

F. Jasmine begins to be included in more adult conversations with Berenice, as a 'person who understood and had worth-while opinions' (p. 118). The 'old Frankie had never admitted love', but F. Jasmine talks to Berenice about it, and when she reaches out for a cigarette, 'Berenice did not slap her hand away ... She and Berenice were two grown people smoking at the dinner table' (p. 119).

Your turn

- 1 To what extent do you think one's identity, like F. Jasmine's, is made up of a number of parts?
- 2 What does F. Jasmine mean when she asks Berenice: 'But what is it all about? People loose and at the same time caught. Caught and loose. All these people and you don't know what joins them up' (p. 143). How does Berenice respond?
- 3 Create a visual representation of how Frankie and Berenice see the ways people are connected.

In Part III, as 'Frances', she realises that her desire to attach herself to her brother and the bride was not part of the process of growing up that she had envisaged. She admits to herself that she is 'too scared to go into the world alone' (p. 181). After her failed attempt at running away, she still feels isolated and 'the old feelings that the world was separate from herself' return (p. 184). Her new, if rather exaggerated, friendship with Mary Littlejohn and her imagined future travelling the world with her, show that Frances is still imagining alternative identities, but also exploring the possibilities of making new connections of her own.

Your turn

- 1 In Part II, F. Jasmine is described as seeing her life as 'layered in three different parts, all the twelve years of the old Frankie, the present day itself, and the future that lay ahead when the J A three of them would be together in all the many different places' (p. 73). Design and create an annotated poster showing the three different layers.
- 2 McCullers also explores why and how identity changes through the character of Berenice. Write a short expository piece exploring how her relationship with Ludie (see in particular passages on pages 111 and 126 to 127) shapes her future identity. Write a plan suggesting how you would structure a book about Berenice in three parts.

You should try to identify and discuss other ways McCullers explores ideas associated with this Context as well as other examples of how she uses language. This will help you develop your own understanding of how and why McCullers makes particular language choices, and how her novel might inspire some of your own writing. The following additional activities might give you an overview of some of the ideas and language choices explored in *The Member of the Wedding*.

Your turn

- 1 Develop a concept map which creates an overview of the ideas associated with identity and belonging that you have considered so far.
- 2 Choose one of the ideas discussed above and write about it in a different form, and for a different purpose and audience. For example write:
 - a dramatic monologue presenting Berenice's account of the wedding; or
 - a feature article entitled: 'Two is company and three is a crowd'.

