatives, and all the various families could be involved through their ancestral connections to Demala and his land. While the plan



was quite straightforward in the Yolŋu imagination, it must have daunted the government, because each step would require further negotiation. There was not going to be a formal plan on paper, with pre-agreed costing and firm timelines. And even if there were, it could change at any moment. Despite the enthusiasm about community gardens, the Yolŋu were anxious about government's efforts to implant them without regard to the processes of Yolŋu life and land. The Yolŋu consultants were also developing ways of working with us university researchers. Even though they had known us for many years and we speak their languages, we still tend to want to move things forward through our own efforts and initiative.

We heard nothing back from government after they received the report, the garden never happened, and Galiwin'ku residents continue to pay exorbitant amounts for poor-quality food.

### Decolonizing the Yolŋu Garden

The staggeringly complex interrelatedness of Yolŋu life, land, and history, as well as the immense good will and good faith on the part of all, infused the consultancy process, right up to the finalization and presentation of the report. The consultants were skilled at building agreed ways forward on complex community problems. They were here trying to implement an ancestral knowledge practice in collaboration with *Balanda* researchers who had quite a different research theory and practice. This agreement-making process reveals a methodology and a metaphysics underlying Yolŋu knowledge-work which challenges the received epistemology at work in the Western governmentalities at work today in remote Australia – its schools, its universities, its governments, and non-government organizations such as Community Supported Agriculture. Furthermore, the 'rules' of knowledge and agreement-making in Yolŋu society, which require ongoing polite discussion towards agreement, in a sense prevent Yolŋu knowledge-authorities from censoring us on our metaphysical commitments. It would be both bad manners and counterproductive. Knowledge, and agreement, like the garden, need to emerge from careful negotiations in good faith. I try here to unpack the epistemology of this emergence.

To begin with, the original consultancy proposal prepared for the government by Community Supported Agriculture harboured a rational assumption about the Yolŋu of Galiwin'ku. The government could see a problem of the shortage of healthy and reasonably priced fruit and vegetables in the remote

Aboriginal community, and Community Supported Agriculture could see the community garden as a possible solution. Both of those ‘outside’ visions entailed that the 2,200 souls at Galiwin’ku be taken in key respects as ontologically equal: all community members, all consumers, all therefore somehow significantly the same when it comes to community consultations and decision-making about a garden. From this point of view, all that is needed is enough people willing to pay \$30 a week to make the employment of a gardener and the investment in the garden infrastructure (fences, sprinklers, tanks, machinery) a viable proposition. Thinking this through, I was reminded of the work of the feminist Kathryn Pyne Addelson. Addelson was an anarcho-syndicalist in the women’s movement in the USA of the 1960s and 1970s, who later, as a feminist moral philosopher, reflected on her activist experiences. She was particularly interested in developing a collectivist moral theory as an alternative to that of the individualism at work in most moral philosophy. In her work on the battle over women’s fertility going back a hundred years in the USA, she identified the notion of epistemic equality – the idea that anyone can potentially know anything, and everyone knows in the same way, that anyone (in principle) can know the facts of the past, and the “preconditions of action.”<sup>5</sup> Addelson’s collectivist moral philosophy seemed to me a starting point for analysing the dislocation between Yolŋu and government knowledge-practices, and the complex and (my own) interesting third position of an Australian academic working towards a decolonizing collaborative research and consultancy practice. Treating the Yolŋu townspeople as all somehow epistemically equal – because all are equally consumers – enables both the government and the agriculturalists to understand the problem of a community garden as essentially a technical one (how many people interested in paying how much money for how big a box of vegies from a garden situated where?). Epistemic equality allows the government (and academic) knowledge-makers to ignore the individuals’ histories, allegiances, connections, and commitments.

When the Yolŋu consultants divided up the work among themselves and went off to talk to their own extended families, it seemed to me to be a good way to get reliable coverage of community opinion. A practical value. But to them it was the *only* appropriate way to develop agreement – the right people talking to the right people in the right place at the right time in the right order.

