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Homeland Story*: Friendship and filmmaking in Donydji homeland, North East Arnhem Land*

Speakers: Glenda Hambly and Neville White

Chair: Hester Joyce

Abstract:

This is the edited transcript of Session 5 of the *Symposium on Creative Collaborations in Intercultural and Intermedial Spaces*, convened by Creative Arts and English, La Trobe University, 7-9 July 2020. This session, chaired by Hester Joyce, began with an online screening of the documentary film, *Homeland story*. The screening was followed by a Q&A on Zoom with filmmaker, Glenda Hambly, and anthropologist, Neville White. This edited transcript of the post-screening discussion concludes with an afterword by Glenda Hambly: *At the end came the script*.

Biographical notes:

Glenda Hambly is a distinguished writer, editor, and developer in Australian film and television. Glenda wrote and directed the feature film*, Fran* (1985), and the telemovie, *Waiting at the royal* (2000). *Fran* won best script of the year, as well as numerous awards for the cast, and *Waiting at the royal* won best feature at the BANFF Television Festival in Canada. Glenda also produced *The legend maker* (Ian Pringle) which premiered at Melbourne International Film Festival in 2014. In 2018, Glenda completed her doctoral research, *Myths and misconceptions: Australian screenwriting 1997-2017*. She lectures in screenwriting and is currently writing and producing a television mini-series set in Russia, Israel, and Australia.

Neville White AM is a biological anthropologist and an Emeritus Scholar at La Trobe University. His early research investigated social, cultural, and environmental influences on population genetic diversity in Aboriginal Australia. Situated since 1971 in North East Arnhem Land, and centred in the Donydji homeland community since 1974, he has worked and lived with Yolngu communities for some time each year since then. His research has widened to include medical anthropology, nutritional health, ethnobiology, and Yolngu management of their natural and cultural landscapes. Since 2003, his work has focused on community development in the Donydji homeland with the help of Vietnam Veteran volunteers and philanthropic funding, particularly through Rotary Club of Melbourne.

Keywords:

Donydji homeland, Yolngu community development, Vietnam veterans, intercultural screenwriting, anthropology

Introduction

Hester: Welcome everyone to the post screening discussion of *Homeland story.* I would like to acknowledge and pay respects to the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we work and live, and meet today (via Zoom) with the reservation that there are inadequacies within that acknowledgement at this point in history. With great pleasure, I welcome our guests, Glenda Hambly and Neville White.

We would also like to acknowledge Damien Guyula as the co-producer of *Homeland story* and Donydji representative on the production. He has worked as an interpreter for the Aboriginal Interpreter Service, school attendant supervisor and tutor, and cultural advisor, and a liaison officer for the Northern Territory Police. Damien is a member of the Djambarrpuyngu Liya-Dhalinymirr clan. He was raised on the Mirringadja homeland, which is closely associated with the Donydji, where his father, a senior clansman, trained him in tribal law. Unfortunately, Damien was unable to join this Zoom session from East Arnhem Land due to an unforeseen commitment.

Chat question: Why is it so hard to build bridges?

Hester: This question is in response to the Donydji homeland community trying to find support for teacher training for a community member.

Neville: In large part it's because of – and it's a bit cruel to say, but it's true – it's the quality of the administration of bureaucracy surrounding Aboriginal affairs, especially in the Territory. I believe from my long experience, and I think it's a problem around Australia really, that too often, and this is one such case – too often there are obstacles placed before us, and we are always being told why things can't be done: There's a shortage of this or that; we don't have the staff; we can't get electricians out to the community; we can't get the teachers. Rather than say, 'Well, okay, this is a request. There's a real need for this. How can we make it happen?'

So, it's a matter of time and capacity on the part of the administrators. But also, too often, there's a general lack of fire in the bellies of many of them. There are some people who have been up there for a long time and they get burnt out – that's another issue, and that certainly applies to some teachers. That's what I see happening. I think it's too often the case for people working in the area. It has also to do with the boundaries that are established among those services which are meant to be helping Aboriginal communities, like Donydji, to survive. It is incredibly territorial in a bureaucratic sense. The Health Department has its own territories. The Education Department has its own territory. So, for example, you can't get Health, Education and Homeland Services together to provide internet for the Donydji homeland. There are obstacles for the sharing of transport; for example, health workers don't come in Education Department vehicles because they operate on different budgets and guidelines. There's just a lack of vision – or willingness – to bring the various service delivery units together. Sometimes there is downright incompetence.

