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FOREIGN  
SOIL

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**TEACHERS NOTES**

# FOREIGN SOIL

BY MAXINE BENEBA CLARKE

## CONTENTS

SECTION A: BEFORE READING

SECTION B: QUESTIONS FOR READING

SECTION C: AFTER READING

# SECTION A: BEFORE READING

## 1. PREDICTION ACTIVITIES

- What are the connotations of the title of the collection *Foreign Soil*?
- How may a reader's interpretation of the title change depending on their personal and familial history?
- What aspects of history and contemporary politics may shape a reader's understanding of an Australian text that explores the impacts of racism?

Consider:

- The impacts of colonisation on Indigenous Australian communities
- The White Australia Policy
- Australia's changing approach to refugees
- Patterns of immigration since British colonisation
- The Racial Discrimination Act

## 2. UNDERSTANDING THE SHORT STORY FORM

Short stories reflect many of the basic tenets of prose fiction, with a few notable exceptions. Generally short stories have:

- A condensed narrative arc
- One key conflict
- One or two characters developed in depth
- Limited settings

The concentrated form of the short story typically focuses the story around one or two themes. A collection of short stories is often tied around interconnected themes.

### 3. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maxine Beneba Clarke is a widely published Australian writer of Afro-Caribbean descent and the author of the poetry collections *Gil Scott Heron Is on Parole* and *Nothing Here Needs Fixing*. Maxine's short fiction, non-fiction and poetry have been published in numerous publications including *Overland*, *The Age*, *Meanjin*, *The Saturday Paper* and *The Big Issue*. Her critically acclaimed short fiction collection *Foreign Soil* (2014) won the ABIA for Literary Fiction Book of the Year 2015, the 2015 Indie Book Award for Debut Fiction, and Maxine was also named as one of the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Best Young Novelists for 2015, as well as being shortlisted for the Matt Richell Award for New Writing at the 2015 ABIA's and the 2015 Stella Prize. A collection of Maxine's poetry *Carrying The World*, her memoir *The Hate Race* and her first children's picture book *The Patchwork Bike* were published in 2016.

## SECTION B: QUESTIONS FOR READING

### 1. DAVID

- What role does the setting of Footscray play in the text?
- Why is it important for Asha to be 'remembering David'? (p. 4)
- How is the unnamed mother shaped by the words of her older family members?
- Why is the unnamed mother told that she must not 'forget where is it [she] came from'? (p. 6)
- How do the alternating narrative voices enrich the reader's understanding of 'David'?
- How does the motif of the bicycle reflect the key characters' development in 'David'?

### 2. HARLEM JONES

- How does the setting shape the conflict in 'Harlem Jones'?
- Why is Harlem focused on 'her fancy clothes, the posh way she talked'? (p. 19)

- Why does Harlem's mother always front 'up swinging when they come for her own'? (p. 19)
- Why would the elderly African men give Harlem and Toby 'full permission to burn London to the fricken ground'? (p. 25)
- What is the importance of Harlem's emphasis on his name?
- How do you respond to Harlem's anger? How might your experiences shape this reaction?

### 3. HOPE

- How does poverty shape the expectations of the characters in Cidar Valley?
- Why does Millie's father want 'more for his children than [Cidar Valley]'? (p. 30)
- Why is Millie given the nickname 'Banana Girl'?
- Why does Willemina have 'fear in her heart' when she approaches Millie? (p. 46)
- Why does Winston believe that a better life requires leaving for England?
- What is the significance of the title 'Hope'?

### 4. FOREIGN SOIL

- What are the implications of Ange asking Mukasa where he is from?
- What are the connotations of Ange's parents' accusation that Mukasa was 'abducting [her] to the end of civilisation'? (p. 67)
- Why is 'choreographed care and watchfulness brought on by foreign soil'? (p. 73)
- Why does Ange believe that 'she *could* make it work'? (p. 80)
- Why is hair such an important marker of identity in 'Foreign Soil'?
- How did you react to Mukasa's violence?