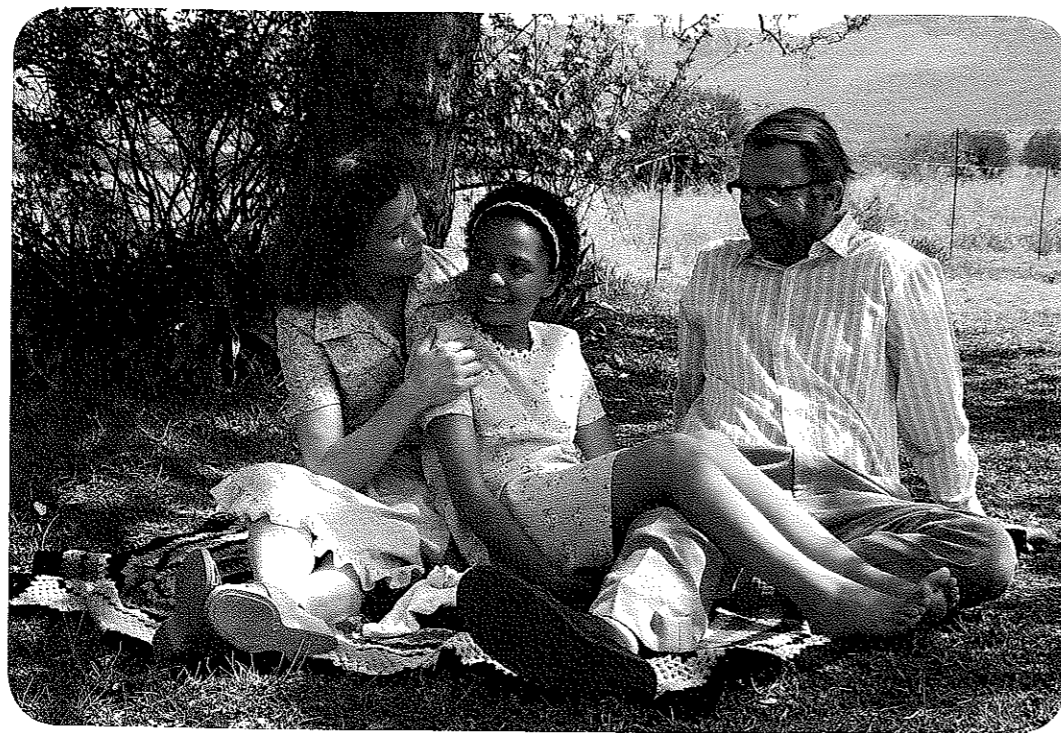
6: skin

director: Anthony Fabian



There is a sad and affecting moment early in Anthony Fabian (director) and Helen Crawley's (screenwriter) 2008 film *Skin*, in which a young Sandra Laing attempts to scrub away the darkness of her skin using a cocktail of household cleaners and solvents. The resulting burns and the whimpering little girl who bears them create one of the film's moments of great pathos. Sandra inflicts such an ordeal on herself in an attempt to belong. She believes that by becoming 'white', in appearance as well as classification, she will begin to fit in and, particularly, to be loved by her severe father.

Ella Ramangwane as the young Sandra Laing, with Alice Krige and Sam Neill as her parents Sannie and Abraham Laing.



The film was originally to be called *Sandra's Skin*. This working title pinpoints the thematic, emotional and narrative heart of the film: the colour of Sandra's skin. The film is about the dark-skinned daughter of white Afrikaner parents, born in the mid-1950s in the first fervent flush of apartheid in South Africa. Sandra's appearance is due to her 'polygenic inheritance'—like 'most Afrikaners ... black genes' are carried by Abraham and Sannie—which appear when she is born. Willing away the cloud of infidelity that hovers over Sannie and the family, Abraham fights for equality for his 'white' daughter.

Apartheid (n.) is the Afrikaans word for 'separateness'. Racial segregation was enforced in South Africa between 1948 and 1993.

Skin has much to say about the injustices perpetrated in **apartheid** South Africa. But it is firstly a personal story about finding one's place in the world; about Sandra's path to forging an identity and a sense of belonging.

IDENTIFYING ideas and the ways Fabian uses language

In the story of Sandra's quest to understand her identity and find a place to belong, Anthony Fabian explores a range of ideas associated with the Context *Exploring issues of identity and belonging*, including:

- **HOW** identity is shaped
- **HOW** group identity is represented
- **THE** relationship between identity and a sense of exclusion
- **THE** relationship between identity and race
- **HOW** and why identity changes

Fabian makes careful language choices when exploring these ideas and it is important to reflect on *how* and *why* he has used language in the way that he has. Some examples we will refer to include:

- | | | |
|------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| • body language | • dialogue | • pronoun choice |
| • camera use | • metaphor | • symbols |
| • colour palette | • motifs | • soundtrack |
| • costume | • narrative structure | • titles. |

HOW identity is shaped

Throughout the film there are references to the factors that shape identity. Identities are created, challenged and undermined. *Skin* suggests that there are two broad, primary forces which act to mould identity: a person's upbringing and education, and the social and cultural context in which they live.

Upbringing

The young Sandra Laing is, as her father says, '... special: brave, intelligent, a wonderful child' (Chapter 2 0:10:12). Her identity has been formed by the loving home in which she has started her life, and with which the viewer is presented at the beginning of the film. Sandra's parents, Abraham and Sannie, brought her 'to the middle of nowhere' so that she might spend a childhood untroubled by the colour of her skin. Yet her parents are also deeply conservative, and troubled by how to ensure Sandra is treated as 'white'.

It was Sandra's unique relationship with her parents that drew the director of *Skin*, Anthony Fabian, to her story. In a 2009 interview, he said that he was attracted by:

The dynamic between Sandra and her parents. The need to be accepted and loved by one's parents is very strong in all of us. I was very drawn by the acceptance, rejection and reconciliation in Sandra's story.