Felicity Collins (audience): I always find it difficult to make a coherent comment coming out of a very powerful film, and one so beautifully made. And with that soundtrack in my ears. It's

a riveting experience to see that story unfold: all those stories woven together, all that archival material, all that footage of you, Neville, as a young man with Yilarama (Donydji elder) and then with Tom. I've been to Arnhem Land twice in the last couple of years, and my brother has spent a lot of time working in communities in the Northern Territory, so that made *Homeland story* even more powerful and real for me. The film makes us ask: what can we do to support the Donydji homeland and help the traditional owners survive? The film also resonates with some footage I watched recently, where a highly respected Yunupingu elder was talking in a desperate and heartfelt way about the number of times, over decades, that politicians have come into Arnhem Land and made certain promises and undertakings that have never been realised. Yet *Homeland story* makes culture seem so strong and so rich in northern Australia. People from the south-eastern states, like me, can start to see Aboriginality as located in those distant places – rather than here in Melbourne, in Kulin country. Neville, you live here in Melbourne, yet a huge part of your story is the Donydji homeland we've just seen on screen. I'm wondering how you relate to the difference between the two places?

Neville: What are you asking – in terms of Aboriginal Australia?

Felicity: Yes, in terms of how we imagine Aboriginal Australia through intercultural encounters that films like *Homeland story* – and your work as an anthropologist, or my experience as a tourist – open up for us. I'm wondering how you carry both places: Melbourne, where you live, and the Northern Territory, especially Arnhem Land, where you have done so much research?

Neville: In terms of Aboriginal Australia, I have in the past dealt with a lot of Koori issues. I no longer do. I work with communities that, for a variety of social and political reasons, don't have doubts or concerns about identity. So, in that way, they're different – it's a different social milieu to be part of. And I actually just relate to them now as my family over a long period of time. Whereas I don't have that relationship with the Kooris here. I tend to steer clear of it a bit because the politics are somewhat fraught. But I bring people down from northeast Arnhem Land. I once brought Tom Bidingal and his younger brother, Christopher Bidingal, down to the Telstra Arts Awards in Canberra, where they had people from around Australia, and there was an award given – there still is – for painting from around Australia. While we were there in the audience, during the presentations, they had some women and children from Canberra, Koori people. Women and men and children were dancing to tapes from the Garma Festival, from Yirrkala in northeast Arnhem Land. Tom and Christopher didn't say anything, didn't comment. They laughed and they thought it was good the children were there.

But next day, on the way back to Melbourne, they were upset that their own culture was being appropriated by others, Aboriginal or not. They said that it belongs to their country, and it shouldn't be circulated in that way. That's the reason why some from Donydji don't go to Garma. Because they don't believe it's for them to sell their culture. People can learn, and they're very happy for people to learn. But they want people to learn with them on their country, and not go somewhere else. I certainly see the political environments as being very difficult and different indeed. I sometimes get concerned down here and upset that some people, Aboriginal people, Indigenous people, complain about the Health and Education services, and that they're disadvantaged. But in fact, really, there's an opportunity for people here to go to school and to university. There are support systems and mentoring available to them. They

have their own health service, if they choose. But that is not the case with remote, tradition-orientated people, like those in Donydji. Yes, it does concern me. I think there's unequal distribution of resources among Indigenous Australians, to do, in fact, with the political clout that their spokespeople have.

Felicity: Thank you.

Neville: If I could ask, is Glenda here to listen to some of the accolades that are being expressed [in the Chat]? Because she's done a great job.

Chat question: I have a question for you, Neville, about your relationship with La Trobe University during this whole process: what was La Trobe's relationship to your research in terms of their support?

Neville: Thank you very much for the question. In the early days – well, in terms of administration – when Belinda Probert was Deputy Vice-Chancellor (2008-2012) – she and her associate, Sally Went, were very supportive of what I'm trying to do. And I had support from my own head of department, Professor Peter Parsons. It was very good. However, La Trobe beyond that wasn't really supportive or interested, though they certainly enjoyed the publicity when they had something positive they could say to the newspapers. But when I've tried to organise programs for people (from Donydji homeland) to come down, and I guess just talking about what we might be able to do for Joanne Guyula, I've never been able to crack through that. There are health workers, there are people in education, who should be able to help. I've argued over the years that the University should use its staff and other resources to help communities like Donydji, but this hasn't happened. Sadly, for me, the administration has been disappointing, other than in the earlier days. And certainly, as I say, the Genetics Department has been – was – very good. But maybe there's an opportunity now – we could all work together to try to help Joanne finish her teacher training, for example. You know, there are also Aboriginal health workers who would benefit. La Trobe could offer so much if it really wanted to.

Chat question: That'd be terrific. Because I think the new Head of Education would be very supportive of that.

Felicity: I have a question for Glenda. Your highly-regarded feature film *Fran* stays in my mind as the urban realist film that made your name. I am wondering what it was like for you to go to Arnhem Land and make *Homeland story*. How did your involvement come about, and what was it like to make a very different kind of film from *Fran*?

