

# STILL OUR COUNTRY

COUNTRY BELONGS TO US AND WE BELONG TO COUNTRY

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A **STUDY GUIDE** BY MARGUERITE O'HARA



AUSTRALIAN TEACHERS OF MEDIA

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## Overview

*Still Our Country* is a poetic celebration of the contemporary Yolngu people of North East Arnhem Land, Australia. The project takes the form of an online installation at [www.stillourcountry.com.au](http://www.stillourcountry.com.au) and an 88 minute documentary film. It is directed by Molly Reynolds. With evocative and experientially cinematic visuals and sound, *Still Our Country* documents the swiftly morphing lives of the Yolngu people of Ramingining in the Northern Territory. The online installation is built on fragments and parts presenting a carnival of contemporary ways, the sum of which makes for a bold declaration of identity and a hopeful promise of a future.

The online installation and the documentary film are part of the *Country* suite of projects made by Molly Reynolds and Rolf de Heer about contemporary Aboriginal culture. *Charlie's Country*, a feature film starring David Gulpilil, was screened to critical acclaim at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival and later in Australia. Gulpilil won a best actor award in the Un Certain Regard section of the 2014 Cannes Film Festival for his performance in the film. He also appears in the other projects in the *Country Suite* as himself — a proud Yolngu man.

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## Background

*Still Our Country* is a part of the Country suite of projects, along with the associated feature film, *Charlie's Country* and the feature documentary *Another Country*, a historical political perspective on the Ramingining area and people as told by Gulpilil.

Each project stands alone without referencing the other and it is a case of them running parallel to each other rather than them being interconnected. All of them are predominantly shot in the Aboriginal community of Ramingining. The projects have separate emphases, individual areas of concern, distinctly different styles and their own unique emotional tone. Together they paint a detailed and revealing portrait of a culture and a people such as we are rarely privileged to access.

The NFSA (National Film and Sound Archive) was a key partner on the *Twelve Canoes* project ([12canoes.com.au](http://12canoes.com.au)). Given that it was such a productive and successful collaboration, the NFSA has partnered again with Rolf de Heer and Molly Reynolds for the *Still Our Country* initiative.

The online installation at [www.stillourcountry.com.au/](http://www.stillourcountry.com.au/) offers an engaging online approach to connecting with the material in the documentary film, allowing viewers to move at their own pace through the modules, or chapters, slowly absorbing the sounds and images for a rich experiential journey on a visit to the world of Ramingining. The multi-platform approach used in this project allows for different ways of experiencing and understanding the culture. Several of our senses are engaged in this experience.

When Rolf de Heer decided to make *Charlie's Country* with David Gulpilil, he anticipated that questions would be asked by the screen funding agencies about his 'transmedia' and 'multi-platform' strategy associated with the feature film. So as to deliver a meaningful proposition, he handed the task to Molly Reynolds, with whom he had collaborated on the hugely successful *Twelve Canoes* website and film, and the documentary *The Balanda and the Bark Canoes* about the making of *Ten Canoes* the feature film.

Two and a half years later, Molly and colleagues (including Rolf and screen editor Tania Nehme), have created the Country suite of projects, a sterling case-study for cross-platform production.

## Synopsis

Although only 600kms from Darwin, Ramingining may as well be in a country other than Australia. It is persistently, almost wilfully, foreign. The people, of a strong, defiant tradition, often speak no English, and struggle to comprehend the madness of rapid change thrashing through their world order. In short, it makes Ramingining a wonderfully and enticingly bizarre, complex and challenging place for the inhabitants and visitors alike.

*Still Our Country* examines, largely visually, how the people in and around Ramingining township spend their time. It offers insight into the ways in which Yolngu culture continues to absorb and adapt to the dominant Balanda (white) culture, yet retain its own identity. As well as the online installation there is a feature length documentary (88 minutes) which explores, again largely visually, how the people in and around Ramingining township spend their time. On a more formal level as an experiential work, *Still Our Country* also considers the relationship between still and moving image and how each influences perception of the other.





## Curriculum Guidelines

The online installation and /or the documentary film would be suitable for students at upper primary and secondary levels. The online installation in particular will offer younger students the opportunity to explore the Ramingining world at their own pace, to engage with the sounds and the scenes of this world, without needing to engage with a lot of text and talk — rather they can play, learn, explore and enjoy.

Some of the background information in this guide would be better suited to secondary students, particularly the material about the ‘lifestyles choices’ comments of Prime Minister Abbott in relation to remote communities.

