



PATRICIA KELLY / MAUREEN AH SAM

ffcaustralia
Film Finance Corporation

STUDYGUIDE

AUSTRALIAN SCREEN EDUCATION

1

Vis a Vis: Techno Tribal

Vis a Vis: Techno Tribal

Synopsis

Vis a Vis: Techno Tribal witnesses two powerful and articulate performance artists confronting the stereotypes and prejudices about Indigenous people in Australia and the USA. In Australia the experience of Indigenous marginalization by the colonizing culture is 300 years younger than in America. Have these 300 years made significant differences to the uneasy co-existence of these cultures?

Actor-writer and comedienne Ningali Lawford from the Kimberley in Western Australia, and James Luna, a conceptual performance artist from the Luiseno La Jolla reservation in California, meet through a satellite video link and embark on a journey of dialogue, demonstration and discovery. Using both performance and historical illustration, they canvass the contemporary Indigenous landscape, the constant choices facing them over representation and responsibility, and the effects on their lives of the mainstream white society in which they work. Their candid and emotional

connections reveal rich comic talent, self-doubt, and great differences in their approaches to life and work.

The financing and set-up was by white filmmakers aware that the new technologies, though increasingly-common-place, are rarely in the hands of marginalized or Indigenous communities.

James: We're taking advantage of this media because for so long, we've been spoken about, spoken for, photographed, videotaped ... but you know we aren't the people who are in control ...

Ningali: You should see my place. I've never had reality TV in my house before!

A film which features two performance artists was always going to be a hybrid of documentary and drama, and *Vis a Vis: Techno Tribal* can perhaps best be seen as an observation in four acts. The agenda for what would happen was entirely unknown.

What an interesting video to say the least. Vis a Vis: Techno Tribal, features two Indigenous performing artists.

The use of satellite video link brings us into the twenty-first century and what a great way for Ningali and James to share their cultural experiences, challenge stereotypes, racism and bring 'Indigenous/Black history' into the education arena, the wider community and even into the homes of non-Indigenous people. Ningali and James have similar experiences yet they are 10,000 kilometres apart and hail from very different and unique Indigenous Nations.

Maureen Ah Sam



Warning

- Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders are warned that the film may contain images and sounds of deceased persons.
- Any topics relating to racism can raise painful and challenging issues for some students. It is important to create a safe learning

Vis a Vis: Techno Tribal 52 minutes, 2003 Film Finance Corporation Australia Ltd and Nick Torrens Film Productions
Director: Nick Torrens, Steven Lawrence, Phil Lucas **Producer:** Nick Torrens, Steven Lawrence





environment by agreeing on appropriate and inappropriate words and terms and how to speak and listen respectfully.

- There is occasional swearing in this video, occurring in the context of performance. Always preview to see if a video is suitable for your students.

Before watching the video

1. Introduce Key Words

Indigenous, racism, ethnicity, stereotypes, institutionalized racism, diabetes, mainstream, marginalization, identity, kin, totem, overseer, stolen generations, reservation, Language, Kreol.

Why are key words important?

Understanding key terms is the basis for understanding and helps students to expand vocabulary in context.

2. Find out what students already know

Students may know a lot, a little, or have a lot of misinformation about Indigenous people and issues. It is helpful to begin by brainstorming what they already know. Revisit their comments after watching the video and doing work on the issues. Ask what information was accurate? What was inaccurate? What will they do with the new information?

Curriculum links

Suitable for general community use and for students from senior secondary upwards, particularly in SOSE, English, Australian History, Performing Arts, Legal Studies and Media Studies.

At Tertiary level, the video is relevant to Built Environment, Engineering, Creative Industries (Music, Performing Arts, Media), Health, Politics, Justice Studies, Law and Religious Studies and Peace Studies.

The artists: Ningali Lawford and James Luna

Ningali Josie Lawford was born in 1967 at Wangkatjungka, near Fitzroy Crossing in the Kimberley Region of WA. She grew up on a cattle station where her father was an overseer. She attended high school in Perth and then spent a year in Alaska as





the recipient of an American Field Scholarship. On her return she joined The Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre in Sydney.¹ She tells stories in three languages, Walmatjarri and Wangkatjungka (her traditional language), English, which she learned when she was thirteen, and Kreol, the synthesis of the two. She does a solo show called *Ningali*, in which she sings, dances and does stand-up comedy.