### 5. SHU YI

- What are possible interpretations of the motto 'play the game'?
- Why did Ava not 'want a bar of Salt-N-Pepa, or any of their black-as-me friends'? (p. 87)
- How does 'Melinda's mother's word' shape Ava's experience at school? (p. 92)
- Why did Ava feel that 'Shu Yi wasn't a problem that [Ava] wanted to take on'? (p. 93)

- How does the use of a first person narrative voice shape the reader's understanding of 'Shu Yi'?
- Were you surprised by Ava's actions at the end of the story? What shaped your reaction?

## 6. RAILTON ROAD

- What is the significance of Solomon's dream that he is 'ancient Africa, stretching out wide and deep centre-globe, cradling a people'? (p. 101)
- Why do the residents of Railton Road face 'ongoing police harassment and eviction attempts'? (p. 102)
- How are the 'rebel women' of Railton Road characterised? (p. 104)
- What is the effect of the personification of 'Black discontent lurking beneath the surface'? (p. 109)
- Why might Solomon resent being seen as 'a foreign country she was apprehensive about visiting but itching to explore'? (p. 116)
- What aspects of political history are important to understanding this story?

## 7. GAPS IN THE HICKORY

- What is the impact of Jackson's 'damn Southern pride' on the other characters? (p. 126)
- Why does Jackson think that Carter 'better toughen up real quick'? (p. 131)
- Why doesn't Ella care that Delores 'wasn't born in a Delores body'? (p. 153)
- How do you feel about Jeanie's decision to take Carter to live with Delores?
- What role does foreshadowing play in 'Gaps in the Hickory'?
- The narrative voice in 'Gaps in the Hickory' is in the third person, but follows different points of view. How does this impact your understanding of the story?

## 8. BIG ISLAN

- Why does learning to read provide a 'big-big change' for Nathaniel? (p. 174)
- Why is Clarise 'obsess wid educatin [Nathaniel]'? (p. 176)
- How does the characterisation of Curtis as 'standin anxious-happy and full up-a dizzy hope' develop your understanding of Nathaniel? (p. 183)

- How does Nathaniel's view of the port change throughout 'Big Island'?
- How does the use of Jamaican Patois develop your understanding of 'Big Island'?
- Is Nathaniel's understanding of the treatment of black people in Australia accurate?

## 9. THE STILT FISHERMEN OF KATHALUWA

- How does the personification of the 'snoring beast' of the ocean reflect Asanka's inner conflict? (p. 195)
- Why does Loretta miss her job at Asylum Seekers Support Centre?
- What does the potato chest symbolise for Asanka?
- The narrative voice in 'The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa' is in third person, but follows different points of view. How does this develop your understanding of the story?
- How do you feel about Asanka's act of self-harm at the end of the story? How does this shape your feelings about his experiences in Villawood?
- What historical knowledge might a reader of 'The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa' need to understand the story?

## 10. AVIATION

- Why is 'memory everywhere in [Mirabel's] house'? (p. 245)?
- Why is 'the plane suspended in time, hovering wasp-like'? (p. 263)
- The conflict in 'Aviation' is left unresolved. What do you think will happen next?
- How important is understanding the history of 9/11 to understanding the story?
- The narrative voice in 'Aviation' is in the third person, but follows different points of view. How does this develop your understanding of the story?
- What are some of the possible interpretations of the title 'Aviation'?

## 11. THE SUKIYAKI BOOK CLUB

- How does the setting of inner-west Melbourne shape the story?
- Why might the teacher have encouraged the children to smile through singing a song 'about a man overwhelmed with despair'? (p. 269)
- Why does the narrator 'not know how to rescue Avery gently'? (p. 277)
- What aspects of Australian society are reflected in the letters that the narrator receives from publishers? (p. 277)

- What are some possible interpretations of the title 'The Sukiyaki Book Club'?
- What are some possible interpretations of the narrator's choice to resolve Avery's crisis positively?