As the cross-curriculum priorities outline of the National Curriculum makes clear, an understanding of aspects of Indigenous life and culture is key to our understanding of life in Australia — our history, geography, politics, social systems and cultural diversity.

*The Australian Curriculum has been written to equip young Australians with the skills, knowledge and understanding that will enable them to engage effectively with and prosper in a globalised world. Students will gain personal and social benefits, be better equipped to make sense of the world in which they live and make an important contribution to building the social, intellectual and creative capital of our nation.*

*Accordingly, the Australian Curriculum must be both relevant to the lives of students and address the contemporary issues they face. With these considerations and the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians in mind, the curriculum gives special attention to these three priorities:*

- *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures*
- *Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia*
- *Sustainability*

*Cross-curriculum priorities are embedded in all learning areas. They will have a strong but varying presence depending on their relevance to the learning areas.*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are strong, rich and diverse. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity is central to this priority and is intrinsically linked to living, and learning from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities about their deep knowledge traditions and holistic world view.

A conceptual framework based on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ unique sense of identity has been developed as a structural tool for the embedding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures within the Australian curriculum. This sense of Identity is approached through the interconnected aspects of Country/Place, People and Culture. Embracing these elements enhances all areas of the curriculum.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priority provides opportunities for all learners to deepen their knowledge of Australia by engaging with the world’s oldest continuous living cultures. This knowledge and understanding will enrich their ability to participate positively in the ongoing development of Australia.

<http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/CrossCurriculumPriorities/Aboriginal-and-Torres-Strait-Islander-histories-and-cultures>



*Canoes and Twelve Canoes). They didn't know us well then but they were prepared to take the risk because as Ten Canoes co-director Peter Djigirr said at the time, 'we have to stand up for our culture and make this film so the world knows who we are or else we are lost'.*

*Now, almost ten years later, the Ramo mob are prepared to share even more of themselves. In 2005 they didn't much liked being filmed but after the Ten Canoes experience and with familiarity of filming and photographing further learnt through mobile phones, the mob are prepared to let us filmmakers hang about and observe them being who they are. Interviews are still a daunting prospect though; the question and answer approach is not a Yolngu mode of engagement as it is culturally too direct and explicit, and English is not a language that is spoken often or well.*

*As much as anything, this film is a tribute to the Yolngu of Ramingining. They are timeless warriors who've been beaten up over the last hundred and thirty years but who have always proven to be resilient. They continue to be defiant, generous, demanding and versatile, always with their deadly sense of humour. I marvel at the trust they gave to us to make Still Our Country – and I like that it's a step towards giving them their own voice in contemporary Australia.*

## Distance Learning

How is it possible to experience the lives of other communities, people and places without actually going to the place where the people live? To visit many remote communities in Australia, outsiders need a permit (see the information after the map about the purpose of the Permit system).

Many remote communities are just that — very remote and often inaccessible by road during the wet season. So, understanding how other people live can often only be approached through exploring a range of different media and communications technologies through images, sound recordings, films and websites. Just as white people (Balanda as they are called by some Aboriginal people) like to have control over who visits their property or home, so too do Aboriginal people like to be able to decide who comes on to their country and into their homes. Like all of us, they want to know something about outsiders who want to film their lives, about the purpose behind such projects and their role in how the material is presented.

Director Molly Reynolds explains how this project came about:

*The Yolngu of Ramingining are a remarkably generous mob in that they are prepared to share so much of themselves with us, despite having such good cause to distrust all Balanda - the white fellas. Ever since cattlemen arrived up there in 1885, there's been little but strife or problem.*

*Our own relationship with the Ramingining mob properly began with the film Ten Canoes (along with the related projects The Balanda and the Bark*

**'AS MUCH AS ANYTHING, THIS FILM IS A TRIBUTE TO THE YOLNGU OF RAMINGINING. THEY ARE TIMELESS WARRIORS WHO'VE BEEN BEATEN UP OVER THE LAST HUNDRED AND THIRTY YEARS BUT WHO HAVE ALWAYS PROVEN TO BE RESILIENT.'**

**DIRECTOR  
MOLLY REYNOLDS**





## Learning about other cultures

In 2015 we are lucky to have access to number of sources that can create a picture of life in other places and countries which we may not have the opportunity to visit or live in. Ways of developing awareness and moving towards an understanding of other people and their cultures (as well as those of our forebears) may include some or all of the following:

- Photos from different time periods
  - Oral accounts handed down through generations
  - Written records from people who have lived in these places or spent time there
  - Archival film from earlier times
  - Music
  - Artworks, including painting and sculptural forms
  - Tools, artefacts and information about other places and earlier times displayed in local and state galleries and museums or other collections
  - Audio recordings
  - Studying languages and culture
  - Talking with people through mobile technology via voice phones, texting, Skype, Face Time, Facebook, Twitter and other platforms
  - Film and television — including documentaries and feature films
  - Websites
  - First-hand accounts of other times — primary sources
  - News reports
  - Maps
  - Official and unofficial records — national, state and local government records, religious organisations' records, letters and diaries
- These are some of the sources contemporary writers and visual artists work with to create



their responses to people and places.

