



LIBBY TUDBALL



STUDYGUIDE

BLACK CHICKS TALKING



INTRODUCTION

In *Black Chicks Talking*, six Indigenous Australian women meet for dinner. During a gourmet Indigenous meal, they discuss their lives in an intimate, sometimes harrowing, and joyful account. The film provides glimpses of each woman's background and insights into their very varied lives. From the winners throne of Miss Australia; to the warm waters of the Buccaneer archipelago; to the dormitory on Cherbourg Mission, we move through a range of settings.

Themes of culture, identity and denial run through the women's stories. They reveal a legacy of past government 'Protection' Acts and policies when Indigenous people were moved from their traditional lands, and 'mixed race' children (now known as The Stolen Generations) were institutionalised with disastrous consequences.

Rosanna Angus, Cilla Malone, Deborah Mailman, Kathryn Hay and Tammy Williams talk to the director, Leah Purcell, about their extraordinary lives in a passionate and challenging exploration of Black Identity.

CURRICULUM LINKS

Black Chicks Talking will have relevance for students of Cultural studies, Indigenous studies, Australian studies, Studies of Society and Environment, English, Drama and Media studies. The film is suitable for students from middle to senior secondary school and at the tertiary education level. Many of the ac-

tivities are based on an integrated curriculum approach, drawing on English skills, as well as content understanding from other disciplines.

BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM

WHO ARE INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS?

Students should be able to answer this question, as the definition is important in understanding Aboriginality today. The term 'Aboriginal' has become one of the most disputed in the Australian language. It was not until 1976, that distinctions between 'full' and 'part' Aborigines were abandoned in recognition of the fact that being Aboriginal is not just a biological issue. The Commonwealth government definition today is social more than racial, in keeping with the change in Australian attitudes away from racist thinking about other peoples.

MAILMAN HAS DEVELOPED A SUCCESSFUL CAREER AS AN ACTRESS



An Aboriginal person is defined as a person who is a descendent of an Indigenous inhabitant of Australia, identifies as an Aboriginal, and is recognised as Aboriginal by members of the community in which he or she lives.¹

(The same three components, descent, self-identification and community acceptance, are also used for Torres Strait Islanders.)

Sometimes non-Aboriginal people get confused by the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Aboriginal people are those whose traditional cultures and lands lie on the mainland and most of the islands, including Tasmania, Fraser Island, Palm Island, Mornington Island, Groote Eylandt, Bathurst and Melville Islands. The Torres Strait Islands lie between the northern tip of Cape York in Queensland and the south-west coast of Papua New Guinea. The Torres Strait Islanders have many cultural similarities with the peoples of Papua New Guinea and the Pacific.

INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS TODAY

Facts from the 2001 census:

- There were 410,000 Aboriginal Australians in the 2001 census
- Only a small minority live in rural or remote areas
- Most live in urban settings
- Nearly one-third of the Australians residents who self-identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander persons live in capital cities.
- Very few Aboriginal families today have an Aboriginal wife and husband living together. The 2001 census reveals that eighty seven per cent of couples with an Aboriginal member were intermixed. A far greater proportion of first and second generation Greeks and Italians living in Australia marry within their own group than Aborigines living in cities.
- In most cases, the children of mixed households are identified by their parents as Aboriginal, so Aborigines partnering with non-Aborigines will not reduce the number of Aborigines.



- Film-maker Leah Purcell makes the point that statistics show that the Indigenous population in Australia is increasing. By 2006, it is predicted that there will be 320,000 'Black Chicks' in Australia.



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Students should be familiar with the following facts before watching the film:

- Each of the women in *Black Chicks Talking* have lived through times when life was tough for Indigenous Australians because of government policies, racist attitudes and ignorance.
- But they have also lived through a time when Aboriginal people have

developed increasing self-determination, and there has been more celebration of Indigenous cultures. The voices of Indigenous Australians are now heard through music, art, radio, television, film, community action, and far more coverage of Indigenous issues in the media and education.

- The parents of all the 'Black Chicks' lived under government policies where Indigenous Australians lives were controlled by the government and they had to seek permission to travel or marry. They often received lower wages than white Australians and fewer education opportunities.
- Until the 1960s, successive Australian governments had aimed to 'assimilate' Aboriginal people into white society. There was a theory that Aboriginal culture and identity would eventually die out. However, governments underestimated the powerful links of Aboriginal people, and the strength of their traditions and culture. For many Indigenous Australians, like Deborah Mailman's





father Wally, it was difficult to feel proud of your heritage.

