

Contact



A **STUDY GUIDE** BY ROGER STITSON



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SCREEN
AUSTRALIA

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Curriculum links: This study guide is mainly aimed at middle and upper secondary school levels, with relevance to English, Media Studies, History, SOSE/HSIE, Indigenous Studies, Geography, Anthropology, Ethics, Politics.



ABOVE: YUWALI AT THE PERCIVAL LAKES, 2008 RIGHT: THE MOMENT OF 'FIRST CONTACT' IN SEPTEMBER 1964

SYNOPSIS

In 1964, Yuwali was seventeen when her first contact with whitefellas was filmed. Now sixty-two, she tells the story behind this extraordinary footage.

Contact is constructed around one of the most compelling pieces of footage in Australian history: the moment in 1964 when a group of Martu women and children walk out from their nomadic existence of millennia in the Western Desert into a new universe – modern Australia. Remarkably, participants from both the Aboriginal and European sides are alive to tell their story.

The film centres on Yuwali, the beautiful seventeen-year-old girl we see making that giant leap on 24 September 1964. Now sixty-two, vibrant and with a gorgeous infectious laugh, Yuwali still remembers life before contact, when her tribe flourished in one of the most hostile environments on the planet.

29 May 1964 was the date Australian and European Scientists predicted the

Blue Streak rocket they were testing would break up upon re-entry into the earth's atmosphere and plummet into the Percival Lakes area, Yuwali's home. The authorities needed to make contact with anyone who might be living there and evacuate them.

The days counting down to blast off drive the narrative of the film. Day by day Yuwali, back at the Lakes, gives a riveting account as she and the nineteen others in her group are chased hundreds of kilometres around the desert trying to escape the 'devilmen' in the 'rocks that move' (four wheel drives). It's extremely rare to hear such an articulate and perceptive first hand account of life before contact and the shock and fear of seeing cars, planes and whitefellas for the first time. Yuwali tells us of the discussions among her family and kin about how to respond to these terrifying new experiences.

One of the more contentious elements of the story is the decision to take the twenty Martu from their desert home into Jigalong Mission after contact.

The man who made that decision is Terry Long, a Native Welfare Officer for the Western Australian Government. He provides the other narrative spine to *Contact* by revealing the mindset of the whites involved in the patrol, the story behind the Blue Streak rocket program and explaining why he made the decision to take the isolated group from their ancestral home.

Yuwali has lived through contact, missions, remote settlements, Native Title and desperate efforts to hold on to language and culture. In effect, she represents a microcosm of the Aboriginal experience since settlement in 1788. In many ways, *Contact* is not only a story about the past. It holds up a mirror to contemporary society.

Contact is based on a book *Cleared Out* by Sue Davenport, Peter Johnson and Yuwali. It contains much more detail about the story and associated elements (Rocket program and pre-contact life of the Martu). It is accessibly written and well researched and would be an ideal primary research tool.

BACKGROUND CONTEXT

Before examining the events and themes deriving from the central story told throughout *Contact*, we should first acquaint ourselves with some important and relevant historical context. This section looks at: the purpose of Woomera and the rocket testing experiments of the 1960s, set against the background of the cold war and international politics; the culture, lifestyle and survival of the Indigenous Australian desert peoples before first contact with European civilisation; and the long-lasting colonial concept of *terra nullius*.

A note on spelling: in general today the peoples of the Western Desert, as characterised by those who appear in *Contact*, are known as the Martu. An alternative spelling, which you may come across in your research, is Mardu. For example, see Robert Tonkinson's book, *The Mardu Aborigines*, as listed in this study guide's book references section.