- So, before the telephone, the internet, the car and the aeroplane, how did people in years past learn about how other Australians lived in different parts of the country?
- What did happen when white colonists encountered and often came into direct conflict with the original inhabitants?
- What happened to their culture and their places where they had lived for so many thousands of years?

Very few Europeans initially explored the areas outside the small coastal settlements where most of the convicts and early white settlers put down their roots. But when white people decided to take up land and use it for crops and grazing, contact was made with the original inhabitants, often with disastrous consequences for the ways of life of the Indigenous people.

Mail used to be sent by sea and often had to be collected from large towns. When did the telephone become widely available in Australia? The **Australian Overland Telegraph Line** was a 3200 km telegraph line that connected Darwin with Port Augusta in South Australia. Completed in 1872 the Overland Telegraph Line allowed fast communication between Australia and the rest of the world. However, fast and reliable phone coverage across Australia is a relatively recent advance and accessing many modern communication devices is dependent on the availability of satellite dishes and reliable electricity supplies. Not everyone today has fast speed broadband access to the internet and as many of you would know, mobile phone coverage across many parts of the country remains unreliable. The 'tyranny of distance' has been a recurrent theme in Australia for those wanting to move about across the country.



A permit is a written permission from the traditional owners to enter the private land of a family or group of Aboriginal people.

The permit system is designed to help protect the privacy of Aboriginal communities, preserve Aboriginal culture, safeguard the natural environment and promote visitor safety.

### CONSIDER THIS SITUATION – ‘MY PLACE’

You own a country property where you and your friends and family enjoy going for weekends and holidays. One day, people come in 4WDs and motor bikes, drive all over the place, and camp by the creek, cut down timber for fires, leave rubbish everywhere and shoot local animals, some kangaroos and rabbits. This happens several times when you are not there, so you notify the police who finally move the people on, but the ‘visitors’ keep coming back. So you decide to sell the place and buy land somewhere else. But land ownership for Aboriginal people is not just about profit and loss; it is a spiritual matter and in their culture buying and selling land is like selling your family and can’t be done. The connection to country is vital and the Permit System offers some protection for the people living on the land.

If you wish to undertake any of the following activities on Aboriginal land in the Northern Land Council region then you will need to apply to the Northern Land Council for a permit:

- Enter Aboriginal Land for any purpose
- Travel by road through Aboriginal Land (Note: this does not apply to public roads)
- Enter or visit an Aboriginal Community (Note: some exceptions apply)

Permit requirements apply to all persons visiting Aboriginal communities for work or other

## Ramingining - Still our Country

*Still Our Country* presents a series of still and moving images that create a picture of daily life for many of the present day inhabitants of Ramingining. This visual and aural account can be explored in different ways –

1. Through an online installation at [www.stillourcountry.com.au](http://www.stillourcountry.com.au) where you can click on a number of images (or chapters) detailing different aspects of life at Ramingining; here you can see and hear what happens from the people who live there and know it best and/or
2. Through watching the documentary film that uses much of the online material to create a picture of life in Ramingining today. Ramingining is a remote community situated in the far north east of Arnhem Land. **See the map and information on the following page** which provides some information in a different form to the website and documentary film.

➡ jump to info page

## Visiting Aboriginal Communities

### UNDERSTANDING THE PERMIT SYSTEM

Why do people wanting to visit Indigenous communities such as Ramingining need to apply for a permit?

Aboriginal land is privately owned. It is not Crown land, nor public land. Like other land-owners in Australia, Aboriginal people have the legal right to grant or refuse permission to people wishing to enter or travel through their land.