- In 1967, Australians voted in a national referendum to give Aboriginal people the right to vote and to be counted in the census as Australians for the first time. The parents of all the 'Black Chicks' would not have been counted as Australians when they were young, as they lived at a time when the White Australia Policy was law.
- There are few Aboriginal families in Australia who have not been touched by the experience of the forced removal of children from their families.
- All of the 'Black Chicks' would have been educated at a time when there was very little taught about Indig-

enous studies in schools.

AFTER WATCHING THE FILM

Note: Many of these activities could be completed either as oral or written tasks with the whole class, or in small groups, or as individual projects.

- Firstly, write down a few of your own thoughts about *Black Chicks Talking*.
- What do you think are the key themes?
- How would you describe the genre of the film?
- Write a short description of your reactions to the film and then compare your descriptions with other class members.



Read and discuss your views on each of these statements about *Black Chicks Talking*:

'*Black Chicks Talking* celebrates the survival and growth of Indigenous Australian women's culture.'

'*Black Chicks Talking* has messages for all Australians. It tells us that Indigenous Australian women have often had to deal with tough pasts because they are Indigenous, but it tells us that their Aboriginality is strong and growing.'

- Write and discuss your own statements about the film

EXPLORING THE DIRECTOR'S IDEAS AND THOUGHTS

Leah Purcell, is an actor, director and proud Goa-Gungurri—Wakka Wakka woman. She comes from a long line of vaudevillians and learnt her trade at family gatherings and in high school musicals. She has had extensive acting experience as well as critical acclaim internationally for her performance in the play *Box the Pony*, which she co-wrote. She has also received awards for her acting roles in *Lantana* and the *Marriage of Figaro*.

Leah says *Black Chicks Talking* is,

...funky. It's sexy, it's fun, it's new ground. It's young black women looking good and talking strong and it just blows every stereotypical viewpoint away.

- Do you agree with Purcell's view of her film?
- What stereotypical viewpoints about Indigenous Australian women are held by some members of the community?
- Why have stereotypical viewpoints been generated in the public mind about Indigenous Australians?
- What evidence is there of 'black humour' in the film?

Leah says,

I reckon I've been born with story telling from a million years ago. Blackfellas just have it, that's how we communicated in

the Dreamtime. Whether it was good, bad, funny or a sad incident that happened we told it through stories, we danced it, we sang it. I was brought up around that. When we had family parties at home I would watch and listen. I learnt from my Elders, but I think that ability of telling a good yarn is something that goes way, way back.

- What is the Dreamtime?
- Is *Black Chicks Talking* an example of good story telling?
- Do some library and Internet research to find more examples of Indigenous Australians telling their stories. One starting point is the web site <http://yarrahealing.melb.catholic.edu.au> where people tell their stories.

Leah says,

The hardest thing about working on the documentary was the split between being the director who needed the story—and the selfishness in that—and me, who will cry at the drop of a hat if my friend is in trouble. I've put these women through the wringer. Sometimes at night I'd think, what a bitch I am to push them to get to this essence, to trigger a raw emotion for this documentary...they said, Leah, we have done this because we trust you.

- In a class discussion or small groups, talk about whether you think it would have been a stressful experience for all the women, or harder for some more than others?
- What evidence is there in the film that shows the women trusted Leah?



EXPLORING THE WOMEN'S STORIES

ROSANNA ANGUS, COMMUNITY WARDEN AND CULTURAL TOUR GUIDE, BARDI AND JAWI CLAN

Rosanna is the mother of two boys and sees that as her key role, but she has had many varied roles in her district including working with ATSIC as a secretary, in family and children's services, as a tour guide and in Aboriginal health promotions. Rosanna's family have been traditional leaders and land-owners in the Buccaneer archipelago for generations.

- How does Rosanna show how important her culture is to her and her family?
- What factors make her life very different from all the other women?
- Why does she believe that she will be a 'boss woman'?

THE BEGINNING OF THE FILM

At the start of the film, viewers see the warning:

The film contains images of archival footage from Cherbourg photographed between 1905-1910 and in respect to the Mailman and Malone families, the showing of photographs of the late Mr Wally Mailman and Mr Lenny Malone. This may cause distress to some viewers.

- Explain why this would appear at the start of the film?

As the film begins, viewers see the women gathering together and being seated for the dinner.

- How do they all introduce themselves?
- Why is it important for Indigenous women to identify with their clan?
- What impressions do you form about the focus of the film and what it is about at the start?