Glenda Hambly: I got involved in a roundabout way because I was wanting to make a documentary series called *Unexpected heroes*, with a Western Australian based documentary company. I had three characters that I wanted to start the series with, and Neville was one of them. The series was to be about ordinary people who do extraordinary things with their lives, and Neville was clearly a brilliant candidate to be part of the series. When I approached him he basically said no, he didn't want the limelight. But he said he'd ask the people of Donydji whether they wanted the film made, because, of course, I was interested in the partnership that he'd had with them over such a long period of time. He asked the community and they said

yes, because they wanted to be able to tell their story to the wider Australian community; they wanted their voice heard. Because the community wanted the film, Neville agreed to help me make it, which began a long partnership. I don't think Neville understood just how much time it would take up, but he was endlessly helpful and supportive during the 10 years it took to make it.

When the *Unexpected heroes* series didn't go ahead, I decided to turn the Neville-Donydji story into a 90-minute feature and we started filming in Donydji in 2010. I'd never been to Arnhem Land. I'd never been to a homeland. I had no idea what to expect. I took a cinematographer friend with me because I didn't trust myself filming black skins. I was used to doing some documentary cinematography, but nothing complex. It was a real privilege to be able to go with Neville. It was just eye opening, quite amazing to suddenly be part of this completely new world. And we went back three times altogether, filming in 2011 and 2012 as well. Each time we were completely dependent on Neville supporting us, acting as translator, getting permissions, providing the crucial information we needed to fully understand what we were filming. And in 2013, Neville also did some filming for me on one of his regular visits, filming the work the Vietnam Vets were doing with the young men of Donydji. Then, in 2015, Damien Guyula came on as co-producer. Up to that time, his sister, Joanne, who's the school teacher in the film, had been our main liaison person in the community. Damien took over from her and became the translator of all of the Yolngu languages in the film. He oversaw the subtitling, approved the various cuts of the film and eventually became the narrator. So, the ongoing relationship, the ongoing collaboration was there with Neville and Damien and Joanne. I'm not sure if that answers your question, Felicity, perhaps you can ask me another question if it doesn't?

Felicity: What was it like to take the film back to the community?

Glenda: Neville showed it in Donydji after it was finished, so he can tell you about the response. But also Damien Guyula wanted it screened more widely to other Ritharrngu clan members who are scattered in homelands and towns in East Arnhem Land. One of the film's producers, David Rapsey (my partner), and Eunice Wunungmurra (Damien's partner), took it around on an extended tour in December 2019. There's a short video of the stops they made and how the film was screened. It's available on our distributor's website (see Ronin Films, *Homeland story*). Damien was really happy that the film could be screened to that grass roots audience who would otherwise never get to see the film. We raised money for the trip through crowd funding. David and Eunice just went on the road screening it in very basic conditions: sometimes to tiny groups, sometimes to larger ones. But Neville, can tell you what the response was like in Donydji?

Neville: Thanks, Glenda, and I hope you heard those fine things said about your film. I'd just like to say that when Glenda approached me about this, as she said, in those early days, I was reluctant to be the centre of attention. But speaking with Glenda, she understood that we'd like this to be a vehicle for the people to present their own views, and aspirations, and an account of their difficulties, and their hopes for the future. And Glenda agreed to that, and she certainly kept to that. The trust was never broken. That was a wonderful thing to have done, and she achieved it.

At the first viewing, it was somewhat frightening for me because, one, it's terrible to see the state of my ageing [laughs]. And second, I was worried about what the Donydji people might think of the film. Because a lot of that material that you've seen there [on screen] was never seen by them. I took up some photographs, of course, but never any of the earlier moving film because the older men at that stage didn't want it to be seen more widely. They're all dead now, so I discussed it with their families. We kept in mind that our aim was to help the community. And they wanted help for themselves. The film became an extension of our earlier written and audio petitions and video presentations through the Northern Land Council. The documentary was a great vehicle to get the Donydji points of view across. They understood this and they were prepared to meet and say, yes, the old film and photographs could be used. Thus, that trust between the community and me, and the trust between Glenda and me, certainly is not broken at all. It was in fact reinforced as an experience. Also, the people themselves really enjoyed seeing the film. They enjoyed seeing the old material. They were proud that their own voice was being heard too – and listened to. You heard Damien, and when we contacted Damien earlier on, he saw that as an important part of his, if you like, mission. But he also saw the film as a way to in fact help young people gain some self-esteem. And to be proud of who they are – what they've achieved and what they hope to achieve.

Glenda: Yes. Can I just come in and add something to that? Damien's not here to talk about this, but that's why he wanted the film screened to others in the Ritharrngu clan in north-east Arnhem Land. He wanted the film to be screened in the west as well, but unfortunately we didn't raise enough money to get there. Travel in Arnhem Land being so expensive! Damien was really proud of the finished film. He hoped Donydji's success would inspire other Ritharrngu and encourage the young people to stand up for their land, to follow the example of the Donydji elders who fought to stay on their land. He wanted it to empower people. That's how he saw the film.

