

Bronwen & Yaffa (moving towards tolerance)



Study Guide

this guide

Bronwen and Yaffa (moving towards tolerance) is a film about a grassroots fight against racism. It's the story of two young women, Bronwen Trim, a dreadlocked gift-shop co-manager of mixed black and white parentage, and Yaffa Elling, a former Orthodox Jew who sports a purple mohawk – and their struggle to combat intolerance through music shows, essay contests and street-level youth activism. Along the way they meet Scott Lynch, an old acquaintance. A former white supremacist, Scott has been trying to move away from his old beliefs. Together, Bronwen, Yaffa and Scott learn to accept each other as they are, moving towards a new model of tolerance. The turning point comes during the climax of a benefit organized by Bronwen and Yaffa, when Scott agrees to make a public declaration about the process of leaving his intolerant past behind.

By providing background material, focus points, topics for discussion and post-viewing activities, this study guide is designed to provide proper context for use of the video. It is important to preview the video, as it contains some strong language

the film

Concerned about reports that white supremacists were recruiting on the East Coast during the summer of 1995, Bronwen Trim and Yaffa Elling decided to put together a benefit all-ages show featuring 10 local bands that covered a wide range of musical styles including rap, reggae, pop and punk. Through a series of radio appearances promoting the gig, they came to the attention of independent film producer/director Peter d'Entremont and National Film Board producer Mike Mahoney. As the young women organized a second show, they agreed to let cameras follow the action.

THE CHARACTERS

Bronwen Trim became an activist through the necessity of experience. Now in her early twenties, she co-manages a local gift store selling exotic goods. Her father, originally from the Caribbean, is black. Her Australian mother is white. Bronwen grew up in a predominantly white, middle-class suburban neighbourhood; she first encountered racism in high school, where she did not feel fully accepted by either black or white students.

Yaffa Elling is an activist in her early twenties who is currently studying to be a chef while working as a cook. Yaffa comes from an Orthodox Jewish farm family. She grew up in Eastern Ontario, and experienced both her family's racism toward their francophone neighbours, and the neighbours' hostility towards them. After moving to Halifax, she became involved in the political side of the punk movement and was a familiar figure in Halifax's burgeoning downtown youth scene.

Scott Lynch joined the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) as a teenager and remained an active member for several years. Originally from the North End of Halifax, a racially-mixed, working-class part of town, Scott identified with racist groups even as a child. Now struggling to free himself of those beliefs, Scott's new-found re-acquaintance and growing friendship with Bronwen and Yaffa is a key part of his effort to leave his racist past behind.



THE SETTING

A city with a large transient population of university students, Halifax has a lively alternative scene of musicians, filmmakers, artists and young people. It also has a history of ongoing racial division, particularly in the suburban areas of Cole Harbour and Spryfield, where racially motivated conflicts have gained national media attention. Various ethnic communities have complained that local journalists in search of a good story exploit race relations. During the early 1990s, rumours circulated that racist organizations, including the KKK, were actively recruiting skinheads, skaters and other young people in downtown Halifax.



THE TOUR

In March, 1997, Bronwen, Yaffa and director Peter d'Entremont toured schools in the Atlantic Region doing screenings and workshops. Here are some of Peter's notes following the tour:

"Fighting racism is not easy. In a time of rapid change and uncertainty, especially for young people, it's a common response to fear differences between people. Bronwen and Yaffa both experienced racism and intolerance personally because of who they are and how they look. In an increasingly fast-moving world, people often don't take the time to get past appearances. They take stereotypes as the basis for character. It's tough to get past this tendency.

"Bronwen found that in all the schools, kids felt powerless. No one tells them what they can do. They are only told what they can't do. In some schools, communities don't mix, leading to misunderstandings that can be exploited by racists.

"Kids — young people in general — really want to get along with each other. They also want to express themselves, but sometimes they're afraid or just shy. Once you get over those basic barriers of shyness, fear or even ignorance, everybody does get along."