TAMMY HAS HAD AN AMAZING JOURNEY FROM BEING A SCHOOLGIRL IN GYMPIE, TO LAWYER AND DELEGATE AT NUMEROUS UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCES





Rosanna says,

...When people burn-off brush on the land, my family gets sores on their legs...they're burning our Ly'rhnn, our inner spirituality. That's how close our association with the land is.

- Why does she think 'cultural tourism' is important today?
- What goals does she have for her two boys?

CILLA MALONE, MOTHER, WAKKA WAKKA PEOPLE

Cilla has had a tough life. She was born in 1966 in the Cherbourg Aboriginal community. She was placed in a government run dormitory at the age of six months, at a time when Aboriginal Australians had very few rights. Cherbourg was established as a government mission in 1904. Since 1986, the community has been controlled by the local Indigenous community. Cilla says the authorities told her that her Mum was fair with long black hair, so

... anytime we saw someone with long black hair we'd run up and call 'Mum, Mum' and she'd say, I'm not your Mum.

- How do we know that Cilla has had a tough life?
- When she tells the story about being determined to have her babies

at Cherbourg, what is she revealing about her attitudes to white people?

- Why did she call her older sister Mum?
- What impact do you think being institutionalised at such a young age would have on young children?
- What struggles has Cilla had to deal with herself?
- What ingredients does she want to put into her 'mother's love cake'?
- How do you think Cilla would have felt when she saw the scene in which her girls sing?

DEBORAH MAILMAN, ACTOR, BORN AND BRED IN MOUNT ISA, KALKADOON COUNTRY

Deborah's childhood was spent in Mt Isa, where her father was a legendary rodeo rider. She was brought up at a time when Aboriginal people were often ashamed to celebrate their Aboriginality because of racist attitudes.

Mailman has developed a successful career as an actress. She won the Australian 2002 Silver Logie (TV industry award) for Outstanding Actress in a Series for her performance in Channel Ten's, *The Secret Life of Us*. She also won the 1998 Australian Film Institute's Best Actress Award for her performance in *Radiance*.

- How does Deb feel about her AFI Best Actress Award in comparison with her recognition for *The Secret Life of Us*?
- In *Black Chicks Talking*, how does Deborah show that she really treasures her father's links with Indigenous traditions?
- How does she feel about her own Aboriginality?
- What are Deborah's hopes for the future?

KATHRYN HAY, FIRST ABORIGINAL MISS AUSTRALIA, FROM TASMANIA

Leah Purcell says:

I feel very responsible for Kathryn, because I had a big push in her diving into her past, ...her family's history and herself. When we did the documentary, her family wasn't too sure about it. Kathryn's journey is very raw. I went through what she's going through when I was fourteen. I was very honoured that she trusted me and absolutely proud of her for taking up the fight with me...she believed in her story, she believed in stirring within her family about the Aboriginality there.

'Kathryn struggles with her own sense of her Aboriginality during the making of *Black Chicks Talking*.'

- Discuss this statement with other class members.

- When Kathryn introduces herself at the start of the film, she is the only one who doesn't identify with a clan grouping? How can you explain this?
- When did Kathryn first realise that she is Aboriginal? How do you think she felt about this at the time?
- What reasons can you suggest to explain why Kathryn's mother is reluctant to talk about her Aboriginality with her daughter?
- How do you think Kathryn felt about her Aboriginality becoming a focus in 1999 when she won the Miss Australia award?
- Do you think Kathryn feels inadequate at times during *Black Chicks Talking*? Justify your answer.
- Do you think Kathryn has developed a clearer sense of her identity by the end of the film?

TAMMY WILLIAMS, LAWYER, FROM GYMPIE, QUEENSLAND, MURRI WOMAN

Tammy has had an amazing journey. From a schoolgirl in Gympie, to lawyer and delegate at numerous United Nations conferences. In 1995, she represented Australia at the UN Human Rights Commission to speak about human rights violations. In 1996, she worked with former Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev and gave a presentation in front of 750 world leaders. She is currently a director of the Indigenous Enterprise Partnership, and a governor of the Foundation for Young Australians.

- Suggest reasons why Tammy has been so successful in her career?
- How did she become involved with Michael Jackson's World Children's conference?
- Why was she a successful applicant

SHE [CILLA] WAS PLACED IN A GOVERNMENT RUN DORMITORY AT THE AGE OF SIX MONTHS, AT A TIME WHEN ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS HAD VERY FEW RIGHTS



vides a very, very strong base my people need to be centred, to see things, to be able to prosper and get out there.