Discussion

The video begins with a written and spoken dedication from Ningali:

Dedicated to the memory of my two grandmothers Jinny James and Emily Forrest, the two strongest women I ever knew. I will always carry everything you both taught me.

Activity

- Ask students to identify a role model who is significant in their

lives, or someone they would like to have as a role model. Ask them to prepare an interesting graphic or written way of listing the qualities they most admire in this person and why they are important at this point in their lives.

- Ask them to find a song or a poem, a picture or a story that illustrates one of these qualities and present it to the group.

James Luna was born in California and identifies with his mother's Native American/First Nation Luiseno culture. His father was Mexican, but James does not speak Spanish or his ancestral language. He grew up in Los Angeles but has moved to the La Jolla reservation in Southern California. The community of six hundred people lives on 8000 acres. He really got in touch with his Native American culture when he was studying at the University of California in the late 1960s. He now works as a counsellor at a college in order to fund his artistic work.



He prefers to work as a solo artist.

Here are some themes to explore through the video.

THEME 1: CREATIVITY

James and Ningali are both Indigenous and artists, sharing their art and attitudes with an international audience.



Nick Torrens, Director

'Over the course of the dialogues their artistic imperatives become clear — showing and discussing their work and their reasons for doing it—in the ways they have chosen.'

Ningali: I'm an actor, then Indigenous.

James: I'm a solo artist and I'm used to doing things the way I do 'em.

Some important aspects of their creativity include the following:

Humour

Both these artists are very funny, using humour to point out inconsistencies in once uncontested concepts.

Ningali: Terra Nullius means no one here. If that's the case, where the f--- have we come from?

Incorporating snippets from James and Ningali's performances was a great way to show off their talents that either made me laugh or have tears in my eyes. Their use of humour on issues such as the disposition of land, the notion of Terra Nullius or health issues (diabetes) make the audience aware that these things did happen or are happening within our respective communities. Their performances challenge the audience to unpack their own prejudices or their own cultural baggage.

Maureen Ah Sam

Discussion

- What does Maureen Ah Sam mean by 'cultural baggage'?
- Watch the scene from *Black and Tran*, Ningali's show with the Vietnamese-Australian comedian Hung Le. This begins with her saying, 'No, I'm not from Puerto

Rico. No I don't speak Spanish ...' How does this scene illustrate her comment, 'We're still outsiders in our own country?'

- What makes this scene funny even though the topic is serious?

Activities

Compare this scene with James' show in which he is on display as a contemporary artefact. He said: 'I wanted to make this loud statement about us as living people not something from the past.'

- Pause the video at the point where James is lying on the table with people observing him. Put yourself in his place or that of one of the audience. Write a short (half page) script describing your thoughts.
- Show this scene again and then act some of the scripts. Do you think James has achieved his aim that 'if a person comes, when they



leave they will never look at Native American stuff in the same way again’?

Anger

Here are some comments about how James and Ningali deal with anger and use it in their artistic lives.

James: Sometimes I am critical of our people but dammit, if I can’t do that, who can?

James: I needed to hook them in and then I could bite them.

Ningali: I want them to be in pain but have a totally different perspective.

Discussion

- Find some examples from the video to illustrate how Ningali and James create these effects. For example, why did James create the 'Shame-man' role as part of a performance piece about ethnicity? Researching the role of a

'Shaman' will help students to understand this piece at deeper levels.

- What are positive and negative ways of dealing with anger in our daily lives? Consider problems such as road rage or sporting brawls. How do these arise and what effects do they have on those watching? How does humour help defuse anger?

THEME 2: CULTURE

Culture is a huge theme. The following aspects are just a few of many:

Connection to country

Here are some explanations about connection to country. The first is an academic explanation.

An Aboriginal cultural landscape is a place valued by an Aboriginal group (or groups) because of their long and complex relationship with that land. It expresses their unity with the natural and spiritual environment. It embodies



their traditional knowledge of spirits, places, land uses, and ecology.²

The second is a personal response to the video.