THE EAR ZINE

Bronwen and Yaffa's crusade worked by connecting directly with young people. They published and distributed a zine named after their organization, East Coast Against Racism (EAR). In it, they included information and history about various youth movements along with practical advice on how to fight racism.

They engaged other young people through participation. The essay, poetry and drawing contests allowed kids to express themselves in their own language in the ways they know best. Winners were published in the EAR zine; some were read publicly at the gigs.

The EAR zine also contained a lively history of youth culture trends dating from the arrival of the punk, skinhead and skate movements in North America during the 1970s. Each movement was defiantly anti-racist to begin with, yet racist groups have consistently tried to manipulate and exploit their energies and concerns. Bronwen and Yaffa clearly explain the differences between racist and non-racist counter-cultural movements and how to spot racist infiltration of youth culture scenes.

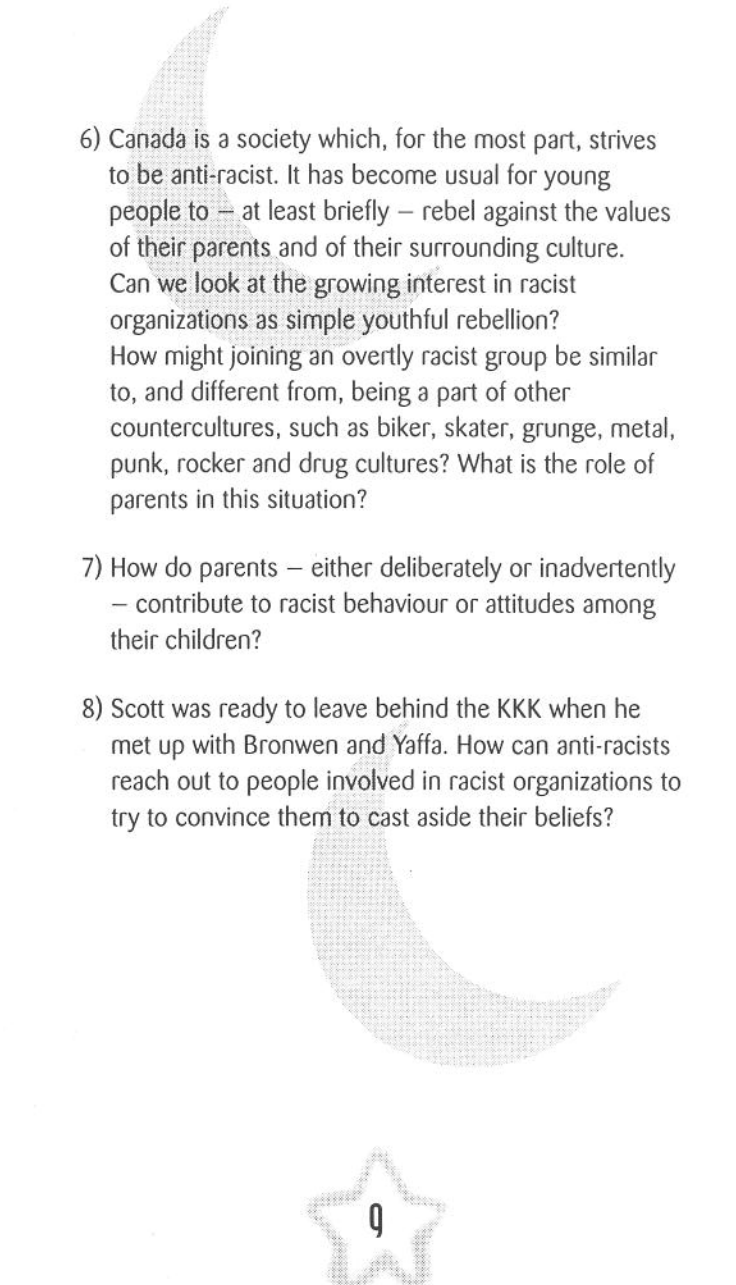
pre-screening questions

Discussions on race and racism are always likely to be very sensitive. Be careful, when leading a discussion among students, to respect their limits.