- In what ways does *Black Chicks Talking* 'rattle the bones of society about what it is to be an urban contemporary Aborigine today'?
- What do you think is meant by Aboriginality?
- Do you think there is evidence in the film amongst the women's views of a re-assertion of Aboriginality?
- What other factors have added to increasing celebration of Aboriginality?

IDENTITY

Black Chicks Talking explores the identity that each woman has developed. Think about what factors influence your sense of identity, where you belong, and how you have become the person you are. In small groups, or as a class, discuss the possible influences. Then compare your list with these factors:

- ethnicity
- where you were born and where you now live

out of 45,000 Australians?

- In *Black Chicks Talking*, Tammy tells the story of when the word nigger was written above her photo in the school magazine, and she hit the girl who wrote it. Why did she hit her? How did her mother say she should deal with racism?
- How do we know that Tammy is very proud of her mother?
- What are Tammy's most recent achievements on the world stage?
- How did Tammy react to Leah's suggestion of doing a victory dance?

EXPLORING KEY THEMES

CELEBRATING ABORIGINALITY

Leah Purcell says:

I'm one of many from the new generation who are sent to rattle the bones of society about what it is to be an urban contemporary Aborigine today. We have a right to speak, to grasp hold of opportunities for the betterment of our people. I strongly believe that culture is important to every black person and that is what will stabilise us. It pro-



- heritage
- culture
- parents and family origins
- gender
- your age group
- your peer group
- sexuality and relationships
- religion
- social life and groups you belong to
- media
- leisure activities
- Suggest other influences not included in this list. What do you think are the main influences on your sense of identity? Try to rank these from the least to most important for you. Compare and talk about your ranking with others in the class.
- Now talk about which factors you think have had an influence on each of the 'Black Chicks', drawing on evidence you see in the film.

MEDIA STUDIES

- Write a review of *Black Chicks Talking* for a film journal.
- Give the documentary a rating and then justify your score.
- Discuss how you think the meeting over dinner works as an entry point for the documentary and as a link for the whole film?

In a class discussion talk about these aspects of *Black Chicks Talking*:

- Filming techniques
- The way the story line has been constructed
- Choice of segments and editing decisions
- The role of Leah Purcell in the film.

The producer Bain Stewart, who is Aboriginal, says that his own experiences have been important in the making of the film. He says,

I'm aware of the subject matter, being a Blackfella, and also of my sister's, my mother's, my aunties' stories. I totally related to the Black Chicks, I know what they're on about. So I know the gravity and significance of the stories.

- Talk about what is grave and significant about the stories?

- What is the role of the producer in film-making? In what ways would it help for the producer to understand and empathise with the characters and the themes?

THE END OF THE FILM

- At the end of the film, the women talk about the future. What conclusions do they draw? What similarities and differences are there in their views?
- Leah says, 'Hopefully the end song isn't too out there, but that's me anyway. It rocks and I love it'. What are your reactions to Leah Purcell's song 'Never Forget'? ('Tidda Kaia' or 'Sister Love')

DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

- Write a reflection where you explore your thoughts about what you learned from the documentary, *Black Chicks Talking*.
- Discuss how *Black Chicks Talking* influences your impressions of Indigenous Australian women?

FURTHER ACTIVITIES AND REFERENCES

- Visit these web sites to find out more about the career and achievements of director Leah Purcell.
http://www.oncueonline.com.au/oncue/profile/celebs/leah_purcell/leah_purcell.htm
<http://www.austinchronicle.com/film/pages/people/13111.html>
- Visit <http://www.austlii.edu.au> http://www.atsic.gov.au/default_ns.asp <http://www.lorefortheland.com.au> to find out more about reconciliation and current Indigenous issues.
- In every state and territory of Australia, there are Indigenous communities often living in areas that were formerly missions of government controlled areas. Try to find out more about the past Indigenous history and current issues in your local communities.
- Other excellent web sites to explore Indigenous issues are:
The Journey of Healing Reconciliation site, <http://www.alphalink.net.au/~rez/Journey>

Yarra Healing, <http://yarrahealing.melb.catholic.edu.au>

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ *The Little Red, Yellow and Black (and green and blue and white) Book: A short guide to Indigenous Australia* (1994) pages 2 & 3, prepared by Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies on behalf of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation.

All the photographs used in this study guide were taken by Jo-Anne Driesens

Black Chicks Talking is available on video from:

Film Australia Sales
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