# Bula'bula Arts Aboriginal Corporation

Ramingining, Central Arnhem Land, Australia



## The Yolngu of Ramingining

*We are the first people of our lands. We have lived here across Northern Arnhem Land from the beginning. We were many small clans living in our own lands and speaking many different languages.*

*In the seventies the Australian Government built Ramingining township. They built houses, a store, a school and a clinic for some of us Yolngu.*

*There are maybe 800 or 1000 people now living in Ramingining township. Other clans are living on the outstations, maybe 400 or 500 hundred people live on those outstations.*

*Ramingining is in north-eastern Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia. In the dry season it is one day's driving from Darwin. In the wet, you can only get here by small aeroplane. All year round food and supplies come on the barge.*

*Statement of identity from the Still Our Country website by the people of Ramingining*

<http://www.bulabula-arts.com/Site/map.html>

- Ramingining has a population of approximately 800 people, though this fluctuates and there is a significant housing shortage. The community is approximately 817 kilometres by road from Darwin, situated on the edge of the **Arafura Swamp** in **Arnhem Land**.
- The wet season in this part of the country goes from November to May.
- The community was established in the early 1970s, and became recognised as Aboriginal land with the passage of the **Aboriginal Land Rights Act** of 1976. A written permit is required to visit Ramingining. There is an airstrip, a general store, a school, a police station opened in January 2008 and a health clinic with four nurses and a fly in doctor who visits weekly from **Nhulunbuy**.
- **Djambarrpuyngu** is the main language in Ramingining, though **Gupapuyngu** and **Ganalbingu** are also spoken. English is not spoken or written by everyone in the community and for many older people hardly at all. The community, along with nearby **Murwangi**, was also the source for many of the actors in Rolf de Heer's 2006 film, *Ten Canoes*.
- The early scenes of *Charlie's Country*, Rolf de Heer's 2014 film made with and starring David Gulpilil, were shot in and around Ramingining which is David Gulpilil's country.
- Alcohol is banned in Ramingining. It cannot be consumed by residents or visitors. Kava (substance from the roots of a plant that is taken as a sedative and muscle relaxant) used to be legally available but was banned in the entire Northern Territory in August 2007 as a part of the **federal government's intervention into Indigenous affairs**.
- As in many remote communities, access to fresh food, especially fruit and vegetables, is very limited and expensive as nearly all supplies have to be flown into communities. Some medical assistance is available locally. For more complex conditions such as type 2 diabetes, kidney disease and respiratory conditions, people have to be flown out to city hospitals in centres like Darwin.
- Milingimbi is the nearest small town, 25 kilometres away with a population of 950 people. Jabiru, the nearest larger town is about 400 kilometres away if the roads are open. In the wet season they are usually closed.
- Elcho Island, home to Australian singer Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu, is just off the coast. Gurrumul sings in Yolngu languages.
- 63% of Indigenous Australians who live in the Northern Territory live in what are described as 'very remote communities'.



Guardian Australia website at <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/mar/11/noel-pearson-blasts-abbotts-lifestyle-choice-comments-as-shameless>.

Read through this report and discuss the perspectives offered by community members and politicians in relation to this debate.

The Prime Minister made the remark on ABC radio in Kalgoorlie on March 10th 2015 in response to questions about the Western Australian government's plan to close up to 150 of the state's 274 remote Aboriginal communities after it received a federal funding cut.

In response to this question: Of three remote communities here [in Kalgoorlie], why are only the two Aboriginal ones under threat? Abbott replied:

*'What we can't do is endlessly subsidise lifestyle choices if those lifestyle choices are not conducive to the kind of full participation in Australian society that everyone should have.'*

Pearson said the Prime Minister was being 'disrespectful to cast fear into the community via a policy thought bubble'. He described the comments as 'shameless' and a 'disgraceful turn of events'.

He asked which communities would take in Indigenous people displaced from their homes, saying they would ultimately end up 'living on the fringes' as an 'underclass' of Australians.

*'There was a time in history when they kicked us out of towns,' Pearson said.*

Abbott has defended his track record on Indigenous affairs, despite the criticism from several high-profile community leaders. 'I'm very comfortable with my credentials when it comes to doing the right thing by the Aboriginal people of Australia,' he told reporters the following day.

He said he was working with Indigenous leaders to end welfare dependency, which he described as 'the poison of sit-down money' by getting kids into schools and adults into jobs.

Abbott's chief adviser on Indigenous affairs, Warren Mundine said Abbott's comments were 'a complete misconception of what it is and he's wrong in that regard.'

*'It is not about a lifestyle, it is not like retiring and moving for a sea change, it is about thousands of years' connection, their religious beliefs and the essence of who they are', Mundine said.*

The Northern Territory's community services minister, Bess Price, said the Prime Minister needed to



purposes on a short or long-term basis. This includes:

- Travellers
- Tourists
- Contractors
- Journalists
- Hawkers or salespeople
- Representatives of any group, company agency or government department not covered by statutory permit arrangements.