Sandra learns warmth and care from her mother and from Nora, their black housekeeper, but from her father, despite his clear love for her early in the film, she learns mostly shame and insecurity. While his insecurities about Sandra's skin are often masked by self-righteous indignation at the way society treats her, he is deeply damaging. Fabian uses the **symbol** of the Lady Bee Skin Lightening Lotion and Sandra's response ('It hurts') when her father applies it to her face, to symbolise how Abraham hurts Sandra through his misguided care.

Your turn

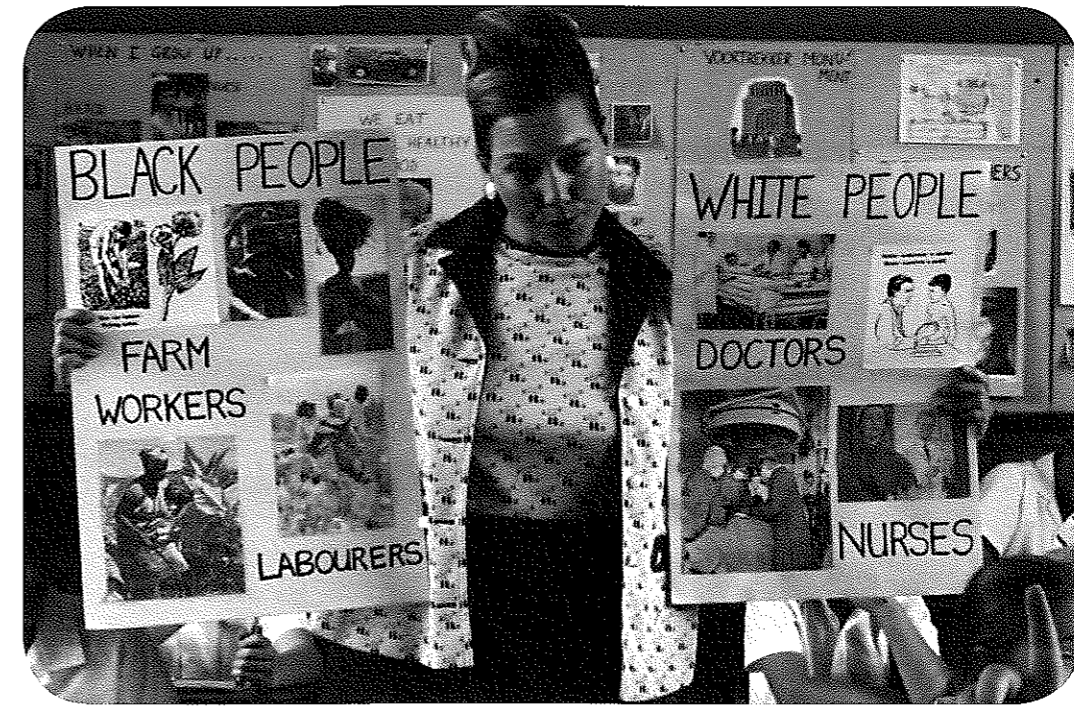
- 1 Look at this film still from when just after Sandra appears in her new school uniform and announces 'Look Mamal' (Chapter 1 0:3:30). How has Fabian used the framing of this shot to play on the viewer's preconceptions about Sandra's parentage? How does this set the scene for what is to follow for Sandra?



- 2 Make a list of the ways in which Abraham Laing mistreats Sandra. Can you understand what motivates him? What formed his character and identity?
- 3 Fabian says 'I was very drawn by the acceptance, rejection and reconciliation in Sandra's story.' Make a table like the one below which lists the ways in which Sandra is accepted, rejected by and reconciled with her parents throughout the film.

| Acceptance | Rejection | Reconciliation |
|------------|-----------|----------------|
| | | |

- 4 Towards the end of the film, Sandra tells her daughter, 'You never stop needing your parents. They're part of who you are' (Chapter 15 1:32:52). How have her parents influenced Sandra's character by the end of the film? Discuss your ideas with a partner and then share them with the class.
- 5 Re-watch the scene of Sandra's younger brother playing with a black friend in Chapter 7 (from 0:40:13). Use this scene as the basis for an analytical paragraph that discusses how childhood influences identity.



As Miss Ludik presents potential vocations for 'Black People' and 'White People', the parallel with Moses holding the tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments is clear.

