CLOSING 'COMMUNITIES' UNDERMINES THE HUMANITY OF ABORIGINAL LIVES

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"I WISH I WAS HOME, NEAR THE RIVER, sitting under a tree, sewing ...". Wistfully talking with me during a visit to Perth, this snatch of dialogue eloquently, poignantly and clearly constituted what home meant to Nyappurru, a senior Gooniyandi woman and Traditional Owner.

Nyappurru had been taken 4,000 kilometres south via road and flight transport from her Kimberley home in Western Australia to a Perth Hospital for medical treatment not otherwise available to her.

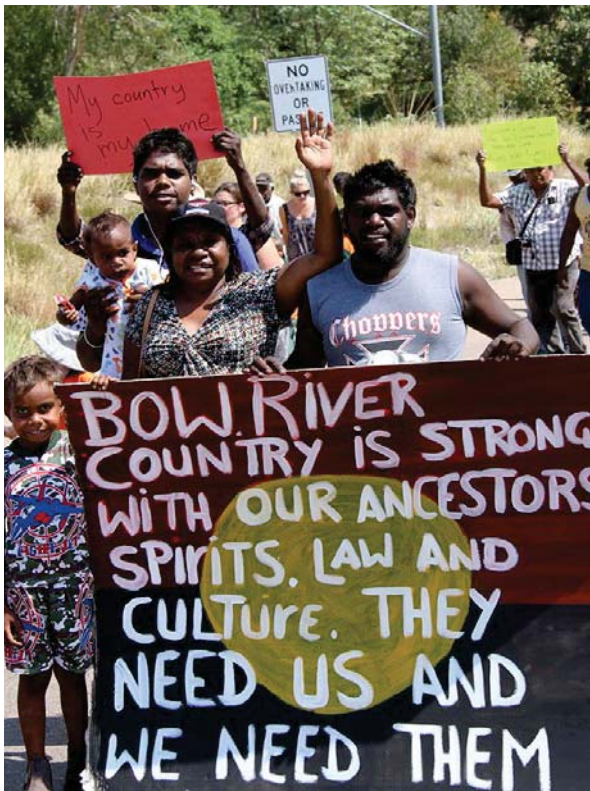
Now deceased and greatly missed by loved ones, the sentiment, emphasis and longing evident in the seeming simplicity of her words are not uncommon among countless Indigenous Australians whose homes lie in locations vastly distant in time, knowledge and sociality from government centres and regional infrastructure services in Canberra and Perth.

The disjuncture between the two – regional homelands and government centres – is obvious, and much has already been written about the evident and inequitable social and economic problems that are likely to ensue if state premiers and federal government ministers continue with a misguided ideological and short-sighted economic approach to close "up to 150 communities ..." in Western Australia.

Introduced decades ago through government agencies to describe Indigenous living areas, the co-opting of the word "communities" seems harmless enough, especially when applied in an everyday, shorthand and policy sense. But it also tends to mask the fact that communities are places that generations of Aboriginal women, men and children call home.

If the wording driving the closures is changed, for instance, and the gloss of "communities" is replaced by words such as "people's homes" or "homelands", bringing with it recognition that these house family groups numbering between three families in smaller locations to approximately 20 interconnected families in larger locations, the statement would be that the closure threatens (at least) 2,000 homes.

Expanding an estimated figure further, the numbers could increase to reveal that more than several thousand Aboriginal men, women and children are currently threatened with homeland eviction and relocation.



Above right: Artist Mabel Juli holding a banner that reads 'I love my Country'. Photo credit: Sandy Toussaint at the Warmun Community.

Below right: Kathy Ramsey and others at the East Kimberley's Warmun Community's protest. Photo credit: Felix Kantilla, Warmun Art Centre.

With limited information available from government sources, it is hard to indicatively calculate, or to predict, a reliable figure or the impact on existing resources.

Misunderstandings

Behind the numbers, of course, is the depth and breadth of persons and the qualities of everyday and future life directly influenced by the possibility of closure and re-location. Misunderstandings about what constitutes a community arise again here.

While it is the case that Aboriginal people often identify their place of living as a particular community (for instance, when completing a government form or for hospital medical records, signing off on an art certificate, or giving directions to someone about where they currently reside), this activity is vastly different in the meanings attributed to home.

I return to Nyappurru's words here: it is not a community to which she refers (a constructed place) but to cherished associations with her home (sewing under a tree, sitting quietly near a familiar river).

In Nyappurru's case, the river she mentioned was a section of the Kimberley's Fitzroy River, a place made especially valuable to her through family and emotional ties, as well as the rights and responsibilities maintained by her and other Gooniyandi people via the requirements of Customary Law.

Again, these emphases are neither rare nor unusual in many contemporary Australian settings. Nyappurru, as with other Aboriginal people in the Kimberley and elsewhere, call a place home because that is what it is: it is not imagined, constructed, or representative of an aspirational lifestyle, but an interconnected lived and loved family place with past, present and continuing cultural, historical, social and emotional ties that guide everyday life.

Such interconnections are reproduced over time, often in conjunction with lived-in homes remaining a significant aspect of a cultural and interrelated complex of contemporary traditions and Customary Law.

A recent article in Western Australia's only state-wide newspaper adds another revealing dimension. Quoting young AFL recruit Zephaniah Skinner, a member of the Kimberley's Yungngora group, who live at the Noonkanbah Station, several hundred kilometres east of Broome, about why he had decided to leave the AFL, the living reality and qualities of home become evident:

> *"When you're over there [Brisbane, as a player training for the Western Bulldogs] it's like another place and you just want to come back home. I don't know what about this place [Noonkanbah] just keeps bringing me back here. I'm still trying to figure it out myself. I just had to come home."*

From Zephaniah Skinner's vantage point, being home is given priority over the attractions of a continuing AFL career.

The conflation of words used to describe hundreds of family homes within the nomenclature of "community" and, worse still, communities writ large, undermines not only the humanity of Aboriginal lives and what people hold dear, but also the potential of honouring, recognising and making the most of a place Aboriginal people have the culturally legal and ethical right, and the responsibility, to call home.

'Remote' is a relative term

Further descriptive conflations and linguistic traps abound, such as the uncritical use of "remote" to describe people's homelands. From the perspective of Nyappurru and Zephaniah Skinner, for instance, it is very clear that time spent in urban Perth or Brisbane away from Kimberley settings generated feelings of remoteness.

Such a potent contrast undermines a person's vantage point of what is, and what is not, regarded as geographically and culturally "remote".

It is hoped that media commentary, public debate, and government emphases, might gradually or eventually shift from unquestioning use of the all-encompassing "Indigenous communities" (and "remoteness", depending on the context) to more accurate depictions that reveal the lived realities of people's lives.

A further hope is that the potentiality and vitality of humanitarian and more nuanced understandings might guide the intellectual and practical development of policies and their successful application.

The sort of hopefulness could be likened to the conceptual qualities inspired by the political philosopher Antonio Gramsci. In Gramsci's words, in order to bring about significant change one needs to maintain pessimism of intellect and an optimism of will.

Such a cogent aspiration remains important in contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia, as much as it does in Australia's cultural, intellectual, economic and political life more broadly.