Atalanti Dionysus (audience): Hi, I love the film. It was quite incredible to see the Rotary workers, working together with the Indigenous community to build something. A vehicle for both to help each other is quite beautiful, and that kind of civic exchange is quite empowering for both cultures. I have worked and made contact with different Indigenous groups, and the one thing they keep saying is they don't just want more films about themselves, they want films to make a difference, and for there to be change. I think your film has got so much of that scope. I love the innovative approach of Joanne wanting to teach the children in their language about their culture. And then teach them the Australian culture and language. I think the time is right for that, even for our schools here. Lots of primary schools are starting to think about history in a whole different way. I think it's time that white children in Australian primary schools start to learn maybe a local Indigenous language, instead of Greek, Italian, French, German, so they understand from the heart the land that we're all part of. And being raised to understand that there were Indigenous cultures here centuries ago. That's the history that we should be implementing in schools.

On Joanne's approach to teaching: in the film when it was said, 'Oh, she can't really do that', it was quite traumatic for me. Here's a young woman who has these amazing ideas, and she wants to teach and be a provider of this knowledge, and it's just going to grow and expand for her. But, yeah, there are so many amazing moments in this film where it's educating us about what's needed. And the other thing, as you were saying, Neville, is the young men: they want

to work. Some things we see about them in the media – they're on drugs, alcohol, they don't want to work. But that's not true: your film shows they really want to work and build, make things. And the women want to live in that part of the world, and do what they do, and be buried there. The connection of soul to country, and how they want to be, is an important facet that we need to acknowledge and understand. In return, we can all learn and have some exchange based on that. It's a well-made film. I really love it. There are so many things we can learn, but we need to do something now. And not just have a film that tours, but actually try and create awareness and change.

Neville: Might I just respond? Thank you for those comments. Joanne tried really hard to complete a degree, through Batchelor Institute [of Indigenous Tertiary Education] and Charles Darwin University. That program was there to help Aboriginal people, particularly women, become teachers. But it was so poorly put together for Joanne, who came from a remote community. She's essentially self-taught. She got her bursary to go to Batchelor Institute under the auspices of Charles Darwin University. One of the first courses that she was enrolled in was Mathematics 1, which she failed as she'd never studied mathematics, only some basic arithmetic.

When I contacted the Education Department and asked why they put her into Maths 1, the answer was that if you want to complete the degree you need a mathematics unit. I responded, 'Then do it at the end of the course with some tutorials, you know, bridging programs throughout, to bring her up to speed'. And I was actually told that it's good for them, the Department, because it can raise red flags and they can see if students are not up to completing the course. And I asked, 'Are you going to have a summer school if she has to repeat it?' Yes, they would. They never did, and she failed it the second time.

Now, let me just tell you, this is true because I've written this in my field notebooks. When I went into Darwin, to support Joanne and help her prepare for a maths exam the next day, she had no idea what a multiple choice question was. I had obtained a previous paper, which I went through with her. One of the questions was: 'Estimate the number of elevators in the town in which you're living'. That was the first question. And the other one was: 'Estimate the amount of food to be consumed in Australia over one year'. These were the two questions. Okay. I'm told they're meant to develop logical quantitative thought and come from an American program. Can you imagine that for a young woman who is a compassionate, committed teacher – wanting to be a qualified teacher, and she gets that as her first exposure to university. The lecture program was split between Batchelor Institute near Darwin and in Alice Springs. Joanne had no social connections in Alice Springs. In breaks between lecture blocks, Joanne had to find her own accommodation. Charles Darwin University didn't provide any of their own accommodation for her. She actually walked around trying to find hostel accommodation while she was also studying. And she had little mentoring, or tutorial help in science and maths.

It really annoys me that probably well-intentioned programs for Aboriginal people are so poorly designed and delivered. Joanne was quite emotionally traumatised by her experience, but she is still keen to pursue her studies for her teacher qualification. We're continuing to work on this. Also, there are other young people in Donydji who, as I say, want to train and find employment. We built a workshop there, as you saw it in the film. Now the Vietnam Vets had young people training and working with them, building tables and so on. We had teams to

repair and paint the houses. Not one of those men, or group of men, has been employed to do the work outside the homeland, even though they're wanting work. Instead, government and local authorities are still bringing in contractors. So, not one of those people, or groups of people that were trained have got work beyond the community, even though it's what they wanted to do. But the government, in fact, looks beyond the Aboriginal community to the white contractors. That's where the money is.

Glenda: Just one quick addition to what Neville just said – and as a response to what you had to say, Atalanti. And that was about Joanne as a natural teacher. It was obvious that we should use Joanne as the narrator for the film, but she's very shy on camera and I knew it wouldn't work because of that. But the one place she wasn't shy, ever, was in the classroom. She just assumed the persona of 'teacher'. She was just fantastic whenever she was with the kids, as you could see in the film. She had the authority, the competence, the confidence, absolutely everything. But if I wanted her to do anything on camera out of the classroom it was impossible. And that's why we ended up using Damien.