Woomera and the Weapons Research Establishment (WRE)

- Draw a map of Australia, showing the state boundaries. Mark on the map the locations of Woomera. For visual context, also mark South Australia's capital city, Adelaide. Then show the general location of the Blue Streak 'dump area' around the Percival Lakes region of Western Australia, and the Western Desert. For context, also show the locations of Jigalong, Carnarvon (on the western coast) and Perth.
- Construction began of both the military research complex and the township of Woomera in the late 1940s, after World War Two. In pairs, carry out research and write a report on the reasons behind the establishment of Woomera. Explain the role of the United Kingdom government and military in this major undertaking. Why was Australia involved, and why was the general region north-west of Woomera selected for

nuclear tests and rocket launches? Why did the British eventually cease their military research testings at Woomera? Explain whether Woomera is still an Australian military research complex, and whether it is off-limits to most of the Australian civilian populace. (See 'Woomera, WRE, ELDO and Blue Streak' in website references.)

- Discuss in class and write a short commentary on the history, activities and purpose of the Weapons Research Establishment (WRE).

Rocket testing – ELDO and Blue Streak

- Plan and create an illustrated magazine page or an informative display poster about the Blue Streak rocket program and the European Launcher Development Organisation (ELDO) that ran the program. What was ELDO? When and why did ELDO cease its activities at Woomera? Explain whether the Blue Streak program was completed satisfactorily or not. Part of your magazine page or poster may be an illustration of the Blue Streak showing its components and where it was situated in the overall stages of ELDO's rocket program.

Cold war politics

- In a wider context, carry out appropriate background research then discuss in class and make notes on the general history of the cold war. For example, what constituted the cold war? Why and when did it start and end? Which main geo-political blocs were the adversaries, and why? In what ways did the construction and later development of atomic testing and rocketry at Woomera relate to the larger picture of the cold war? In what other ways did Australia participate in the cold war? In what ways was Australia affected by the cold war? In examining these questions you may wish to look at the attempt to ban the Communist Party of Australia, the Petrov spy case of 1954,

the split in the Australian Labor Party and the consequent formation of the Democratic Labor Party in 1955, Australia's participation in the Korean and Vietnam wars, the military conscription issues of the 1960s, and the results of federal elections between the 1950s and 1972. In a wider perspective, you may also wish to look at international events such as the construction of the Berlin Wall, and the Cuban Missile Crisis in the early 1960s. One way of doing this may be to form into groups and to carry out research on one of these issues, then present a commentary on it, with question and answer, to the rest of the class.

- Drawing on the previous activities, students in English classes may like to plan and draft short stories in the science fiction or the political spy thriller genre about Woomera and its military secrets (nuclear weapons and rocket testing), set against the cold war background. Alternatively, in small groups, draft a short play script for sound only (character dialogue, narration, sound effects, music), rehearse and revise as required, then produce and record for uploading to your school's intranet.

Indigenous culture before first contact

- As we see during the program, there were many specific examples of where first contact between the Martu peoples of the Western Desert and Europeans constituted a clash of cultures, customs, language, civilizations and world view. Who are the Martu people of the Western Desert? Carry out research then separate into small groups to plan and write an account of the lives of the Martu before first contact. Look at the Martu's relationship with the land, how they are sustained by what exists within the land and the general environment, flora and fauna: food, water, medicine, shelter, tools and weapons, clothing and ceremonial dress and paint, the

trading of artefacts and items of religious or spiritual significance derived from the land. How is food prepared for eating? Is food stored for future use?

Further, what are the purposes of fire and how is fire created and sustained by the desert people? Explain whether there are divisions of family, gender and age in responsibilities, labour and duties. Is life governed by the natural seasons? What role does the Dreaming play in day-to-day existence?

- During the program, Yuwali refers to Yimiri the Serpent, a spirit entity from the Dreaming. From the program, discuss in class how Yimiri is regarded, what he is, what he does, and what he means to the indigenous peoples of the desert. Carry out further research on the Rainbow Serpent as an Australian Aboriginal ancestral being, a being of prime importance as the creator of all life. Explain the Rainbow Serpent's deep and essential association with images of water. (More on Yimiri may be found in the section, Clash of Civilisations – Perceptions of reality.)
- Create a poster display featuring the Rainbow Serpent's influence and power in human existence.
- Plan and write a short fiction story told from the viewpoint of a child or young teenager of the Martu people of the Western Desert before the time of first contact with Europeans. Your story may extend back into ancient times or take place only decades ago; or it may encompass millennia in reality, dream or cultural memory. Consider carefully how you will integrate into your story aspects of the Dreaming.