- 1) What is racism?
- 2) Have you or your friends ever experienced racism or discrimination? In what way? How did it make you feel? How did you respond?
- 3) Is there racism in your school? How can students help solve the problem? Is there anything teachers and administrators can do?
- 4) Do you know anyone who has been recruited by a racist organization? How did the organization present itself?
- 5) What would you do if you were approached by a member of a racist organization trying to either recruit you or solicit money from you?
- 6) Do you get the sense that racism and racist behaviour is increasing or decreasing in your school or community? Why?
- 7) Can one or two people really make a difference in the fight against racism?

post-screening questions

- 1) What are the sources of racism? Are people inherently racist in some way, or is racism a learned attitude? How is racist behaviour learned?
- 2) In Canada, it is illegal to promote hatred against an identifiable group. Do you believe that hate laws are effective? Are limits on free speech acceptable for the purpose of protecting the community from extremist groups?
- 3) One of the students in the film says that black people know it takes more than an anti-racism show to cause change. How effective do you think Bronwen and Yaffa's efforts were? Was the gig – and the activities surrounding it – an effective way to fight racism? Would something similar work in your community? Why, or why not?
- 4) Bronwen says that in high school there was not much interracial mixing. Should students be encouraged to spend more time with peers of other races? How? Would hanging out together lead to less racism? Why or why not?
- 5) Scott says that one of the reasons he joined the KKK was that it gave him a sense of history and belonging. How do groups like the Ku Klux Klan exploit the need for belonging among young people? What can we, as a society, do to ensure that young people feel more of a sense of belonging and history?

- 
- 6) Canada is a society which, for the most part, strives to be anti-racist. It has become usual for young people to – at least briefly – rebel against the values of their parents and of their surrounding culture. Can we look at the growing interest in racist organizations as simple youthful rebellion? How might joining an overtly racist group be similar to, and different from, being a part of other countercultures, such as biker, skater, grunge, metal, punk, rocker and drug cultures? What is the role of parents in this situation?
- 7) How do parents – either deliberately or inadvertently – contribute to racist behaviour or attitudes among their children?
- 8) Scott was ready to leave behind the KKK when he met up with Bronwen and Yaffa. How can anti-racists reach out to people involved in racist organizations to try to convince them to cast aside their beliefs?

ACTIVITIES

- 1) Create a zine or a Web page dealing with the battle against racism in your community or celebrating its diversity.
- 2) Visit some racist sites on the World Wide Web (see “Resources” section, below). Are sites like this harmful? Should they be allowed to exist? Should Internet service providers have a role in deciding what types of Web pages they host? Can Web hatred lead to violence and increased racism in the “real” world?
- 3) Keep a clipping file of media articles on issues of race in your area. Compare the mainstream media’s point of view with the multicultural and ethnic media’s responses to the same issues. If there are differences in coverage, what do you think accounts for them?

RACISM

Racism is a set of implicit or explicit beliefs, presumptions and actions based upon an ideology of inherent superiority of one racial or ethnic group over another and evident within organizational or institutional structures or programs as well as in individual thought and behaviour patterns.*

Racism can be overt. Or it can be subtle. Racism is often described by people who experience it as systemic. That means the whole of society operates with elements of racism firmly entrenched, sometimes without well-meaning members of society even realizing it. For instance, non-white nurses working in a hospital might find that their pay is lower than that of white nurses, or that they are more often assigned to work on the night shift. Or a university department might hire only white professors. This type of racism may be more difficult to combat than more open racism – such as non-white workers being called racial slurs by co-workers or supervisors. Systemic racism tends to be dealt with through a combination of legal sanctions, education and employment equity programs.

Provincial human rights organizations, backed by the federal Charter of Rights and Freedoms, exist as formal and legal recourse for victims of all kinds of racism.

* Definition provided by the Multiculturalism Program of the Department of Canadian Heritage.

DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination is broader than racism. It can include prejudicial behaviour based on sex, gender, age, ability and/or sexual preference.

resources

ON VIDEO

The National Film Board has an extensive selection of excellent videos on combatting racism. For more titles, call the NFB (1-800-267-7710) for a free catalogue, or visit us on the Web (www.nfb.ca).