Depending on your purpose, you will require a Work / Transit / Tourist, a Research, a Media or a Commercial Filming permit.

<http://www.nlc.org.au/articles/info/frequently-asked-questions/>

### 'LIFESTYLE CHOICES'

It is important to understand what Prime Minister Tony Abbott was talking about in March, 2015 when he described living in remote communities as 'lifestyle choices'. This was in response to a question about the Western Australian Government's intention to stop funding some remote communities in Western Australia as being economically unviable.

Why did so many Australians, both black and white, find Abbott's words offensive?

Why do some Australians choose to live in remote areas and what are some of the challenges involved in these choices?

The Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson has blasted Tony Abbott's comment that living in a remote community is a lifestyle choice, saying it is a 'deranged debate' conducted in a 'substandard manner'. The following information is from *The*

'IT IS NOT ABOUT A LIFESTYLE, IT IS NOT LIKE RETIRING AND MOVING FOR A SEA CHANGE, IT IS ABOUT THOUSANDS OF YEARS' CONNECTION, THEIR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND THE ESSENCE OF WHO THEY ARE',

MUNDINE

apologise for his comments. 'I think Tony Abbott might need cross-cultural training,' she said. 'I'd urge him to go and visit these communities and sit down with the people who actually live on the land and find out how important it is for them to live that lifestyle they think is fit for them.'

Another member of the Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory Council, Bruce Martin, told *Guardian Australia* Indigenous Australians were 'deeply hurt and offended' by the idea that their long-held views and beliefs amounted to a lifestyle choice.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social justice commissioner, Mick Gooda, said the Prime Minister's comments would cause offence. 'We haven't had a proper discussion about remote Australia for about 20 years but that involves engaging respectfully with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people right across the country,' Gooda told ABC TV.

The chairwoman of the Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia, Michelle Nelson-Cox, said Abbott's comments were 'hugely disappointing'.

'The Prime Minister's comments about Aboriginal communities place no value on the connection to country and culture that these communities provide, nor the important role they play in the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people,' she said.

'Aboriginal people are obligated to maintain a connection to country to sustain spiritual beliefs, customary activities and traditional lore. In addition to providing a home to many Aboriginal people, these communities provide a continuing sense of identity through this ongoing connection to country.'

You can't raise the expectations that you're going to have equality of opportunity in every part of Australia.



**'I'D URGE HIM TO GO AND VISIT THESE COMMUNITIES AND SIT DOWN WITH THE PEOPLE WHO ACTUALLY LIVE ON THE LAND AND FIND OUT HOW IMPORTANT IT IS FOR THEM TO LIVE THAT LIFESTYLE THEY THINK IS FIT FOR THEM.'**

**BESS PRICE, ABOUT THE PRIME MINISTER**

Senior ministers have rallied around Abbott. 'The prime minister is absolutely right,' Joe Hockey said. 'You can't raise the expectations that you're going to have equality of opportunity in every part of Australia, in every corner of Australia.'

'No prime minister in Australia's history has been more engaged with Indigenous communities in remote areas than Tony Abbott. No one.'

Malcolm Turnbull echoed the treasurer's sentiments. 'He does spend a week a year living in an Aboriginal community, he's very, very committed to it and I think he does have a very good understanding,' the communications minister said.

Christopher Pyne said: 'What the PM is saying is that there comes a point where the taxpayer has to say, how much money can be spent in this community when there is no economic future in this particular community.'

The leader of the house said calls from Labor to apologise for the lifestyle comment were 'a bizarre and hysterical response'.

Labor's Indigenous affairs spokesman, Shayne Neumann, demanded Abbott apologise for the comments, which he said displayed a 'pre-Mabo' mentality. 'Here he is saying that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be evicted from the lands on which they've lived for millennia,' Neumann said.

'He really is a disgrace and he really should apologise unreservedly for these comments.'

Abbott's comments are at odds with those of his Indigenous affairs minister, Senator Nigel Scullion, who on ABC radio in Perth on Monday criticised Western Australia for not using other funding sources to support its Aboriginal communities.

'Aboriginal people who live in the north-west and





other parts of the state are deserved of your allocation, your allocation of the financial assistance grants, because we give it to West Australia to do that', Scullion said.

'This connection is important to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people and has been an important part of the healing process for victims of the stolen generation, many of whom were forcibly removed from country earlier in their lives'.