School

Sandra begins to question her identity and her place in society when she goes to school. The section of the film that presents her first experiences of school is informative about education's place in perpetuating social values. There is the shocking lesson about the history of South Africa in which the teacher claims, 'And on these plains were wild animals and savage natives who were always trying to take our land' and that 'They couldn't live together because they were ... different!' (Chapter 2 0:08:29 and Chapter 2 0:08:56)

She spouts these inanities while brandishing two posters titled 'Black People' and 'White People'. Fabian uses a **biblical reference** here: the teacher holds the posters like the two tablets that bore the Ten Commandments.

Your turn

- 1 With a partner, discuss why Fabian has directed the classroom scene (Chapter 2) in the way that he has. What does the biblical reference to Moses' tablets suggest about how education can mould identities?
- 2 What is suggested by the teacher's use of the pronoun 'our' in the above quote? What are some other words which could have been used by her without being so one-sided?
- 3 Find and make a list of examples from the school scenes where Sandra seems perplexed by her treatment. As a class try to pinpoint the moment at which she realises what her life will be like.
- 4 Write an argumentative letter to the principal of the school, arguing for Sandra's inclusion in the community and against the attitudes expressed by other parents and the children in Miss Ludik's class.

Society

All of the characters in the film are shaped by the social and cultural contexts in which they live. While his attitudes seem abhorrent to a modern viewer, Abraham's views about race and segregation are squarely in the mainstream for 1950s white South Africa. There are very few white characters in the film who are sympathetic towards the hardships of black South Africans. The most noticeable of these is Sannie Laing, and even she is horrified by Sandra's confession that she likes Petrus.

Your turn

- 1 Re-watch the scene in which Sannie speaks to customer Joseph about his 'expensive' wife (Chapter 3 0:11:57). What can you read into the difference in **body language** between Sannie and Abraham?
- 2 Pause the shot of the state building to which Sandra is taken for assessment of her race in Chapter 4 (0:20:15). Why do you think Fabian has chosen the **camera angle** he has? What does it suggest about Sandra's chances of a sympathetic hearing?
- 3 Make a list of the times that Sandra's birth certificate appears or is referred to. Discuss why it is a **symbol** and what you think it might represent. What do you think Sannie dropping the certificate on the ground symbolically represents? (Chapter 12 1:14:19)

HOW group identity is represented

One of the things that make Sandra's life so difficult is her inability to belong in either of the major cultural groups in South Africa in the 1960s and 70s—she exists in a lonely netherworld where she is neither white nor black. This is represented **metaphorically** by Fabian in Chapter 6, when Sandra can neither stay in the restaurant with her chicken-loving date, nor take a ride home with Petrus. The specific instance here is a metaphor for her more general isolation between white and black.

Both of the main cultural groups represented in *Skin* have particular ways of showing their identity. The way people look, the way they speak and their music are three markers of cultural identity.

The way people look

Physical appearance is, obviously, of great importance in *Skin*. The movement back and forth of Sandra's official 'race'—from white to coloured, back to white and then again to coloured—comes about because of how she looks. Appearance, more broadly in the setting of apartheid South Africa, marks people as worthy or not.

The **costumes** worn by characters in the film also mark their group identity. A good early example comes from the scene in which Sandra first arrives at school in Chapter 2. As they enter the school, standing and sweeping is a black gardener. He wears denim overalls. These are not simply practical; they are used by Fabian and his costume designer, Fotini Dimou, to mark him as belonging to a subservient group. They are part of his identity. Less than a minute later



Election day in 1994 as represented in Chapter 1 of *Skin*. Note the extensive use of bright colour.

Sannie asserts her place, and by extension Sandra's, among the white elites by complementing a stylishly dressed acquaintance on her 'lovely dress'.

The costumes chosen by Fabian and Dimou do not merely identify the wearers as members of a particular group. They implicitly comment on the nature and morals of the wearers. The election day scene from the beginning of the film is bright and vivid, as are many of the costumes worn by black characters throughout. Conversely, the Afrikaners' costumes are drab, in beiges and greys. The **colour palette** is metaphorical, suggesting that the moral rectitude in this story rests with black South Africans.