Domino (1994) Six multiracial adults tell their stories, showing how living with two cultures can be a source of strength and enrichment. 45 minutes. Order number: C9194 019.

Speak It! From The Heart of Black Nova Scotia (1993) Young African-Canadians living in Nova Scotia rediscover their culture while fighting racism. Canada Award winner. 29 minutes. Order number: C9192 139.

For Angela (1993) Starring *North of 60*'s Tina Keeper, this drama is based on a true story about a native woman who takes a stand against racism after she and her daughter are taunted by a group of teens on a bus. Canada Award winner. 25 minutes. Order number: C9193 044.

Playing Fair Series (1991) Four award-winning, short dramas for children aged 7 to 12, designed to spark discussion on racism, respect and equality. Series order number: 193C9191 131.



ON THE WEB

The World Wide Web provides an easy-to-access forum for many, many different racist groups. Anti-racist Web sites have also sprung up to counter their propaganda. Students are likely to be shocked by some of the content on these sites. However, one of the best ways to counter racists is to see exactly what they are saying.

The B'nai Brith Canada League for Human Rights

(http://www.bnaibrith.ca/league_f.htm) "Dedicated to combatting anti-Semitism, racism, and bigotry," this page offers research reports on hate groups in Canada, as well as an annual report on anti-Semitic incidents and reports on the league's activities.

The Freedom Site

(<http://www.ftcnet.com/~freedom/index2.html> OR <http://www.interlog.com/~mlemire>) A clearing-house for the Canadian racist right. The site houses links to groups including the neo-Nazi Heritage Front and the Euro-Christian Defence League, as well as a slew of articles about what the Webmaster perceives as dire threats to free speech in Canada. Slow to load.

Hatewatch (<http://hatewatch.org>) Superb US-based site, offering a RealAudio newsletter on racism, news on how to fight hatred and links to sites run by a number of hate groups.

Internet Nova Scotia: The African Presence

(<http://www.nstn.ca/bccns/index.html>) Produced by the students of Cole Harbour High School and the Black Community Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia, this site provides a wealth of information on Black Nova Scotia, past and present.

Nizkor (<http://www.nizkor.org>) Vast, Canadian-based site which brings together the Web's largest collection of material refuting Holocaust deniers. Firmly committed to free speech as well as anti-racism, Nizkor links directly to Holocaust deniers and neo-Nazis in order to counter their arguments, and offers histories and background on a very large number of Canadian racist organizations. Impressive.

Zündelsite (<http://www.zundel.com/>). A bilingual (English and German) page from Canada's most famous Holocaust denier. Zundel and Nizkor link to each other in a debate on myths and facts about the Holocaust.

Not all racists are white, of course, and white supremacists are not the only intolerant groups inhabiting the Web. Both the Los Angeles-based Jewish Defence League (<http://www.jdl.org>) and the Chicago-based Nation of Islam (<http://www.noi.org>), for instance, have been accused of racism. See and decide for yourself. How do the words of these groups compare with those of white supremacists?



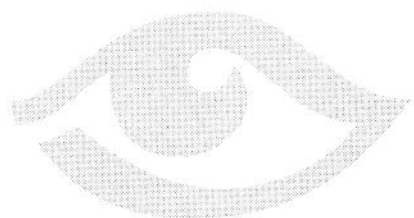
IN PRINT

Cannon, Margaret. *The Invisible Empire: Racism in Canada*. Random House, 1995.

Kallen, Evelyn. *Ethnicity and Human Rights in Canada*. 2nd Edition. Oxford University Press, 1995.

Kinsella, Warren. *Web of Hate: Inside Canada's Far Right Network*. Harper Collins, 1994.

Philip, M. Nourbese. *Frontiers: Selected Essays and Writings on Racism and Culture 1984-1992*. Mercury Press, 1994.



To order NFB videos call
1-800-267-7710

VISIT US ON THE WEB!
www.nfb.ca



Study guide produced by the
National Film Board of Canada, with the support
of the Multiculturalism Program of the
Department of Canadian Heritage.