Neville: Could I just add that, when I first went to Donydji in 1974/1975, they had a little school. A bark hut. I think the Elcho Island Mission had set it up initially. There was a Yolngu teacher there. He had a strip of bark as a blackboard with charcoal for chalk, and the kids were sitting on planks – that's where I camped. That school survived for another year. But at that stage, there was a death in the teacher's family and he moved to another community in 1975. After that, there was no school, despite our efforts, until 2000/2001. And that was under a plastic shelter – tin and plastic – with a teacher coming from Elcho Island two to three days a week. We approached the Education Department to see if we could get money to build a schoolhouse, because there were about 20-24 children there. We were told that the community would have to show a stronger commitment and be prepared to actually stay there and learn for a year through the wet season, when there were no walls on the shed. There was nothing. They were sitting on mats under bark and tin. But they had to demonstrate a commitment. It was at that point I said, 'No, we'll raise our own money'. And that's where Rotary came to help. Joanne, from that early stage was committed to learning to teach. Later, she expressed her desire to include Yolngu cultural material in the classroom, when there was no non-Indigenous qualified teacher. Over many years, there was reluctance to give Joanne formal credit for this teaching because there was some early resistance to the inclusion of Yolngu cultural components in education. That's changed now.

Noel Maloney (audience): Firstly, it's such a powerful documentary. And congratulations, Glenda and Neville. It really moved me. Many things moved me in the documentary, but it was particularly one person saying – I'm not sure whether it was Tom – that they want 'no' in their language to be 'no' in English. That was a really powerful moment. I'm wondering what work and research is being done in the area of recognition for prior learning processes, at a Territory and a national level, to help people like Joanne? Because like Atalanti, I was really shocked that she couldn't get due recognition, and that there wasn't a capacity to translate from one culture to another, to get recognition. I'm wondering what research and work is being done around that? Does anyone know? Because it just seems like such an important thing to develop culturally flexible recognition of prior learning practices.

Neville: It's a very important point. It is not something that has benefited Joanne. To my mind – in Noel's words – 'culturally flexible recognition of prior learning practices' doesn't feature strongly, if at all, in bridging and teaching programs for Aboriginal people wanting to become qualified teachers. I don't know what's happened – what that research was about, or where it's gone, but certainly more such work needs to be done to inform the curriculum, both for the general population, and particularly for people like Joanne who are actually trying to develop a teaching program that's relevant to her own community.

Audience [in the Chat]: I know that RMIT delivers some health based, community based [VET] qualifications in the Territory. Is there some transferable work that's been done there?

Neville: Flinders University has a large health education component based in Nhulunbuy in north-east Arnhem Land. I don't know how much health worker training it does, or whether it just provides an opportunity for their own students to work in an Aboriginal community. Another issue is that the Northern Territory government, in its wisdom, has established a boarding college in Nhulunbuy, taking the young people away from their communities. This is to cater for students finishing their basic primary education in the homeland schools. It is a very well-resourced boarding college. They took five young people from Donydji, who were said to be the best students they had, because they were so committed and well disciplined. And that's the thing about children being raised and educated in their own communities, in contrast to those living in the large towns. But the five of them dropped out after about two years, in a few cases because of bullying from people in the town centres, who were a little more aggressive. For others, it was local drug use that bothered them. So, no one's gone through from Donydji. However, they've not put the effort back into helping Joanne in the homeland schools, where there's between 90 and 95 per cent attendance, compared with between 25 and 30 per cent attendance in the hub communities.

Hester: I have a comment about the flexibility with which Joanne is bridging the western discourse and her own in education. And also – because the title of the symposium is *Intermedial and Intercultural Creative Collaborations*, I think the sequence that you've got in the film with the mapping is fantastic. What settler Australians are used to is Cartesian mapping. Arnhem Land mapping, the local mapping, looks like the cobweb telling the story of the river and the dog – the water and the dog. It's a fantastic layering of languages to describe the land. The complexity for me is overwhelming. For the institutions to change their ways of thinking. it's quite a challenge.

Neville: There's a great reluctance on the part of many government organisations, and certainly companies – commercial interests, and particularly mining companies – to accept this interconnectedness, both at a social level and between society and the land. And that's where we had most opposition when we were trying to get the heritage nomination up [for the region] – which was successful, but unfortunately it has since been removed from the Register of the National Estate. We were never informed of that decision. What the mining companies wanted – and that was the big debate we had down here when they came to Melbourne – as did the Northern Territory Chamber of Mines, and the Northern Land Council, was access to my maps. I said, 'I can't give them to you unless the people agree'. They didn't want a cultural landscape because they didn't want connectedness. They wanted the anthropologist to provide them with discrete points on a map that they could put a fence around. Or run a road around them. They

didn't understand the sorts of things that the man was talking about – with the ancestral dogs, their travel underground, the change of languages, and their connectedness. As Joanne's father said, there are even connections with the clouds [laughs].