Ningali was raised in a community environment and now lives in Melbourne to pursue her career, but she often returns home to be with members of her family. James on the other hand was raised in the city and moved back to his ancestral land. This aspect of returning to our ancestral land clearly demonstrates how we have maintained our connection with country,



kin and culture.

Maureen Ah Sam

Compare these quotes with Ningali's poem about how she feels about her country. She dedicates this to the audience.

For My First-born

*To you my fellow Australians, I give
you my mother's land
To you my fellow Australians, I give
you my father's pride
To you my fellow Australians, I give
you my grandmother's wisdom
To you my fellow Australians, I give
you my father's love, for these are the
things most precious to me.
So keep them close to your heart.*

Discussion

- Which of these explanations is most effective for you? Why?

- How do other Indigenous Australians explain 'connection to country'? Read some poems by the Aboriginal poet, Oodgeroo Noonuccal or listen to some of the songs of the group 'Yothu Yindi'.
- Visit the web site about the Native Americans of California <http://www.ci.escondido.ca.us/library/pioneer/LessonTwo.pdf>. This includes an introduction to the language, history and customs of the Luiseno people.³
- What does connection to country mean to you now?

Activity

- Write a similar dedication in which you offer to share some of the things most precious to you (that you are willing to share).
- Prepare a collage of pictures, songs or poems to illustrate Ningali's dedication.

- Identify some scenes in the video that illustrate the director's claim that 'Ningali is a great cultural mediator'. What price do these artists pay for this role?

Language

Ningali's grandfather said:

Never ever lose your language, because if you do that you will lose your stories, your songs and your culture and if you do that, you will just be another face in the crowd.

Maureen comments:

While Ningali discusses her view on language maintenance I felt a twinge of jealousy as she has had the opportunity to be raised within her clan group and use the language of her people. Many Indigenous Australians have not had that experience due to

the policies and subsequent practices that impacted on many Aboriginal families. We were not allowed to use our language, songs, dance or practise our customs as it was a means to 'Christianise, civilise and control' Aboriginal people. I have witnessed a sea change over the past thirty years with the movement back to country and the revitalization of language maintenance and cultural identity.

Discussion

- How might hearing Ningali speak so confidently in 'Language' encourage others to maintain or learn another language?
- Discuss the benefits of speaking another language or languages.
- What has James lost in not speaking either his mother's language or his father's?

Activity

- Set up a language exchange. Ask students to identify and write down greetings and/or common proverbs in as many languages as they can find over two days. Feature these on a wall and leave up until everyone knows them.

THEME 3: HEALTH

There are major health issues that affect Indigenous people particularly.⁴ Many of the health problems are linked, for example obesity and diabetes.⁵

There is a small segment in the video that touches on the health of both Indigenous nations. I did not find this surprising. The fact that diabetes is rampant within our collective communities is just one example of the state of health of Indigenous people in Australia and the USA. History has led us to believe that Government created legislation and policies in our best interest. But the statistics tell us differently.

Maureen Ah Sam

Recent data confirm Indigenous people are admitted to hospital at twice

the rate of non-Indigenous people. This group suffers much higher rates of renal disease, diabetes, injury and poisoning than the rest of the Australian community.⁶

Discussion

- Investigate one of the issues associated with the poor health of Indigenous people in Australia and the USA or any other country.
- Both Ningali and James smoke. Smoking is a general health issue but the statistics reveal it as a greater problem for Indigenous people in Australia.

Tobacco is long overdue for a good hard look because it's a major cause of illness and premature death among Indigenous people ...

It's the forgotten killer; it causes more deaths among Indigenous people than any other drug, including alcohol and petrol sniffing.⁷

Indigenous persons aged 18 years and over were twice as likely as non-Indigenous persons to be current smokers (51% compared with 24%) with higher proportions applying to both sexes and across all age groups.⁸

Activities

- What are some of the current messages about smoking a) from cigarette companies and b) from the anti-smoking lobby? Where do they appear and who is their target audience? For information about the effects of smoking on the Indigenous population see this Frequently Asked Questions web site.⁹
- Survey your class or another group about smoking. How many smoke? What were their reasons for taking it up?
- Identify the kinds of support available for those who wish to give up smoking or resist the peer pressure to begin.
- Ask students to evaluate the QUIT site and the 'Will Power' character on <http://www.quit.org.au/index2.html> or <http://www.quitnow.info>.