'There is no doubt that improvements to services are needed in many of these communities. But, given their importance to the health, wellbeing and continuing culture of Aboriginal people, government should invest in these communities, rather than withdraw existing services.'

- What do some of the supporters of Indigenous Australians who choose to live in remote communities suggest is important to the people who live there?
- What day to day aspects of life in these communities would create challenges for the people living and working there?
- How difficult might it be for young people to have access to secondary education in relatively small remote communities? How do other Australian students who live a long way from larger towns undertake their studies?
- In what contexts is the term 'lifestyle choices' generally used? What does the term 'lifestyle' usually refer to?



'THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT IMPROVEMENTS TO SERVICES ARE NEEDED IN MANY OF THESE COMMUNITIES. BUT, GIVEN THEIR IMPORTANCE TO THE HEALTH, WELLBEING AND CONTINUING CULTURE OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE, GOVERNMENT SHOULD INVEST IN THESE COMMUNITIES, RATHER THAN WITHDRAW EXISTING SERVICES.'

## WHERE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE LIVE

At 30 June 2006, New South Wales had the largest estimated resident population of Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander Australians (152,700 people or 30%), followed by Queensland (144,900 people or 28%), while the Australian Capital Territory had the smallest (4,300 people or 1%). The Northern Territory had a higher proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents (30%) than any other state or territory.

The information presented here has been collated from the 2006 census ABS data.

At 30 June 2006:

- 32% (165, 800 people) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians lived in **major cities**
- 21% (110,600 people) lived in **inner regional** areas
- 22% (113,300 people) lived in **outer regional** areas
- 9% (47,900 people) lived in **remote** areas
- 15% (79,500 people) lived in **very remote** areas.<sup>1</sup>

Most remote and very remote communities are in Western Australia and the Northern Territory. As in many places where there are small populations, there is quite a lot of movement in and out of these remote and very remote communities to larger population centres in towns and cities.

- As you watch *Still Our Country* either using the DVD or through exploring the website, note down what you see as the main advantages for people choosing to live in Ramingining and what the main challenges might be.

# Form and Design of Still Our Country

This work is an exploration of the relationship between still and moving image and a study of the ways of conveying meaning by using the two mediums.

The online installation is divided into seven chapters, each with five modules. There are a total of 35 modules ranging from 1 to 3 minutes in length.

Each chapter has an 'introduction' which is the module that gives the viewer an insight or way of experiencing the chapter. All chapter introductions are full-screen and are crafted using a voice-over. The chapter will also have a 'character' module. These character modules are short pieces that give identity to the person who is delivering the thought-track and generally involve an individual talking to camera. *Living Township Way* and *We are Yolngu* have slight variations to this.

So there is a documentary film and an online installation or website that each offer different mediums for exploring the material and enriching and extending our understanding of the community of Ramingining.

While a great deal of the interest in exploring the online installation lies in making choices rather than moving through all the modules on the site, I would encourage teachers and students to include the Ancestors module in their viewing for the interesting historical context it provides.

## THE YOLNGU PEOPLE

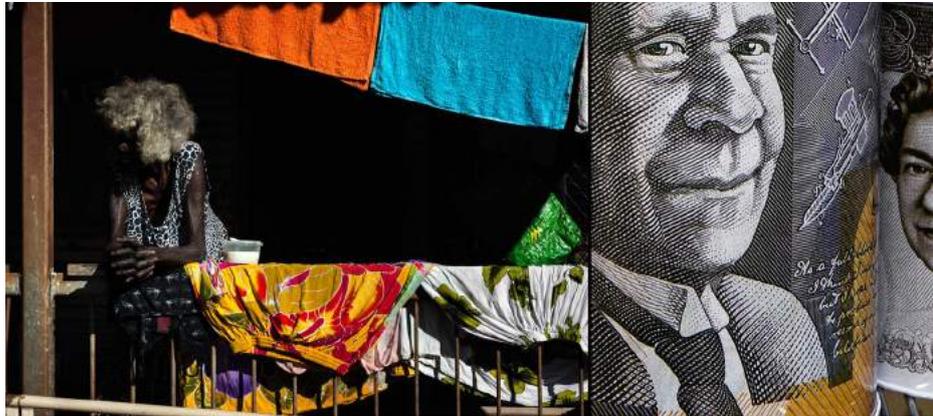
*It is our wish that there should be two-way learning: you learn from me, I learn from you* — local elder

Aboriginal society is made up of language groups who belong to a particular place and area. An interactive map at <http://www.abc.net.au/indigenous/map/> allows you to move your mouse over an area to enlarge the names of different language groups across the country.