Your turn

- 1 Re-watch Chapter 1. The election day is unquestionably vibrant. Identify the symbol that stands out amongst all the colour and sound. Discuss with a partner what you think this predominant symbol represents. Try to think about the specific story of Sandra Laing, but also the broader story of South Africa.
- 2 Do some research into the languages used in the film and in South Africa in the 1960s and 1970s. What languages are spoken by each of the black and white South African groups? Are there languages that are used exclusively by whites or blacks?
- 3 As a class, discuss the ways in which language is important for identifying people with various groups. Make a list of groups (ethnic, gender, age, geographic, etc.) that are, at least to some degree, defined by the language they speak.
- 4 Watch the campfire scene after the demolition of Petrus and Sandra's house (Chapter 12 from 1:12:50). As Petrus gets increasingly drunk, he curses Sandra, alternating between two languages. Write a short analytical paragraph about why Fabian and Crawley would give Petrus these words in two different languages. Analyse, too, the contrast between Petrus saying to his mother that Sandra brings him 'good luck' and his rant by the fire.

Music

One clear marker of cultural identity for black South Africans is music. An exuberant, lively music plays over many scenes, such as the election day, when Petrus gives Sandra a lift home, and the township celebration after the birth of Sandra's son Henry. At this party, Sandra is told that the music and dancing 'is one thing they'll never take away from us' (Chapter 10 0:59:26). Music and celebration are clearly important for keeping this group identity alive.

Your turn

- 1 Create a concept map or diagram displaying social groups in modern Australia that hold music as an important part of their identity.
- 2 Hold a music-sharing session, with the traditional music from the cultural backgrounds of the students in your class being presented and discussed by individuals or pairs. Note any examples where music has helped to hold a group identity together.

THE relationship between identity and a sense of exclusion

In order to find a group identity and to feel that one belongs, there must be some exclusion of others. Anthony Fabian summarises the idea well while talking about the film:

We have to find our group and identify with people, whether by race, gender, sexuality or culture. The downside to that instinct is excluding people that are different from the group. I am coming to terms with those wider meanings and they lead to things like war and issues over immigration. All these things relate to the story of Sandra Laing.

They relate to Sandra Laing in that, again, we see the idea that she is marooned between two exclusive groups.

Your turn

- 1 Think of as many examples as you can of Sandra being excluded from the white community and from the black community. Write the examples in a table like the one below.

| Exclusion from black society | Exclusion from white society |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| | |
| | |

- 2 Think about your own identity. Make a mental list of those groups to which you don't belong. If you feel comfortable, share these reflections with someone else in your class.

Abraham's obsession with Sandra's racial classification is a good example of how powerful the need to belong is, or have someone close to you belong, to a particular group. When Sandra is reclassified white in Chapter 5, Abraham runs down to the river to tell her and Sannie, 'She's white again! Sandra, you're white!' (Chapter 5 0:29:37). The river that separates them in this scene is a metaphor for the different attitudes Sannie and Abraham exhibit about Sandra's racial classification. Previously in the same chapter, Sannie asks, 'What does it matter what a piece of paper says?' (Chapter 5 0:25:35). This seems to be the more reasonable position.

One of the key ways in which Fabian explores the idea that Sandra is cut off from various groups in her society is through the **motif** of windows, which appear throughout the film. Sandra is often shot through a window, removed from the camera in the same way she is prevented from belonging. In the still below, Sandra is seen crying on the phone, just after her mother has said she won't see her and her children. The window here specifically represents her being cut off from her parents.

Motif (n.) a distinctive feature or dominant idea in artistic or literary composition