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<sup>5</sup> Kathryn Pyne Addelson, *Moral Passages: Toward a Collectivist Moral Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 139.

A moral value. The consultants engaged their Yolŋu kin *as Yolŋu* and *as kin* in everyday life. This rejection of epistemic equality entails the rejection of the common figure in academic research – whom the philosopher Kathryn Pyne Addelson refers to as the “judging observer,” the

detached knower [...] separate from time, place, social position, body and intimate relations. Judging observers require a certain kind of world, a world of objective independent facts principles and laws.<sup>6</sup>

The Yolŋu consultants, of course, engaged no such requirements. By rejecting first of all the role of judging observer, and working with the community members as kin, they also rejected the assumption that everyone does or can know the same things in the same way. Everyone is related to Demala and to his land, but in many different ways. Any garden that works is going to have to take account of this network of accountabilities to people, places, and stories.

By moving into the appropriate spaces to talk to their own people in the free-ranging but always refocusing ways (resisting being judging observers), and by acknowledging that there is more than just food at stake and many very different stakeholders (resisting epistemic equality), the Yolŋu consultants made the technical problem of the garden in Addelson’s terms a social problem which emerges (or in our case is inserted) in arenas of public action.<sup>7</sup> Their fundamental concern was not the garden but the ongoing moral work of Yolŋu life. Their consultancy work consisted in “making the moral problem public”<sup>8</sup> – their way ultimately of encouraging the government (and us academic researchers) to listen and work collaboratively.

They refused to think of themselves and their people in government terms as all equally individual consumers of food (with associated notions of rights and accountabilities), understanding themselves as networks of kin and land (with associated notions of care, concern, and responsibilities)<sup>9</sup> working

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<sup>6</sup> Addelson, *Moral Passages*, xi.

<sup>7</sup> See Kathryn Pyne Addelson, “Some Moral Issues in Public Problems of Reproduction,” *Social Problems* 37.1 (1990): 1.

<sup>8</sup> Kathryn Pyne Addelson, “Knowers/ doers and their Moral Problems,” in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff & Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993): 287.

<sup>9</sup> See Kathryn Pyne Addelson, *Impure Thoughts: Essays on Philosophy, Feminism, and Ethics* (Philadelphia PA: Temple UP, 1991); and Addelson, *Moral Passages*.

together on how to make community life (and the garden) respond to our need to go on together faithfully, including government and the university, remembering who and where we are. The garden would build the community rather than the other way around.

This helps to explain why, in the talking about plans for a community garden, the two days of discussion with seven extended family groups centred so much on the past, and so little on the future. In Addelson's terms, the world of the judging observer relying on notions of "prediction and retrodiction [...] requires a particular understanding of time, nature, and human action and moral development."<sup>10</sup> Not so for the Yolŋu, for whom prediction and retrodiction must always remain open for argument.

As the Yolŋu told their stories, the past, as the raw materials for understanding how we should go on together, was reinscribed. The mission gardens, the church, the harvest festivals, the failed community gardens, ancestral connections to land were all brought up and retold in a way that made the (re)emergence of the garden viable. It brought the participants to life in new ways as we agreed upon who has the authority to decide and make decisions about what are the important issues to consider (ancestral connections to land, involvement of government departments, dealing with the Shire, growing-up young people) and who can give the go-ahead to proceed at each step.

Doing it this way, the 'community', that mythical entity with which the government imagined we were consulting, had no significant prior existence. Governments, of course, like sociologists, tend to take groups as the unit of analysis, without worrying too much about how those groups are constituted politically. But in the hands of Yolŋu researchers, the population of Galinwin'ku in all their connectedness (and the homelands and the children of the future) emerged as 'community' in a new and unique way in the complex localized discussions about the garden. And received anthropological categories of clan group, owner, authority, connectedness etc. – the stuff of academic research – also became reconstituted in new ways as the discussions progressed. "Even when the same categories seem to be used, it is a creative collective act to enact them as the same."<sup>11</sup>

There is an irony here – that Australian Aboriginal cultures are commonly seen to be conservative, and governments to be progressive. But the government plan assumed stable, given categories, and the Yolŋu method worked

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<sup>10</sup> Addelson, *Moral Passages*, xi.