Felicity (audience): There's a sequence early in *Homeland story* around 'Let's make a film, and send it to them, to tell them we don't want what they want to do here. And to leave us alone'. That was powerful, and more so, because it was footage shot in the 1980s. What's so frustrating is that over and over again efforts to be heard, to be listened to, and to gain support, are still falling on deaf ears. The film concentrates on one homeland, but what is the relationship between the homelands? Is there a way, they can work together to counter the Tony Abbott rhetoric on homelands as 'a lifestyle choice' – if you make the 'lifestyle choice' to live on a homeland, then forget about any government investment in infrastructure and support. Do the homelands work together, or is that not possible?

Neville: The homelands don't really work together as a body, but they have their representatives. The resourcing organisations will often call on representatives from each of those homelands to have some input. It doesn't work well. There's no political lobby group for homelands. What tends to have happened is that Indigenous leaders elsewhere – often self-defined, or appointed by the white politicians or the media – have the say. But people like Tom won't get listened to. Or if they do, they're too 'bushy' and other people can't understand them. No-one makes an effort to actually understand what they're trying to say. So, there's no co-ordinated body representing homelands. There've been a large number of reports published by the Northern Territory government but nothing seems to change. Still, I think politically it will change, because there are some very articulate Yolngu people – men and women. Women now are having more say in Yolngu country than ever before. In Central Australia, we know that women have more power publicly because they have their own ceremonies and so on, and they've been very outspoken with their own colonial history, as well as social and cultural differences. Whereas for Yolngu people, where I was – the more traditionally orientated people – the women did not say much publicly, but they had a lot to say after the meetings. Now the older women, like the two that you saw on screen, are prepared to speak out. And this will be the change, I think. Women are coming into the discourse as well. And that's extending across homelands.

Felicity: One last question from me. We think about Vietnam Veterans and Rotary as quite conservative organisations. When I grew up in country towns, we had the Rotary Dairy Maid Festival and the ANZAC Day memorial essay we all had to write. So, I'm wondering how transformative it was for the Melbourne Rotary group and the Vietnam Vets to undertake, not just one visit, but this long commitment over time?

Neville: Enormously transformative. The Rotary Club of Melbourne came on board through their Working with Children committee. I'm not a Rotarian, but they had heard of what I was doing through my brother, who was a member here in Melbourne. They asked me to speak to them. And they helped with some other philanthropic groups, providing some money for the first school. They heard then of the success of that first school and came back and said, 'Can we do more to help you?' It's really unusual in Rotary, they tell me, to have a program that's been running for nearly 17 years. And it's raised about 1.8 million dollars for housing and community development. Most of those houses, workshops, the school, and some other

infrastructure you see at Donydji were built through philanthropy and the Vets [Australian veterans who served in Vietnam]. Government didn't contribute one thing.

As for the Vietnam Vets, it was seeing what was happening to my friends, whom I hadn't had much to do with since Vietnam in the late 1960s, that gave me the idea of developing the program. I realised that here was an opportunity to bring these two disadvantaged groups together. It's been a transformative experience – for every single man I've taken up there – away from drinking, and the stress of the workplace, and problems in society. They committed themselves; they got on extraordinarily well with the community; and the young [Donydji] men liked them because they weren't like academics [laughs]. They were people they could relate to – they were easy going. They made jokes. And they'd put each other down and so on.

But it also helped those Vietnam Veterans break out of some of the negative aspects of the lifestyle they'd fallen into. And it certainly helped me. Everyone has gone back home after being in Donydji and has reduced the amount of grog they previously consumed – the Donydji Homeland is a dry community by their own choice. The Vets have also become involved in Legacy, and in conservation movements, for example. Still conservative, you're quite right about that. Some are left-leaning. Others are, as you say, quite right wing. But enormously committed to what we're doing. As one man said to me, 'I thought I had it tough in Vietnam, but seeing how these people have to deal with bureaucracy, and with the government – it's worse for them. So, we want to help'.

Glenda: Can I just add something? Just to talk to Felicity's question a little more. When I first approached Rotary – actually there's some interesting background which I'll tell you about because it reflects on what kind of man Neville is. In 2015, the Documentary Australia Foundation (DAF) accepted *Homeland story* onto their register. It's a way of getting philanthropic money, but no money had come through from that source and I was really struggling to find some money to pay the editor. I went to a DAF workshop in Melbourne and they said partnerships are the key. You've got to have partnerships with the corporate world, philanthropy, whatever. And I thought: Rotary. Neville's been up there working with Rotary all these years – I should try them.

