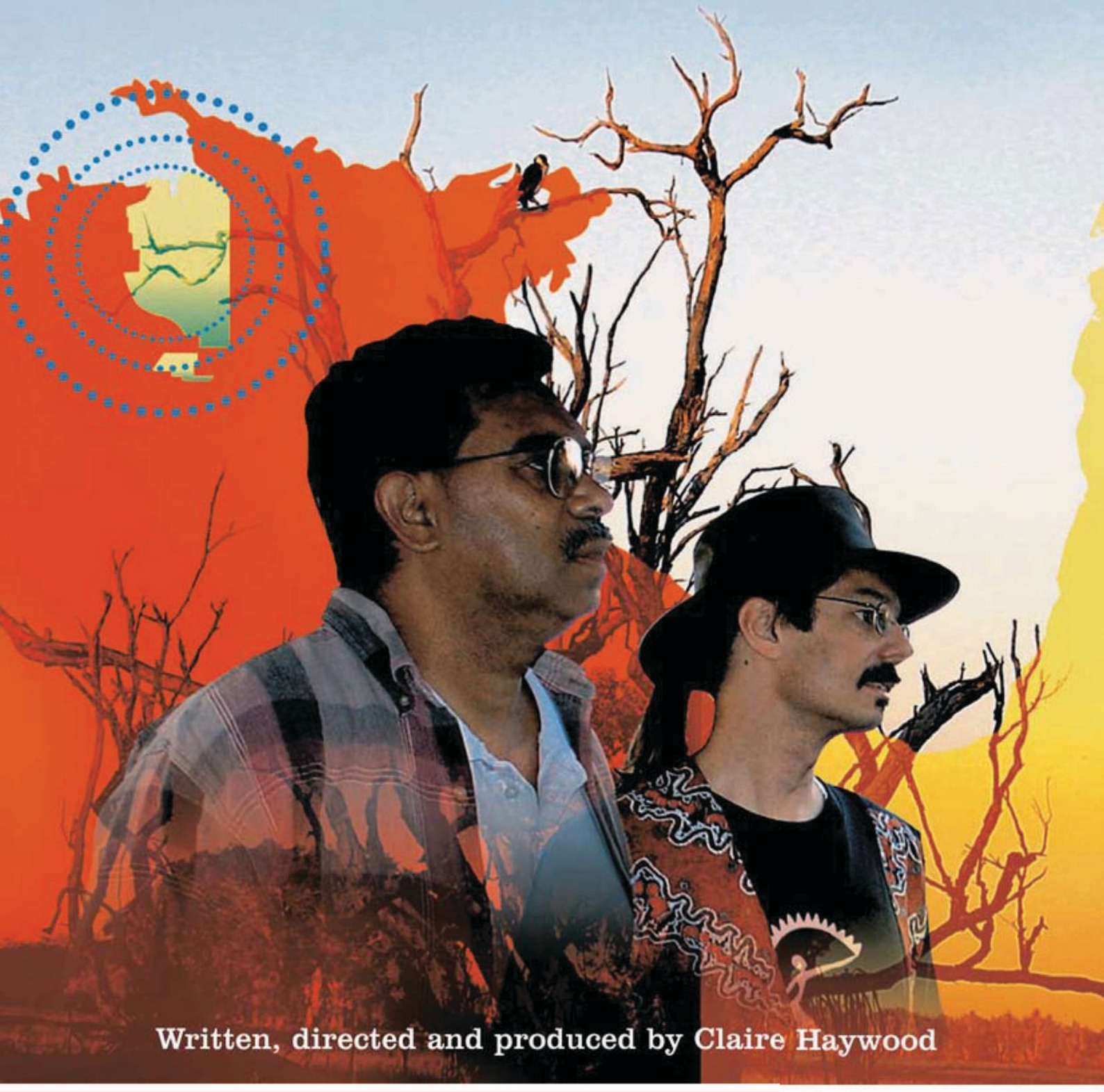
A Frontier Conversation



Written, directed and produced by Claire Haywood

A **STUDYGUIDE** BY ROBERT LEWIS

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A FRONTIER CONVERSATION COULD BE USED AT SENIOR SECONDARY AND TERTIARY LEVELS IN ABORIGINAL STUDIES AND COURSES IN THE WRITING OF HISTORY.

CLARA SUE KIDWELL

COOINDA

SYNOPSIS

A Frontier Conversation (Claire Haywood, 2006) is about a visit to northern Australia by a group of American academics involved in the teaching of Indigenous history. They join a group of Australian researchers and writers to explore the nature of Indigenous history.

BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM

How can you tell your history?

1 Write down an example of each of the following (See Table below) that says something about you and your life. You may have to write a caption to go with some. For example, when you choose a song, you may have to caption it so that the reason you chose it is clear, such as 'The song that was played during the first rock concert I went to alone.'