- How many of the language groups had you heard of?

## IMAGES AND THINGS THAT MATTER

Each chapter in the film and on the website is comprised of screenshots of still and moving images, often on a split screen. The subject matter of the



still images varies throughout the film and includes the natural world of birds and water and bushland, as well as the people in the township.

Some individuals do talk about how and why they live as they do, but as Molly Reynolds points out in her statement about working on this project, 'Interviews are still a daunting prospect...the question and answer approach is not a Yolngu mode of engagement'. So, this is filmmaking that immerses an audience in the natural and man-made world of the people. It alludes to and touches on a number of issues that often consume the more mainstream media, but it is not a didactic, finger-pointing piece about 'Indigenous disadvantage'.

The questions in this guide offer suggestions about how the style of the online installation and the documentary film present the world of Ramingining. They are intended as possible areas for discussion and further research rather than comprehension questions. The term 'program' refers to both the website and/or the material on the website where you can choose your own order of images. Some

'IT IS OUR WISH THAT THERE SHOULD BE TWO-WAY LEARNING: YOU LEARN FROM ME, I LEARN FROM YOU'

LOCAL ELDER



things to look out for include:

- Patterns and leaves, feathers and bark. Record the different natural materials that create the world of textures, colours and patterns that recur in this program in both the still and moving images.
- What do we see of creative activity in the program — making artworks and artefacts such as the painted poles (hollow log coffin funeral poles) shown in an outside clearing, weaving baskets and painting on canvas?
- *'This is what I don't like to eat but I do'* — Martin holding up a loaf of processed white bread. How does the remoteness of Ramingining affect the food choices available to the residents? (Indigenous Australians have a much higher level of cardiovascular diseases, lung diseases and diabetes than white Australians). You can read about the health issues that affect many Indigenous Australians at this website: <http://www.healthinonet.ecu.edu.au/health-facts/summary>  
What do we see in the film of the kinds of foods available at the local store?  
How is food delivered to remote communities such as Ramingining?  
How does much of this 'convenience' food contrast with the more traditional diet Indigenous Australians would have had before white settlement?  
How realistic is it for any of us to revert to the kind of diet our ancestors ate — Paleo included?
- *'Now, a lot of our people are Centrelink people...the government decided to give us sitting down money'*  
What work do we see people doing in and around Ramingining today?  
Research the work of the Gurruwiling Rangers who work in the Wetlands areas of the Arafura swamp.  
How are the work opportunities today different to what happened in the 1960s, according to an elder?  
How important do you think it is for people to

'NOW, A LOT OF OUR PEOPLE ARE CENTRELINK PEOPLE... THE GOVERNMENT DECIDED TO GIVE US SITTING DOWN MONEY'

- have meaningful paid work opportunities not too distant from where they live?
- What are some of the birds and animals that are part of the natural environment around Ramingining? How are they shown in the filming of this world?
- There is little talking to camera in this presentation but the soundtrack is rich and complex as an accompaniment to the images and sequences. List some of the sounds that are part of the Ramingining soundscape such as barking dogs and the noise of construction work.
- How is the connection to country expressed and illustrated by some of the people such as actor David Gulpillil?
- What are some of the sports and recreational activities we see in the film? What kind of crossover is there between traditional white sports and activities and those that the young people of Ramingining take part in?
- How do the young people incorporate





elements of white (American) music culture and dance into their own culture and entertainment? What technologies make this possible for young people all over the globe?

- Look at the sequence with Dawu describing his miraculous experience in the Darwin Hospital that led to his embrace of Christianity. What other evidence is there of incorporating some of the rituals and celebrations of Christianity into the Yolngu society?
- What are some of the substances that are not allowed in this community? Who are these restrictions designed to protect? Are other local communities in Australia subject to similar prohibitions?

## Your responses

- How clearly does this project, *Still Our Country* — either the online installation or the documentary film — create a complex picture of contemporary life in Ramingining? What did you discover that was new to you or unexpected? Which of the peoples' stories were most affecting and/or interesting? Did you find anything in this picture of Ramingining that seemed ugly, confronting or disturbing? To what extent did it encourage you to think about whether remote communities should or should not continue to be supported by state and federal government funding? Discuss different perspectives amongst your group.
- In what ways is this visual and aural picture different to the more traditional documentaries made about communities? Were you conscious of the voices or the choices being made by the filmmakers working on this project?
- Did this website show you ways in which you could create a website about the place where you live? How does the online presentation give viewers or people searching for understanding of another place more control over their experience?
- In what ways can communication about people and places be improved when the emphasis is on images and sounds rather than on talk, statistics and information?