So, I found out who Neville had been working with. It was called the Donydji Subcommittee of Rotary at the Rotary Club of Melbourne. I rang up to talk to the Chairman and found out the sub-committee knew nothing about the film. At that point, I'd been working for five years with Neville. But because Neville's so self-effacing he had never mentioned the fact that a film was being made. Anyway, the Chair of the Committee was immediately interested and I was invited to give a talk about the film. I said to them, 'What I'd really love is for you to sign a piece of paper that says you support the making of this film, to indicate you are partnering me in making the film'. I was intending to use this statement of support to try and get philanthropic funding from other NGOs. And they said, 'Well would you like some money from us as well?' I said, 'Yeah, sure. I'd be very happy to take your money too!' And that Rotary sub-committee provided the first major tranche of money I received to progress the film. It allowed me to employ an archival assistant to digitise and catalogue Neville's 20,000 stills and 140 hours of archival material on which the history of Donydji is built, in the film. That was all Neville's doing.

The archival assistant worked for four months full time digitising everything. It was an enormous collection that Neville had, and the film wouldn't be what it is without all that material. Rotary suggested the archiving. They wanted the fact that they'd been working with the community for so long to be preserved and they wanted Neville's precious collection to be preserved. And they also wanted to become involved in the film because they thought it could be used as a tool to lobby government, to improve government's attitude to the homelands. So, Felicity, I think you need to revise your attitude to what kind of people inhabit Rotary! Certainly, the Rotary Club of Melbourne. They've been amazing. They say they're not political, nonetheless they were really concerned that in talking with politicians about the plight of Donydji they had got nowhere. And they felt a film would help them get somewhere. Or help the homelands get somewhere, which is why they were just endlessly supportive. They were the ones who enabled the film to be made. Because they not only gave me additional financial support beyond that money to do the archive, they facilitated another partnership with another philanthropic organisation, the Baker Foundation, who put a lot of money into the post-production of the film. It was really Rotary, their commitment to this – to the work, to the Donydji homeland – that enabled the film to be made.

Hester: I think all that's left to do is to thank everybody. I'm reminded that we need to keep our conversation going, those of us who want to take action in relation to this particular situation, which has to do with intermedial and intercultural collaboration, in practice perhaps. On that note, can we thank Glenda and Neville very much? And Damien who is doing something more important elsewhere today. And thank you everybody for attending.

Afterword by Glenda Hambly: *At the end came the script*

In the beginning was the word. Screenwriters like to point out that this is particularly true of a film. Without a script, there is no film. But in the case of *Homeland story,* while structural notes guided the making of the film during its long development, production, and editing phases, it was only very late on, one could truthfully say in post-production, that a complete script was written.

Rather than a script, what was crucial to this project was the collaboration with Neville White. For the nine years it took to complete the film, Neville was endlessly helpful in making the film happen. The film took an unusually long time because I could not get interest from the public broadcasters or from government funding agencies (Film Victoria and Screen Australia). Therefore, I could only work on it in a fitful fashion, squeezed in around paid work, progressing it when funding became available.

Production on the film began in 2010 when a cinematographer and I accompanied Neville White to Donydji, and we returned again in 2011 and 2012 to continue filming there. In Donydji, Neville acted as our guide, translator, and informant on everything that mattered. He was completely indispensable to the smooth location shoot, and thereafter, back in Melbourne he remained deeply involved, helping guide the project forward by providing additional information and support.

Originally, I had assumed the documentary would focus on his almost 40-year long relationship with the Donydji community. That is, it would be told from his point-of-view. I knew next to nothing about homelands (communities where First Nations people maintain connection to their traditional lands) before I started making the film, but the visits to the administrative centres at Yirrkala and Nhulunbuy in north-east Arnhem Land, to Donydji and other remote communities, quickly exposed the problems facing people who want to stay on their traditional lands. The obstacles largely originate in failures of government policy and servicing arrangements – and the mistaken assumption of white bureaucrats and politicians, living far away, that they know best about all matters pertaining to people living on their homelands.

After we filmed each year in Donydji, Neville would bring out 'treasures' (that's what I called them at the time) from the shelves of his study in suburban Melbourne, a study crammed with boxes of notes, maps, notebooks, books, and photos. He handed me VHS cassettes and DVDs, as well as stills that he had taken, which provided additional information on the people I was meeting on each trip to Donydji. One of these early treasures was a short film called *You keep asking, asking*, which he had made in 1985. An excerpt from it, in which people from the Donydji clans address the camera – demanding the mining companies leave them and their land alone – appears in *Homeland story*. Neville gave it to me so I could better understand Donydji homeland's history and the long battle the families had waged to protect their land.

Gradually I became aware that Neville was showing me just the tip of an iceberg, a very deep iceberg comprising 20,000 slides and photos and 140 hours of video, 8mm and 16mm film, which he had recorded from the time he arrived in Donydji in 1974 until the present. He had systematically added to the collection during his regular-as-clockwork annual visits to the Homeland. His audio-visual treasure trove contained everything from esoteric botanical information to cultural practices and the traditional cure for an infected ear. There were extended interviews with many community members. The archive provided a graphic record of how the Donydji homeland had transformed over time. It was a precious and unique collection. I was delighted when he gave me approval to use it. It immediately extended the scope of the documentary to include the 50-year long evolution of the homeland from nomadic times to the Digital Age.