<http://www.quitnow.info> Information is also available in community languages.

- Access an Aboriginal health site such as <http://www.bega.org.au/welcome.htm> the site of the Kalgoorlie Bega Garnbirringu Health Service. Note some positive or interesting cultural information to share with others. Compare this site with a Native American Women's Resource Centre site <http://www.nativeshop.org/nawherc.html>
- Ask students undertaking studies in Health to read and critique a strategic plan to tackle one health issue that affects Indigenous people today. What would they do differently?

THEME 4: Politics and Policies

Both James and Ningali discuss the impact of legislation and policies that have affected their people.

Christianity, assimilation, institutional education, employment or acting out scenes on the forced removal of children only highlight the attitudes of those who held the power to determine how, when, and where Indigenous people lived within broader society. Often these policies/legislation were built on the notion of 'social Darwinism', saying to the broader community that Indigenous people are not worth the time or effort to educate.

Maureen Ah Sam

Ningali: They brought the Bible with them and told us to close our eyes and pray and when we opened them, they had the f-----g land.

James: It is popular to be ethnic. They don't stop to think about all the pain and misery ... What does it mean to be an Indigenous person in our culture?

Education

Institutional racism denotes governmental and organizational policies that restrict minority groups or demean them by the application of stere-

| AIM | COMMENT |
|--|---------|
| To use satellite television to connect two highly committed artists from different parts of the world. | |
| To present a coherent narrative based on emotional connection with the two artists. | |
| To offer a broad international audience a window into the world of artistic and Indigenous experience, as the artists explore the differences and similarities between their societies, their objectives and themselves. | |
| To offer Indigenous audiences a personal perspective on parallel universes. | |

CHART 01

otypes.’¹⁰ *How true of the education system that both Ningali and James experienced. This form of institutional education was designed with Indigenous people in mind. It was a means for the Government to create a pool of workers that undertook the menial labour that others did not want to do. It has always made me feel, as an Indigenous Australian, as a ‘second class’ citizen, even in 2003. James Luna discusses his educational background. He regards himself as one of a few who have qualifications or perhaps one of the ‘elite’ within his people. Indigenous students accessing tertiary institutions in Australia represent 1.52% nationally, which is well below the national figure of 2.6% of the Indigenous population. I find this criminal.*

Maureen Ah Sam

Discussion

- Watch the scene in which James features photographs of Native American children before and after being taken away from their families to attend school. He then compares these with his own before and after college photographs. What point is he making here about education?

Activities

- What evidence is available in this video on the effect of various government policies on Ningali’s family and on James’ life?
- Watch the film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002) for a powerful, dramatized account based on a true story by Doris Pilkington, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*. The film *One Night the Moon* (Rachel Perkins, 2001) offers insights into the tragic effects of a white man’s prejudice.

Film Issues Marginalization and the media

Here are two comments:

The Director: As mainstream television is largely programmed for first world consumer and corporate needs, it is held responsible for much negative impact on Indigenous peoples everywhere.

James: We’re taking advantage of this media because for so long, we’ve been spoken about, spoken for, photographed, videotaped ... but you know we aren’t the people who are in control ...

Discussion

- What does marginalization mean? How does this video help to pro-

vide examples of what this means to James and Ningali?

- What does it mean to ‘speak about’ someone and to ‘speak for’ someone?
- In James’ comment above, who are ‘we’ and who are ‘the people’ in control?
- Does this kind of face-to-face video interaction change the audience’s role? The director says that if we are part of the dominant culture, then ‘we learn the participants’ attitudes to us.’ Do you agree?

Activities

- Following the discussion, ask students to summarize Ningali and James’ attitudes to the dominant cultures in their countries. You could do this under the headings of **Positive**, **Negative** and **Interesting**. What did they learn that surprised or challenged them? What will they do with this information?
- Ask students to monitor their media for a set period of time to see how Indigenous people or cultures are portrayed, if at all. They could choose television, movies, radio, newspapers or magazines or the Internet.
- Watch an episode of *Message Stick TV* or listen to ten minutes

of the Indigenous radio program *Away or Speaking Out*. See <http://www.abc.net.au/message/> to connect with a variety of programs. Try some of their recipes. 'Emu Pie with pepper berry sauce' or 'Lemon Myrtle'.

