



Left
Ruby Yarrowin in the 1960s

Karrabing: keeping country live

In 1984, young American student **elizabeth povinelli** travelled to Darwin to study the economic practices and political views of Indigenous women. She has returned every year since.

text
Shane Thamm

photograph
Courtesy Linda Davis

below
Ruby Yarrowin
with her family

With an entire continent to choose from for her research, Elizabeth Povinelli set off for Belyuen, an Indigenous community on the other side of Darwin harbour.

It was the first step toward becoming Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University, New York City, and adjunct Professor at CDU. But she didn't know that at the time, nor did she know anything about Belyuen or anthropology then.

"I knew nothing about Australia other than what I had seen in movies. And I arrived in Darwin by chance, a chance heavily mediated by the regular routes of airline flights," she said.

Some 25 years on, Professor Povinelli continues to work closely with three Indigenous families. Together they are developing a unique method of archiving the social, historical and cultural knowledge of their traditional land in the Anson Bay region southwest of Darwin. Their project is called *Karrabing: keeping country live*.

Karrabing is an Emiyengal word that refers to the tide's final ebb before it returns, and reflects the families' hope to discover a way of life that joins Indigenous and non-Indigenous aspirations.

Ultimately, *Karrabing* will become a real-world library, where information is literally embedded into the landscape. Future visitors will be able to use mobile phones to photograph two-dimensional barcodes placed on the land, which will prompt the phone to download a webpage. They might view videos or recordings of ancestors discussing the site, discover local environmental knowledge, or for the adventure tourist, information about good places to fish and hunt.

Professor Povinelli continues to record their cultural histories to ensure the families have the personal resources to make *Karrabing* work, and to establish a sustainable life at Anson Bay. She remains a constant voice of encouragement for them to gain essential skills. Some of the people already have certificates in welding, carpentry, and power and water management, but what they don't have is money or physical resources, something *Karrabing* could provide if it has an economic flow-on effect. If the concept succeeds, the families hope to develop a tourism business, or have it adapted for use at tourist Meccas around the globe as a "live guide" embedded into the destination.

Of equal importance to the families is the opportunity to reconnect with their land after a generation of separation. In the 1930s, Ruby Yarrowin and her parents' generation were the last permanent residents of southern Anson Bay. They moved north to Belyuen, then were forcibly interned at the Katherine Aboriginal war camps during World War II. They fled because of the violence and walked more than 200 km back to Anson Bay. After the war, they returned to Belyuen where Ruby married and raised her children and grandchildren.

In 2007, her extended family fled Belyuen because of violence and they are now seeking to return to the place where this long journey started. Linda Yarrowin, daughter of Ruby Yarrowin, said the happiness of their children was central to their desire to make life on their land work.

"When you are there you feel your grandparents, your people walking around. You want your children to be there," she said.