Another approach to this activity may be to create the story in comic strip form, using words and illustrations (if necessary in collaboration with a fellow student). Decide on the style of the illustrations; you may wish to consider basing them, in a contemporary way, on traditional rock art paintings.



Terra nullius

- Research then define in class and make your own notes on the meaning of *terra nullius*. Why, when and where did this concept, belief or attitude originate in regards to Australian history? Discuss whether the concept of *terra nullius* in Australia has ever had any factual basis to it. (For more on this topic, see 'Terra nullius' in website references.)
- Carry out further research if necessary, then discuss in class and write an account of *terra nullius* arising from your viewing of the 1960s events and situations presented in *Contact*. Include a commentary on how you think the selection of the Percival Lakes region of the Western Desert as a rocket 'dump area' was planned and managed by the authorities in charge of the ELDO rocket launchings. Could they have organised the situation differently? How would you have gone about selecting a region where large rocket particles would fall from the sky, crash and burn?
- Plan and write a short fiction story in which the concept of *terra nullius* features as an important theme or plot point. As this is a work of fiction it is not necessary to refer directly to the term 'terra nullius' itself, but readers should be aware, as the story develops, that this is an element of your narrative.

CLASH OF CIVILISATIONS

The program essentially tells the story of first contact, in 1964, between Europeans and the group of twenty Martu women and children from the Western Desert, from two viewpoints. One viewpoint is that of the Martu, as seen particularly through the experience of seventeen-year-old Yuwali, recounted many decades later. The other is that of the Western Australian Native Welfare patrol officers, whose job was to track down the Martu and to remove them from their own environment to places such as Jigalong Mission.

Perceptions of reality

- From the program, discuss in class then write your own commentary on the ways in which the patrol officers (mainly as seen through the eyes of Terry Long) perceived the Martu clan they were tracking in 1964, and the ways in which the Martu perceived the Europeans who were tracking them. For example, explain why Yuwali refers to 'monsters', 'devils' and rocks that have 'come alive'. Why couldn't the patrol officers locate the clan at the first attempt? Why did they eventually have to employ Aboriginal guides?
- Describe in your own words, from the program, how Yimiri the serpent saved the Martu from being devoured by the white 'devils' and



YUWALI, THELMA AND FAMILY ON LOCATION

'monsters' when they first arrived in the Martu homelands. Fashion this into a short fiction story specifically aimed at children, and include illustrations where applicable. The story could be presented in mythic form, as though from the Dreaming. Working in pairs you may even wish to create it as a storyboard for a short film.

- Write a short commentary on what Terry Long means when he says, 'These people were living entirely off the land with absolutely no world sense at all of what was happening around them'. Refer especially to the words, 'world sense'. Discuss the possibility of reversing this interpretation, and asking whether the Anglo-Australian populace of the time had a 'world sense' of the culture and history of Indigenous Australia, or of other world cultures not familiar or similar to their own.
- Discuss in class and write a commentary on the importance and role of dingos to Yuwali's people. Provide examples of how this is

conveyed in the program, both from Yuwali's memories and from the use of archival film. Compare this to what you consider to be the Anglo-Australian attitude to dingos. Imagine the same film were to have been shown as a newsreel in theatres, or on television to a large audience in 1964–1965. Devise and write an Anglo-style commentary of these same scenes, aimed at an audience holding the same cultural values and outlook. Write another commentary of the same scenes for an indigenous audience.