## Full Credit Listing - *Still Our Country*

Made with the generous contribution of the Yolngu of Ramingining, in particular:

Bobby Bununggurr, Billy Black, Matthew Dhulumburrka, Dick Yambal, Peter Minyngululu, Terry Gurrampa, Michael Dawu Gurrampa, Rose Gurrampa, Judy Malmurrunu, Jimmy Djamanba, Peggy Djamanba, Johnny Buniyira, Frances Djulibing, Jennifer Budukpuduk Gaykamangu, Joseph Smith Gaykamangu, Martin Gaykamanu, Doris Wanybarrangu, Stan Gaykamangu, Otto Champion, Gerald Yawulkpuy, Frances Garrawurra, Ronnie Garrawurra, Mary Dhapalany, Jayden Malibirr, Jordan Malibirr, Robert Yinggerrri, Lizzie Durrurrnga, Robyn Djunginy, Clara Malibirr, May, Lisa Gurrampa, Linda Ganyila, Philip Gudthaykudthay, Richard Birrinbirrin, Roy Burnyila, Gladys Womati and the Gurruwiling Rangers.

a Vertigo Productions,  
National Film and Sound Archive  
and  
Bula'Bula Arts Aboriginal Corporation  
Co-Production

Creative Directors  
Molly Reynolds and Mark Eland

Developer  
Stew Heckenberg

Cinematography  
Matt Nettheim

Still Photography  
Mark Eland, Peter McMahon, Matt Nettheim and CJ Taylor

Editor  
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Sound Design and Recording  
James Currie and Tom Heuzenroeder

Producers  
Peter Djigirr, Rolf de Heer, Molly Reynolds

Associate Producers  
Cathy Gallagher and Alicia Brescianini

Production Accountant  
Mark Kraus

Additional Recording  
Josh Williams

Music composed by  
Joff Bush, Ack Kinmonth, Graham Tardif and Gerald Yawulkpuy

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## Resources and References

Still Our Country online installation  
[www.stillourcountry.com.au](http://www.stillourcountry.com.au)

Twelve Canoes website  
[www.12canoes.com.au](http://www.12canoes.com.au)

ATOM study guides for the three films which are part of the Country Suite of projects about contemporary Aboriginal life can be accessed at <http://www.metromagazine.com.au/studyguides/study.asp>

The school in Ramingining is attended by about 300 students. An exchange program is run with St Kevin's College, a Melbourne Boy's School. Here are some links to explore Ramingining School and its programs.

Explore a Ramingining School Year Book online  
<http://www.schools.nt.edu.au/raminging/files/2009%20school%20year%20book%20low%20res.pdf>

Q and A for teachers looking to work in Ramingining  
<http://www.schools.nt.edu.au/>

[raminging/site/jobs.php](http://raminging/site/jobs.php)

Ramingining school is paired with a sister school in **Cockatoo, Victoria**, Cockatoo Primary School. Exchange visits are organised where groups of Year 5 pupils and accompanying teachers visit Ramingining for a week. A few weeks or months later, Ramingining students from Year 5 and 6 visit Cockatoo Primary School.

Another exchange program that started in 2009 saw Year 9 boys from **St Kevin's College** in Victoria visit Ramingining as part of the schools RICE (Rich Investigation Challenge Experience) program. The two schools are now fully immersed in an exchange program which is designed to benefit both year 9 boys going into Ramingining and year 7-9 students from Ramingining going to Melbourne.

A number of other schools operate school exchange programs with schools in remote Northern Territory communities.

A photo essay from a Sydney botanist about his time spent on fieldwork in Ramingining  
<http://www.manikay.com/didjeridu/>

[raminging.shtml](http://raminging.shtml)

Watch an interview on Youtube with Molly Reynolds, the film's director and Rolf deHeer from the 2014 Melbourne Film festival where the film was screened  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S6qPqApvwpg>

An information sheet for health workers seeking information about living in remote communities  
<http://www.rahc.com.au/living-remote-aboriginal-communities>

A 2014 commentary about the lack of educational opportunities in the National Curriculum for all students to understand what 'Indigenous perspectives' really means  
<http://theconversation.com/pyning-for-indigenous-rights-in-the-australian-curriculum-30422>

*Marguerite O'Hara*  
July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015

(Endnotes)

- 1 <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/lookup/4704.0Chapter210Oct+2010>



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