## SECTION C: AFTER READING

### 1. THEMES

#### A. THE IMPACTS OF RACISM

- Foreign Soil explores the institutional nature of racism. Characters across the collection grapple with racism entrenched in schools, the police force and government policies.
  - 'Harlem Jones' depicts the corrosive impacts of systemic poverty, racial profiling and police brutality on young people of colour. Harlem's anger, which drives the story, signals a seemingly inevitable response to chronic marginalisation.
  - 'Railton Road' presents the challenge of wrestling with the writing of histories and social movements that continue to marginalise people of colour.
  - 'The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa' reflects the devastating and traumatic consequences of Australia's mandatory detention of refugees. Asanka's desperation acts as a trigger for Loretta's compassion, whereas Sam continues to prioritise his own happiness and well-being.
  - 'Aviation' reveals the far-reaching effects of the post 9/11 world. The young child at the centre of the story suffers the effects of a society whose response to fear has been racism.
  - 'The Sukiyaki Book Club' portrays the reluctance of mainstream society to confront racism. The narrator is placed in a seemingly impossible bind; asked to choose between the integrity of her work and silence.
- Clarke explores the interpersonal experience of racism. Throughout the text, characters battle both resilience and prejudice passed through generations.

- 'Shu Yi' demonstrates the way that children learn to mimic the prejudices of their parents. Conversely, Ava's mother demonstrates the hope that children will demonstrate the resistance and resilience of their parents in the face of racism.

## B. THE GAPS BETWEEN GENERATIONS

- Foreign Soil reflects the gaps that can form between generations of families due to shifting geography and social norms.
  - 'David' reflects the gaps that can form between immigrants and their children. The unnamed narrator reflects the pressure that she feels from the elders within her family who are critical of her lifestyle.
  - 'Hope' explores the way that parents can invest in their children's futures. The path that Millie's life takes indicates the way these hopes can be thwarted.
  - 'Foreign Soil' explores the way that children can challenge the prejudices and expectations of their parents. Ultimately this challenge leaves Ange isolated, far from her support network.
  - 'Gaps in the Hickory' reflects the way that familial connections can skip generations, as Carter and Delores are connected at the end of the story. It also reflects the very real barriers that time, space and difference can create within families.

## C. THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

- Language is central to the experiences of the characters in Foreign Soil. This is foreshadowed by the epigraph of the text, which signals the way in which the characters will use language to reimagine and reinvent their landscapes.
  - 'David' reflects the distance that can be created between characters who have minimal language in common. The unnamed narrator struggles to avoid making assumptions about Asha as the two struggle to communicate.
  - 'Railton Road' depicts the power that can come from understanding history and law. Solomon and the other activists are empowered by their understanding of the world around them.
  - 'Big Island' explores the liberating effects of literacy. As Nathaniel's reading develops, his belief in his capacity grows.
  - Asanka's decision to sew his lips together in 'The Stilt Fishermen

of Kathaluwa' reflects his lack of agency as refugee in detention. His act is a powerful metaphor for the way that his voice has been silenced throughout his life.

- The continual rejection faced by the narrator in 'The Sukiyaki Book Club' reflects the subversive nature of the written word. The fear evident in the letters of rejection reflects the power of stories that expose experiences of racism.

#### D. THE STRUGGLE OF BEING AN OUTSIDER

- Many of the characters in *Foreign Soil* sit on the margins of society, whether by choice or by design. Their experiences are paradoxical, reflecting both the power and danger inherent in this position.
  - Ava's decision at the end of 'Shu Yi' speaks to the powerlessness that stems from being shunned, and the power that can come from isolating another.
  - In 'Gaps in the Hickory' Delores has to move away from her family so that she can be herself. This choice is necessary for her survival, but also leaves her isolated.
  - In 'The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa' Loretta is a minority voice of opposition to refugee policy and feels powerless to help Asanka and other detainees.
  - The narrator in 'The Sukiyaki Book Club' faces the effects of being silenced by publishers. Her struggle to maintain financial stability is a direct consequence of this marginalisation.

## 2. LITERARY FEATURES

### A. FORM AND STRUCTURE

- *Foreign Soil* makes use of disrupted narratives to show the complex relationships between the characters' pasts and their present.
  - In 'David' Asha's flashbacks to her time in Sudan reveal the trauma that many immigrants bring to the new phase of their lives.
  - The parallel narratives in 'Gaps in the Hickory' reflect the unusual routes that life can take, as the characters are driven away from, and then reunited with, their kin.
  - Asanka's flashbacks in 'The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa' show the crippling effect that trauma can have for refugees. These

flashbacks then compound the difficulties that he faces in detention in Australia.