The Donydji homeland was 'founded' in the late 1960s when key families stopped being nomadic and settled there – it was one of many sites in their annual nomadic cycle – in order to protect an important sacred site that had been damaged by BHP's mining explorations. My filming visits to Donydji had already extended the scope of the film beyond Neville and his long relationship with the community to include a contemporary political analysis of the endemic problems facing homeland communities. Now, it was extended again to include a historical overview. From this point on, all three elements became central to the film and it became a complex multi-strand narrative.

The next step was to select the most pertinent and interesting stills and moving footage to use in the documentary. I selected 2000 of the 20,000 stills, and around 20 hours of moving footage, from the 140 hours, based on the criterion of 'characters'. By that I mean, stills and moving footage that focused on inter-generational leaders at Donydji and the people Neville was closest to. This approach seemed the most promising given that audience empathy and emotional attachment to a character(s) is crucial to viewers accepting the message of the film.

The editor, Ken Sallows, followed my admittedly schematic structural notes to edit this archival material – together with the 60 hours of filming we had done in Donydji – into a three-hour cut. The structure centred on half a dozen characters: four men and two women. The balance of the story at this point was definitely tipping away from the white point of view, which I had originally assumed the film would have. However, although the subject matter was now both Indigenous and white, I made Neville the narrator of this three-hour version. The narration was pieced together from the many interviews I had done with him as well as newly written voice-over passages designed to knit the multi-strand narrative together.

I had, briefly, hoped the documentary might work as a three-part series for television. But in the real world of entertainment, there was no hope that an information-heavy series on a remote Indigenous community would interest the public broadcasters. Given this, the next step was to cut the three-hour version down to a cinema feature of 90 minutes. The three-hour version had focused on six characters across two Donydji families. This had to be reduced to just one family to focus the film and save time.

The spine of the feature film became the stories of four people or 'characters': Dhulutarama, one of the leaders who worked closely with Neville from 1974 onward; Dhulutarama's sons, Yilarama and Tom (who took over as leader from his father); and Dhulutarama's grand-daughter, Joanne Yindiri Guyula, a teacher at the school in contemporary Donydji. The intergenerational cascade of characters allowed the evolving history of the Donydji homeland to emerge in a natural but controlled way. Now, there was a strong group of characters on which to hang the history of the homeland and a consideration of the community's contemporary struggles. The emphasis in the story had swung to the Donydji family and, clearly, they needed their own narrator, not just Neville speaking on their behalf.

In 2015, I asked Joanne's brother, Damien Guyula, to translate the Ritharrngu and other Yolngu languages used in the film, so sub-titles could be added. Given his important role in approving the first assembly (the three-hour cut) on behalf of his community, he became a co-producer on the film. I also asked him to become 'the voice of Donydji', joining Neville as co-narrator. In 2017, when financial support from philanthropists allowed me to push the project forward again, it was time to sharpen and complete a script so the editor could finalise the film. The uneasy mix of Neville and Damien as co-narrators was not working well, and I had lost perspective on the project after working on it for so long. The circuit breaker was Anna Grieve, a highly experienced documentary filmmaker who came onto the project as the script consultant. Her objectivity and advice were invaluable. I reshaped the story and rewrote the narration, so that it became Damien's story: the story of his family and his community told from his point-of-view. While Neville retained a very important role in the film, his voice was only heard in synchronised passages or when his voice-over directly related to an action he was taking on screen. An Indigenous voice was finally in control of the story. But it was not enough to have Damien as a disembodied narrator. He needed to appear on screen for the audience to recognise him and build a bond with him early on. Fortunately, Neville's archive had, by this time, been lodged with the State Library of Victoria and this provided the opportunity to film Damien at the library, introducing and concluding the documentary.

Finally, after eight years – and after a number of versions of the film had been edited – the script was finalised and the final cut of the film could be completed. What appears to be an

unconventional approach is probably not that unusual for many complex documentary projects. In the case of *Homeland story*, it was born from the unusual circumstances of the film's extended development and production period, and the unusual way the building blocks of the narrative slowly emerged.

On the film's reception: *Homeland story* was released theatrically in Western Australia and the Northern Territory. It was a finalist in the ATOM awards for Best Documentary and is being released to the education market by Ronin Film. It had a national television release on NITV and has been available for extended periods on SBS on Demand. A recent review of the film called it 'an extraordinary, and extraordinarily uplifting, story of cross-cultural cooperation, support, and love that's also an important document of Australian history, bureaucracy, and policy – and of Donydji (East Arnhem Land) culture' (*The Sunday Age*, July 18 2021). We are negotiating with the Northern Territory government to screen the film for Ministers and parliamentarians, before repeating the exercise at the federal government level. We note that Covid-19 restrictions have delayed Northern Territory screenings many times in 2020-2021.

Homeland story is available from Ronin Films:
https://www.roninfilms.com.au/feature/16232/homeland-story.html