- Yuwali says, 'I felt too sad ... Poor fella. It makes me sad seeing my dingo in the movie ... We started crying for our homeland'. Write a short commentary on the image of Yuwali's dingo as encapsulating and representing a greater Australian tragedy beyond the personal and the individual sadness.
- Plan and write a fiction story presented from the viewpoint of a young person such as Yuwali, who interprets what she sees, senses

and hears through her environmental experience and her Dreaming mythology, education and spiritual life. The story will be about first contact with people from a completely different civilisation, customs, beliefs, technology and world view.

- In contrast to the previous activity, prepare a report for a large national daily newspaper about the first contact with the Martu clan. It is likely that a reporter writing this piece, unless on location, would be relying principally on information such as interviews with patrol officers and other non-Indigenous sources. Consider the wording and viewpoint of your news story, because the Martu and their customs and way of life may be viewed as the 'Other', and the 'Strange', rather than the known and the accepted, designed for a largely white, Anglo-Australian metropolitan readership. Include a headline and, if appropriate, maps or photographs. Present your report in newspaper column format.



ABOVE: STILLS FROM WRE PATROL 1964
RIGHT: WRE PATROL OFFICER WALTER MACDOUGALL



Perceptions of food and clothing

- After first contact is made, Yuwali and the others in the clan are offered cooked meat from the patrol officers. Considering that the program depicts scenes of the Martu preparing their own cooked food, discuss why she refers to the patrol officers' cooked food as 'shit'. Why does she bury it?
- View carefully the sequences of the program that refer to clothing – the spoken dialogue and commentary, the photographs and the archival film. Discuss in class the cultural, environmental and even religious differences between the two races – Indigenous and European – in their attitudes towards the purposes and the very concept of clothing. Explain why Thelma today says, 'We couldn't go back to the old ways. No. We'd be too embarrassed not wearing clothes'. Why does she say this? What events have occurred to prompt this reaction? After discussion,

write a short commentary on clothing as a signifier of the disappearance of an ancient culture, and the power and force of another culture.

Sexual tension

- Almost immediately on first contact, sexual tension between the two groups became an issue. Discuss whether or not this occurred due to cultural misunderstanding by one, or the other, or both groups, or whether anyone was at fault or to blame. Consider the power relationships in the two groups as a possible motivator or factor in the issue. Account for the discrepancy between what Yuwali says about Patrol Officer Walter MacDougall, and what Terry Long tells us about him.
- Discuss then write a commentary on the attitude and behaviour of the Native Welfare officers' two indigenous guides, Sailor and Nyani, both towards the officers and the women in the Martu group.

'First contact' histories and judgements

- The study of history is not merely about what happened, when and why. It is coloured by interpretations, judgements, assessments, arguments and opinions, some of which arise from an historian's own cultural, ethnic and religious background and environment, some of which arise from the protagonists themselves, and from within historical records, such as official reports, letters etc. After having completed the previous activities, discuss in class the problematic issues that arise for historians in interpreting and assessing events from the past, drawing on your examination of the relationships between the welfare officers, the guides and the Martu group, as presented during the program. Consider the further problems that arise for historians when dealing with events where some of the protagonists are still living.



**YUWALI'S GROUP WITH ABORIGINAL GUIDES
NYANI (TOP) AND SAILOR (BOTTOM)**



- Plan and construct an illustrated poster display of first contact between the two groups depicted in the program. Consider carefully the message or viewpoint you wish the poster to impart. For example would you present the poster text, illustrations, colouring and layout to convey a positive impression of a meeting between Australian civilisations, or a tragedy?

The absence of adult males

- One of the themes throughout *Contact* is that of the missing father figure in the lives of Yuwali and the younger children, and the missing male authority figure in the lives of the older women. In class, discuss the relevance and importance of the missing adult males to the decision-making, behaviour and state of mind and emotions of the Martu group who feature during the program. To what extent was the group self-reliant, or dependent on adult males for survival, safety and well-being?