- Watch the video *Babakueria*, available from most state film and video centres, for a satirical and thought-provoking twist on Australian history, in which the roles of the dominant and Indigenous people are reversed.¹¹

The Format

This *vis a vis* format began in 1992, but its strength lies in 'the potential for the film's subjects to create and manage their own agendas'. Here is a summary of the director's aims. See *Chart 01*.

Activity

- Ask students to use the second column to make their own comments about if or how well they think the director has succeeded in any particular aim.

Other Web sites and resources

For comprehensive links to web sites relating to the history and cultures of Indigenous peoples in the USA and Canada see <http://www.bloorstreet.com/300block/aborcan.htm#2>

The National Archives of Australia has a very useful web site: http://www.naa.gov.au/the_collection/indigenous_records.html#bth

The National Archives of Australia's web site: <http://www.naa.gov.au/education/education.html> Exploring Citizenship kit

For one review of the film *One Night the Moon* see: <http://members.ozemail.com.au/~qstage/onenight.html>

There is a guide to 'Respecting Indigenous Cultures'. Some general guidelines are outlined in more detail under the headings: General Protocol,

Media Protocol, Research Protocols and WWW Resources: <http://abc.net.au/message/proper/culture.htm>

The *From Sand to Celluloid* collection of videos made by Indigenous filmmakers is available from <http://www.afi.org.au/>

The *Rewind* series has over twenty, five-minute episodes on most important aspects of Australian history and culture, using archival and current resources. See www.filmaust.com.au

A short interview with Australian of the Year 2003, Dr Fiona Stanley, offers a brief introduction to issues of Indigenous Health. <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2003/s935242.htm>

The Australian Indigenous Health Bulletin is a good starting point for health information on a wide range of issues. http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/html/html_bulletin/bulletin_home.htm

This study guide was written by Patricia Kelly, a Brisbane-based writer and academic, in collaboration with Maureen Ah Sam, a lecturer in the Oodgeroo Unit at the Queensland University of Technology. Maureen has many years experience at all levels of education and in working with Indigenous communities. Her invaluable perspective has been incorporated into and highlighted in this guide.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ For a detailed and personalized look at the triumphs and troubles of this company see the video series, *Dreamtime to Dance*: www.firelight.com.au/dream.html
- ² Susan Buggiey, <http://www.mveirb.nt.ca/Registry/EACumulative/Susan%20Buggiey%20paper.pdf>
- ³ <http://www.sandiego.edu/nativeamerican/> This is a university site offering a chronology of Native American settlement in California and links to over 300 other sites.
- ⁴ See a short interview with head of the Australian Medical Association, Dr Kerryn Phelps <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/s153963.htm> for an overview of the causes.
- ⁵ <http://www.abc.net.au/nt/>

news/200305/s863406.htm

- ⁶ <http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs%40.nsf/462a212839e1e5ca256820000fe0de/3919938725ca0e1fca256d90001ca9b8!OpenDocument>

- ⁷ Dr Ivers, Menzies School of Health Research, Darwin, NT. <http://192.94.208.240/Crc/General/CRC PUBS/newsletter/Issue6/tobacco.htm> 'Indigenous Australians & Tobacco—Some Good News After All'.

- ⁸ From Australian Bureau of Statistics web site above. For statistics on Native Americans see http://health.nih.gov/result.asp?disease_id=458

- ⁹ Australian Indigenous Health *InfoNet* (2003). Frequently asked questions: what do we know about smoking among Indigenous people? Retrieved January 4, 2004. http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/html/html_keyfacts/faq/faq_health_behaviours/smoking.htm

- ¹⁰ Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology, 2nd Ed 2001.

- ¹¹ *Babakueria* is available from www.abc.net.au/programsales/catalogue/aborig.htm

For more detailed classroom work see http://www.curriculum.edu.au/democracy/case_studies/narara/protest.htm the Curriculum Corporation'sv detailed case study on Aboriginal Protest Movements, 1940-1972.

This study guide was produced by ATOM. For more information about ATOM study guides, The Speakers' Bureau or ScreenHub (the daily online film and television newsletter) visit our web site: www.metromagazine.com.au or email: damned@netspace.net.au