<sup>11</sup> *Moral Passages*, 143.

with a wide-open future which needed to be decided using very fluid, carefully negotiated and emergent categories. It depended upon abandoning the certainties and predictabilities of the techno-bureaucratic approach.

The Yolŋu consultants may have been engaged as professionals but they avoided providing what Addelson calls a “professional account”<sup>12</sup> – using the judging-observer position and assuming epistemic equality. Abandoning the firmness of categories (community, families, food, arable land) also entails undermining government hopes for firm and workable plans and time-lines.

In this Yolŋu metaphysics, the knowable world comes out of action, not the other way around. The *act* is primary, whether it be gardening or talking about a garden (or writing a report). Yolŋu, it could be said, understand themselves as producing what Donna Haraway has called “naturecultures”<sup>13</sup> in good or bad ways: good when we work together respectfully and in good faith, bad when people come in with plans and try to implement them “like a cyclone,” without negotiation.

There is no difference between the correct ways to do negotiation and the correct ways to garden. Both focus on the *action* as the primary unit of meaning. For both the Yolŋu and Addelson, people and societies have their existence and meaning in the actions and experiences of making, meeting, and managing situations. “*The unit of meaning is the collective act, which generates self and the social order.*”<sup>14</sup> Acting respectfully and collaboratively to specify the conditions for the emergence of a responsible Yolŋu garden (commitment to places, kin, ancestral histories, everyday stories of care and concern) is no different from the act of gardening itself, producing Yolŋu with commitment to places, kin, history, totems and so on.

At the end of the process, the Yolŋu community members seemed relatively happy. They had been paid for their contributions to the consultancy, and had been given a chance to make representations to the government on their own terms, in their own terms. Everything that the Community Supported Agriculture proposed – the non-Yolŋu gardener, the weekly contributions, the delivery of boxes of fruit and vegetables – was agreed to by Yolŋu as a good idea, and they made clear that there is a way of producing the garden which will guarantee its success. I, however, was in the difficult position

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<sup>12</sup> Addelson, *Moral Passages*, 153.

<sup>13</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008): 15.

<sup>14</sup> Addelson, *Moral Passages*, xi.

of making a report which would guarantee the government's commitment to the garden's success. I was beginning to discern a dislocation between the moral and the technical emerging as I focused on preparing the report.

While it was never made clear to us, it seems that the government decided that the complexities of implementing a negotiated emergent Yolŋu garden were more than they could ask (or trust) the Community Supported Agriculture organization to take on. It is much easier to pay a gardener to set up a garden than it is to work constantly with key representatives of seven major networks of clan groups and community organizations to negotiate, step by step, something provisional, which must be tailored to the emerging and changing collective life of the community while remaining faithful to ancestral principles of action and connection. Doing things the Yolŋu way, government could never predict how many people would need to be involved, how long it would take, or how much it would cost. The recasting of the garden from a technical to a collective moral problem set it well beyond the (perceived) capacity of government to deliver. The practices of engagement and negotiation which to Yolŋu are so natural, so necessary, and not so difficult are, to the rational practices of government, uncontrollable, expensive, and not amenable to rigorous implementation. What is an academic researcher's responsibility here?

### Decolonizing the Government Consultant

In her book *Reports from a Wild Country*, the anthropologist Deborah Rose develops an "ethics for decolonisation." For Rose, time is of crucial importance. Taking up the work of Johannes Fabian (2002) in *Time and the Other*, she reminds us of the connection between the notions of salvation at work in the monotheistic religions and the notion of progress which infects governments and the academy. In this practice, the past is something to be ignored, forgotten or transcended, the present is difficult and momentary, and it is the future to which we look forward. "In our culture it is the future which is in front, that which is forward directionally, is the future (a time concept). That which is behind us [...] is the past."<sup>15</sup> For the Aboriginal people of the Victoria River areas, however,

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<sup>15</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation* (Sydney: U of New South Wales P, 2004): 151.