Offer a logical conjecture either as to where the men were during the group's ordeal, or as to what might have happened to them.

- Following from the previous activity, Native Welfare Officer Terry Long offers reasons for why it was vital, in his opinion, for the Martu group of women and children to be taken from the area of the rocket 'dump ground', apart from the obvious reason that it was physically dangerous to remain there any longer. In class, discuss those reasons and make a written note of them. Include a commentary as to whether Long's reasons were valid, or whether they were misguided, although well-meant.
- Discuss the reasons for why the younger members of the Martu group were tied up by the ankles at night by the Native Welfare officers and their guides. Comment on the rights and wrongs of this action. Was it justifiable? Do you think it was legal? Would it be legal today, decades later? How might the news media report these events?

- Imagine you were a news reporter for a television channel or a radio station observing the entire scenario. Plan and deliver a 'live' report that is either recorded as though for radio broadcast, or delivered to camera for a television news or current affairs bulletin. Consider the way in which you would 'slant' the story, and the emotional appeal you might inject into it.
- Follow up with a letter to the editor of a newspaper as though written by a senior in-command Native Welfare patrol officer justifying and explaining your staff's decisions.
- Yuwali says, 'If Dad was here we would have stayed'. Do you think she was correct? What do think would have happened if her father were with the group?
- Plan and write a short fiction story based on your conjectures of the previous activity. Present the story from the viewpoint that you consider most appropriate – whether told from a first-person character-narrator stance, or from a third-person observational view-



point; and whether narrated in the present or past tense.

REMOVAL TO JIGALONG

As we see in the program, the Martu group were quickly removed by trucks and four-wheel-drive cars to the then Christian mission settlement of Jigalong.

The journey

- Refer back to the map you made showing Jigalong and the Percival Lakes (See 'Background Context' on page 3 of this guide). Roughly, in kilometres, how far was their journey from the 'dump area' of the Percival Lakes region of the Western Desert to Jigalong?
- When the journey by motorised convey starts, Yuwali refers to 'all the trees and ground running'. In what ways is she creating an understanding and an interpretation of the new realities she is now experiencing? Imagine you were one of the children on that journey.

Write a short account of that journey from the child's viewpoint, a viewpoint derived from the culture and mythology of the land around you.

Removal in retrospect

- Of the arrival of the Martu group in Jigalong, Terry Long says, 'We ought to have handled it much better than this'. Discuss in class what Long means. How was the removal from traditional lands and the arrival in Jigalong 'handled', and how could it have been 'better'? Should the Martu have been allowed to return to their homeland after the rocket testing was completed, or are there good reasons for disallowing this to happen? Did the Western Australian government (or other state or federal governments) have a policy on removing 'nomadic' and tribal Indigenous Australians, as hunter-gatherers, from their traditional lands? Was there a debate at the time about what policy to pursue in relation

to Aborigines still living traditionally in the desert? Given that there were no men with this group and their extreme isolation in the desert what do you think should have happened to this group?

Jigalong timeline to the present day

- Jigalong was already an important settlement well before the time Yuwali and her people arrived there. Carry out appropriate research and construct a notated timeline of the history of Jigalong and its link to the European and Aboriginal populace, from 1907, when Jigalong was established, to Martu self-determination in 1974, and beyond to the present day. Add a short commentary explaining how Jigalong is associated with the famous story of the rabbit-proof fence, as presented in Doris Pilkington's biographical book, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996), and the film version of the book, titled *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip



**YUWALI AND HER GROUP
AT THE TIME OF CONTACT**

Noyce, 2002). (Note that the world premiere of the film was screened at Jigalong.)

ADAPTING: PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

There are many scenes during the program that take place in the present day, or 'now', in contrast to the use of a variety of archival film, allowing us to observe how the participants in the events of 1964 are faring in contemporary times.