## B. NARRATIVE VOICE

- Some parts of the collection are told in the first person, providing a powerful reflection of the inner conflicts that the characters face.
  - The parallel first person narratives in 'David' illustrate the gaps in understanding that can occur between two people in a conversation.
  - Ava's narrative in "Shu Yi" provides a powerful insight into the competing pressures facing young people in immigrant families.
  - In "The Sukiyaki Book Club" the use of first person shows the hardship that the young mother faces receiving rejection that is underpinned by racism.
- Other stories are told in the third person, with shifting points of view.
  - The shifting point of view in 'Gaps in the Hickory' reveals the rich and complex nature of navigating difference within families.
  - The transition between different characters in 'The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa' gives the reader a picture of the relationship between the cause and effect of Australia's refugee policy.
- *Foreign Soil* integrates a range of language that reflects the cultural heritage of the characters. This highlights the relationship of these characters to broader histories of colonisation, education and resistance.

## C. CHARACTERISATION

- Throughout *Foreign Soil*, Clarke reflects the difficulty of making decisions in a complex moral world.
  - 'Harlem Jones' makes the decision to act against police violence — a decision that the narrator in 'The Sukiyaki Book Club' knows will be unpopular with some publishers.
  - In 'Shu Yi' Ava struggles with her approach to Shu Yi because of her own experiences with racism.
  - Loretta is caught between the comfort of her marriage and her moral impulse to help refugees in the 'The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa'.
- *Foreign Soil* depicts characters who are weighed down by the burdens of their past.

- Asha finds some hope and joy in remembering her son in 'David'.
- Solomon's dreams reflect the weight of slavery in 'Railton Road'.
- In choosing to be herself, Delores is severed from all connections to her past in 'Gaps in the Hickory'.

### 3. CREATIVE RESPONSES

Students may be asked to respond creatively to the work in *Foreign Soil*. This means working with the themes and literary features of the work. Some possible tasks:

- Write an original story that would fit in the *Foreign Soil* collection.
- Write a prequel to 'David' from the unnamed narrator's point of view.
- Write a prequel to 'Harlem Jones' from Harlem's point of view.
- Write about Millie's move in 'Hope' from Mr Lucas's point of view.
- Write about Mukasa and Ange's first meeting from Mukasa's point of view.
- Write a sequel to 'Shu Yi' from Ava's perspective.
- Write a prequel to 'Railton Road' from the landlord's point of view.
- Write a sequel to 'Gaps in the Hickory'.
- Write a prequel to 'Big Island' from Clarise's point of view.
- Write a sequel to 'The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa' from Lorretta's point of view.
- Write a sequel to 'Aviation'.
- Write an acceptance letter to the narrator of 'The Sukiyaki Book Club'.

### 4. ANALYTICAL RESPONSES

Students may be asked to respond analytically to the work in *Foreign Soil*. Some possible essay questions:

- 'Clarke's work reflects the ongoing struggles with racism in modern Australia.' Discuss.

• 'These children that born here in this country, they so disrespectful.'

Clarke shows the gaps between immigrants and their children. Do you agree?

- 'They're all angry, they're all armed. They're all Harlem Jones.'

*Foreign Soil* shows the potential for change. Discuss.

- 'He knew for sure that something extraordinary rested in the fingertips of

this child.'

To what extent do the parents in *Foreign Soil* place their hopes in their children?

- 'So, where are you from?'

Clarke's stories explore the complexity of belonging. Do you agree?

- 'You can't come to this country and expect everybody to bend over backwards so you feel comfortable.'
- *Foreign Soil* reveals the discomfort experienced by immigrant communities in Australia. Discuss.
- 'We're trying to *learn* some shit in here.'
- Clarke's characters demonstrate the importance of ideas to freedom. Discuss.
- 'Place like this, you better toughen up real quick.'
- *Foreign Soil* reveals the need to focus on self-preservation. Do you agree?
- 'Re is fe restlessness.'
- Clarke's characters reflect a range of motivations for immigration. Discuss.
- 'The weight of the world is too heavy for even a god to bear.'
- *Foreign Soil* shows the cost of isolation. Do you agree?
- 'The plane is suspended in time, hovering wasp-like.'
- Clarke's work reflects the problems of a post 9/11 world. Discuss.
- 'We feel Australian readers are just not ready for characters like these.'
- To what extent does Clarke's work challenge readers?