2 Then swap lists with a friend or classmate. Let them write in what they think your selection tells them about you.

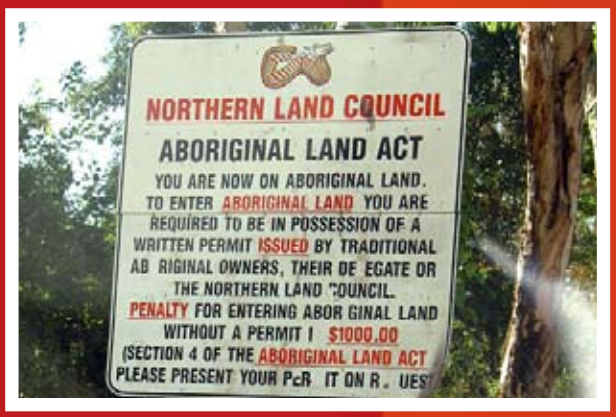
3 Discuss what they have said about you, and you about them.

4 Did this list help you to see the other person a bit differently?

5 Does this help you to see the person in a broad historical context? For example, does the choice of a song help you to see how the person is part of a broad group who also liked that song at that time,

LIST	CAPTION / EXPLANATION	I THINK THIS TELLS ME THAT YOU . . .
Object		
Person		
Song		
Drawing / painting		

LEDGER ART



and therefore might be influenced by that part of the popular culture?

A Frontier Conversation is a film about this idea of how personal evidence can help us know about people's stories, and how to see them in a broader historical context as a result. Watch the film, and think about the issues that are raised in it.

EXPLORING ISSUES AND IDEAS IN THE FILM

Identifying the people involved (See Table below):

1 The aim of the trip was to explore new ways of delivering history. What possible ways could there be of doing this? List the possibilities given.

2 What do the Australian and American groups on the tour have in common?

3 Why did the group go to the Northern Territory?

4 David Carment talks about the Indigenous people of the area, but also about the local Chinese. How can an awareness of families help historians know what to focus on in telling the history of Indigenous people?

Professor Ann McGrath	Director, Australian Centre for Indigenous History, Australian National University
Sonia Smallacombe	Historian, Charles Darwin University, Northern Territory
Professor Clara Sue Kidwell	Director, Native American Studies, University of Oklahoma
Karen Marrero	Postgraduate student, Yale University
Dr Jay Gitlin	Deputy Director, Lamar Centre for the Study of Frontiers and Borders, Yale University
Michael Kral	Anthropologist
Dr Nancy Shoemaker	Professor of History, University of Connecticut
Margo Neale	Head, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Program, National Museum of Australia
Dr Gordon Briscoe	Historian
Tiffany Shellam	Postgraduate student, ANU
Professor Ann Curthoys	Professor of History, School of Social Sciences, ANU

JUSTIN WITH GROUP

UBIRR ROCK

NOEL AT NITMULIK

5 Another reference is made to jail art. Why might this be useful knowledge for historians?

6 Why might traditional Aboriginal art be a useful source for historians?

7 Ted Egan greets the visitors in an Aboriginal language. The narrator says that language has been important for 'cultural exchange' for some time. Why might it be important for historians to speak the language of the people they are studying? Why not just rely on interpreters?

8 Egan sings a song. How can a song be important?

9 Why might the passing on of a song be important?

10 The narrator speaks of Clara Sue explaining 'how Native American women's identities have been appropriated to the cause of American nationalism'. What does that mean?

11 Do you agree that it is a problem? Or is it a way of melding identities into a new one? What is the difference between incorporating and appropriating?

12 Denise Smith-Ali works with elders to teach the Noonga language to young people. What are the advantages of maintaining and supporting Indigenous languages in schools? Are there any disadvantages if those Noonga speakers are not also fluent in English?

13 The narrator speaks of a recent part of Indigenous people's history: their role in the cattle industry. Why is that part of Indigenous people's recent history in danger of disappearing?

14 Nancy Shoemaker raises the matter of guilt being similarly shared between white Americans and white Australians towards Indigenous people. Why would a feeling of guilt restrict involvement in telling the history of Indigenous people?

15 How have the Jawoyn Association's programs in health, education and employment helped local people to recover and renew their traditional culture?

16 Peter Holt says that one of the aims of his literacy program is 'finding those stories again and getting some of that history documented and then getting it into the curriculum so people do have that political sense of where they came from'. Why would individual stories be both significant and powerful in a school curriculum?

17 What is the challenge for Indigenous guides in the Nitmuluk National Park in communicating their stories?

18 Some stories are only for certain groups. What problems does this pose for historians, and for the groups involved?

19 The visitors are impressed by the environment. How is environment part of people's history?

20 One of the words used to describe traditional Indigenous culture is just that — traditional. What problems can this create in perhaps creating an artificial division between the past and the changing present?

21 Some of the historians discuss the difference that might exist between their academic view that history is to be learned about, understood and passed on – whereas to some Indigenous people, 'history' is ongoing; it is who they are. How might this create difficulties in writing about Indigenous history?

22 What main ideas or messages have you gained from the film about 'reading' and understanding Indigenous history in Australia?

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