- From what you have seen in the program, discuss then write your own commentary on whether Yuwali, Thelma, the other members of the Martu group and their families have adapted successfully (or as successfully as could be considered possible) to the circumstances that were forced upon them in 1964. What do you think they can teach the rest of the Australian populace, those of Anglo and European heritage, and the more recent arrivals from other parts of

the world? Do you think they are sad, bitter, resigned to their fate, or not? Have they overcome? Is their future positive?

- Discuss the role being played by the older Yuwali and Thelma in the final sequence of the program, as they watch their young selves on film. What does this sequence tell us about the Martu today? What is the significance of the camera shots of the young members of the family as they sit watching the old film footage, and playing music?
- If you were able to correspond with those who experienced removal from their Western Desert homeland, and those who took part in the removal process, what five questions would you most want to ask of their experiences, thoughts and feelings? What do you think their answers and responses might be?
- Carry out further research if necessary, then, working in pairs, plan and create an illustrated double-page magazine spread about the present-day Martu and their own-

ership of their ancient homelands. You may wish to examine this in relation to uranium mining leases in the general region, and how they impact on traditional lands. Use desktop publishing software to lay out and format your pages.

MEDIA STUDIES

Carry out the following activities.

- Discuss in class then write your own commentary on the dual narrative approach taken by the filmmakers to the construction of *Contact* – the story as experienced from the Martu viewpoint, and the story from the European (or Native Welfare Officers') viewpoint. Provide examples from the program as to how this is achieved. In what ways does this technique add to our understanding of the story being narrated, and the development of the narrative themes?
- The filmmakers (Martin Butler and Bentley Dean) comment in the program's press kit information



that Yuwali and Thelma, the two Martu women who principally appear on-camera, 'bring this story and their unique situation in 1964 to life so vibrantly and accessibly that they came to set the pace of the narrative – taking us back to that time and place without the use of dramatic recreations'.

Discuss what the filmmakers mean by Yuwali and Thelma setting 'the pace of the narrative'. How is this achieved? Provide examples from the program. As an older woman, how does Yuwali's on-camera and on-location presence during the program avoid the need for 'dramatic recreations'? How effective is this in involving the viewing audience? What difference would it have made had a young actor played Yuwali as a seventeen-year-old, recreating her experiences from 1964?

- Discuss, referring to examples from the program, the importance and effectiveness of the use of historical archival film and photographs throughout *Contact*.

- The opening camera shot of the film, showing a timelapse view of the night sky and stars, is repeated a number of times throughout the narrative. Write a commentary on the purpose, impact and possible meanings of this visual motif. At what moments does it appear during the film, and why? In your discussion, you may wish to refer to Aboriginal concepts of time and timelessness, to the seasons, to change, and the Dreaming.
- From the press kit, the filmmakers report the following: 'The filming on location at Percival Lakes had to be undertaken in mid winter as it's too hot and dangerous outside of those months. To set up the shoot required a six-month lead time and was clearly going to be a major operation. All fuel, food and water, plus the necessary transport for over twenty people have to be taken in to probably the most remote part of Australia.'

The filmmakers set off not knowing if they have yet acquired funding to

cover expenses. They experience fuel leaks on one of their four-wheel drives, with the possibility of having to dump it in the desert. There are accidents requiring first aid treatment, red dust invades the camera equipment, there are punctures, bogs, and, short of water for washing, they come across a waterhole full of camel faeces ... Imagine you are one of the filmmakers. Write a set of diary entries about the difficulties of planning, logistics and the shoot. Express your emotions about the experience. Was it worthwhile at the time? Is it worthwhile now, looking back?

- If you were to promote *Contact* via a display poster, how would you go about it in text, illustration, use of colouring and thematic message? Plan and construct a poster promotion.
- Plan and write a review of *Contact* in 350–400 words, for a newspaper's weekly television liftout magazine. Carefully consider the audience you are aiming at, and write your review accordingly.

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YIMIRI, THE FRESHWATER SPRING IN
THE MIDDLE OF THE SALT LAKE



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