Your turn

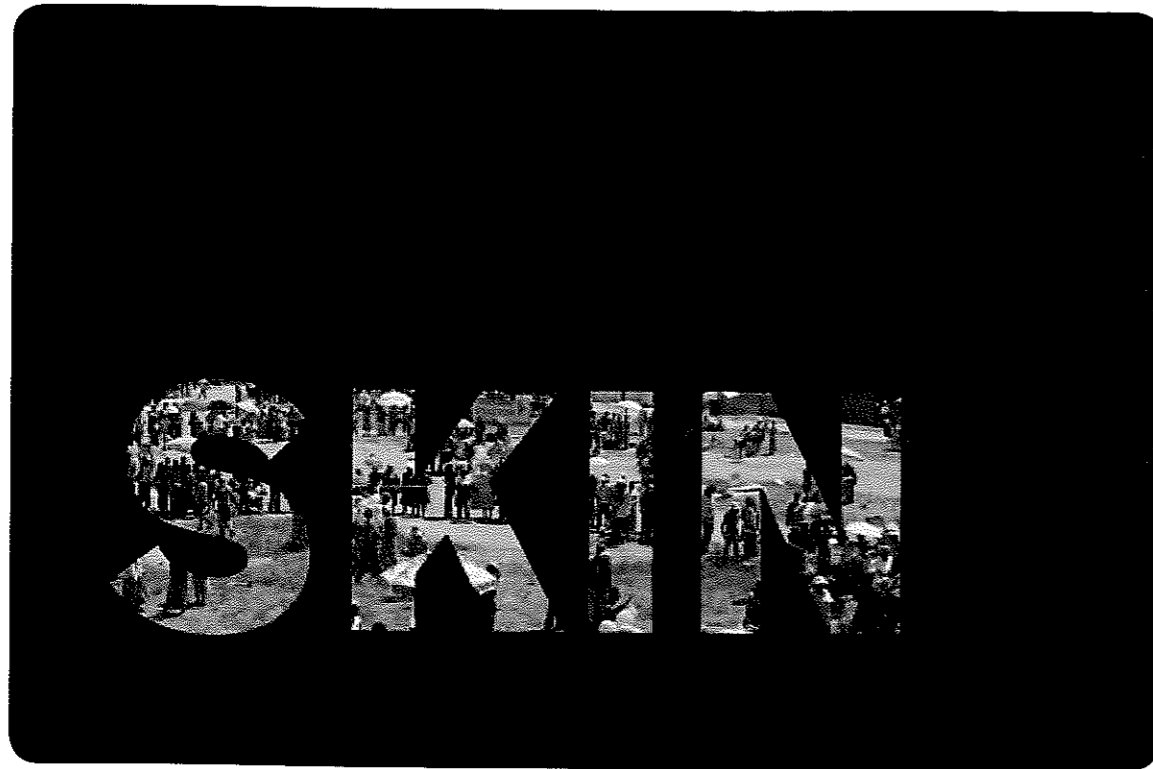
- 1 Watch the film again, looking for examples of windows, particularly those through which scenes with Sandra are shot. Discuss as a class why windows are an appropriate figurative device for what separates Sandra from others.
- 2 Re-watch the section of Chapter 2 where the students at the school pray before eating. Listen closely the bible verse read by the teacher. It is from the book of Matthew.

... Jesus reached out his hand, touched him and said 'I want to. Be clean.' And immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy. (Matthew 8:24)

Why do you think this verse was chosen? What is the connection with the context of apartheid South Africa, and with Sandra Laing specifically? What does the inclusion of this biblical reference suggest about Christian hypocrisy during the period?

THE relationship between identity and race

At the beginning of the film, the film **title**, *Skin*, zooms slowly over the scenes of the election day in 1994. The space surrounding the word 'skin' is black, while the space of the letters is hollow showing the colourful crowds underneath.



In the title, people are seen through the word 'skin', in exactly the same way as in the film people are seen through, and for, the colour of their skin. Fabian is simultaneously also suggesting that underneath 'skin' is where the people are; that the true person exists under their skin. Sannie concisely conveys the problem with the connection between skin colour and identity when she responds to Abraham's pledge that he's 'going to get her reclassified white', with 'how will that change the colour of her skin?' (Chapter 4 0:18:45).

Sandra's **character development** involves a shift in her identity from white to black. She does not naturally see her skin colour as being part of her identity; this feeling is created by her father and the teachers and students at her school. The hairbrush that Abraham gives Sandra is a powerful symbol of his preoccupation with race. He gives her the gift in the hope that perhaps 'we'll get it through those curls one day' (Chapter 4 0:19:05). Even her brother Leon who, at the beginning of the film, is supportive of and loves Sandra, looks around to check that no-one else is watching before hugging her at school (Chapter 2 0:10:48). This shows the importance to Leon of maintaining his white identity.