Orientation is towards origins. We here now, meaning we here in this shared present are distinct from the people of the early days by the fact that they preceded us and made our lives possible. We are the ‘behind mob’ – those who come after. [...] we face Dreaming and live our lives moving closer to Dreaming: those behind us walk in our footsteps, as we walk in the steps of those who precede us. Vic[torian] River [Aboriginal] people’s time-space matrix of country and their canonical orientation towards origins (rather than towards a future state) ensure that from time to time a western person experiences a dizzying sense of historical inversion – of the past jumping ahead, or of time running backward.<sup>16</sup>

While the Yolŋu family groups spent so much time rehearsing all the possible conditions from which the garden would emerge, and all the histories of people and places and their ancestral connections, the focus of the government, and of our own academic research practice, was firmly focused on the future.

The government and the Community Supported Agriculture group (and we academic researchers, and the Yolŋu) saw the garden as a workable solution to a serious problem. But we all saw the problem in different ways. Learning from my Yolŋu co-researchers, I began to discern that the garden could only be negotiated ethically by looking backwards, as it were, rather than forwards. Looking forwards allows governments to ignore the past. It also allows a brutal disregard for the suffering of the present, and leaves Aboriginal people and their culture always behind somehow, never really able to catch up. It allows a “schizogenic use of time,”<sup>17</sup> a denial of the coeval that makes it unnecessary for government (and academics like me) to sit down, face to face with the ‘Other’, in real time, and negotiate a process through to its completion. I began to see the very technical and future orientation of the report as that which prevented my role of bringing Yolŋu and government together to produce a good-faith Yolŋu garden (as well as my responsibility to develop my own academic practice towards decolonization).

Some time after the consultation, I was sitting with an old Yolŋu friend who was visiting Darwin. She was disappointed that, after all the very positive discussion and agreement in good faith, the garden clearly was not going

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<sup>16</sup> Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country*, 55.

<sup>17</sup> Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002): x.



to happen. I was ready to blame the government, of course. We academic researchers and the Yolŋu consultants had done the right thing by everybody. The government had failed again. But I felt some sense of rebuke in the way she talked about the consultancy as if there were something I had (yet again) failed to do. Something about how, after all these years of living and working with Yolŋu, I still had not learnt the style of engagement which would cultivate the government, as it were, in bringing the garden to life. If I had not myself learned how to move a negotiated action slowly “forward” through an “orientation to origins,” how could I expect to bring the government into the collective action?

I had done some shape-shifting and turned myself into a judging observer out of sight of the Yolŋu. I had written epistemic equality into the report, and in doing so I had let a few faceless bureaucrats get away with saying No to the proposal. Only if I were to engage the government workers who were clearly keen on the success of the garden as “kin in place” – that is, as committed to working face to face with Yolŋu addressing the collective problems of far-northern Australia – would I have acted honourably and productively within my “double participation”<sup>18</sup> as both an activist committed to justice for Aboriginal people and an academic committed to understanding and enhancing the practices of government and the academy.

My friend was sad that I had failed to practise what she and her family had taught me over forty years in order to bring the government into the Yolŋu moral universe. Turning what was clearly a moral problem in the bush into a technical problem in the report represented a sort of repudiation of my commitment to going on together in good faith. I have work to do, rethinking how I do knowledge-work with government.

A postcolonial governmentality of Australian ‘Aboriginal affairs’ is an impossible, contradictory goal. But working collaboratively with particular people of good faith in government to articulate with Aboriginal individuals and groups a methodology and ethics of decolonization in the context of a public problem is not impossible. It is imperative. And I am trying to learn how to do it.

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<sup>18</sup> Addelson, *Moral Passages: Toward a Collectivist Moral Theory*, 158.



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