Your turn

- 1 There are two **settings** that bookend the film: the cosmetics factory where adult Sandra works, and the election day lines. With a partner, and then as whole class, discuss how each of these settings might be symbolic. What is ironic about Sandra ending up working in a cosmetics factory? (Incidentally, the real Sandra Laing appears in the production line behind her portrayed self at the end of the film.)
- 2 In pairs, divide the film into four or five narrative sections. Discuss the dividing lines between the sections. How does the viewer know that they have moved on to a different part of Sandra's story? Why do you think the director and screenwriter used such an expansive narrative structure?
- 3 The banner below is from the website of the film's production company, Elysian Films.
 - a Copy and annotate the image, thinking about why it has been constructed in the way that it has. What is the meaning of the banner?
 - b As a class, discuss how the three sections of the banner match the **narrative sections** of the film. Choose an image from the film that could be placed to the right of the picture of Petrus, representing the latter part of Sandra's life.



HOW and why identity changes

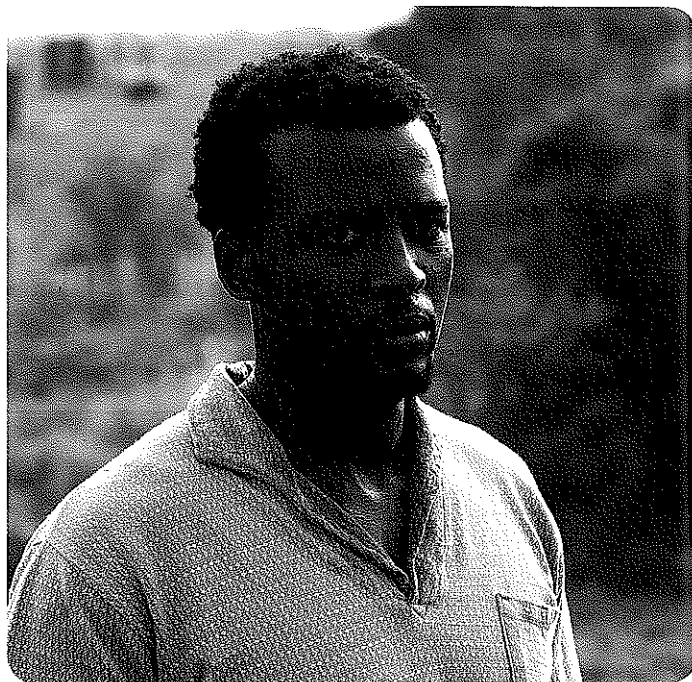
A number of characters change considerably during the course of the film. The way these characters feel about themselves and their place in the world shifts with changes in their relationships with others, and with events more broadly in South Africa.

The most obvious change in Sandra's character comes early in her life. Her experiences at Piet Retief Primary School lead to her realisation that she will be treated differently because of her appearance. The optimistic girl who dresses so keenly for school is changed by the time she is driven home by police and the school's principal. That she is *shown* being driven home helps to build a broader motif of travelling in *Skin*. Consider how many times the viewer is shown Abraham driving along the dirt road from his property. The motif is a visual and figurative representation of the journey on which Sandra goes. The change in Sandra's identity is clearly represented in the **dialogue** she delivers in Chapters 2 and 7. 'I'm not black' (Chapter 2 0:07:35) becomes 'Pa, I'm not white!' (Chapter 7 0:42:25).

Your turn

- 1 At the beginning and end of the film there are lingering shots of a bunch of balloons on election day. Fabian uses a tracking shot in Chapter 1 (0:01:19–25) to follow the man carrying them. The balloons are seen floating up into the sky at both ends of the film. What do you think they represent symbolically about Sandra?
- 2 Compare the two river scenes featuring Sandra and Petrus (Chapter 6 0:33:20 and Chapter 7 0:43:39). Why has Fabian chosen to reprise this setting? What does it show more clearly about Sandra?

Sandra's husband, Petrus Zwane, changes significantly throughout the film. Watching the drunken Petrus beat Sandra, it is easy to forget his kindness and optimism earlier in their relationship. While he shoulders some responsibility for his ruin, Petrus is changed by the circumstances and society in which he attempts to become 'truly a businessman' (Chapter 10 0:59:06). His early part in the film is marked by hard work and sacrifice—saving for 'two years and eight hundred cabbages' (Chapter 7 0:38:13) for his truck, and then selling it later to stock his new store.



This identity of hard-working businessman is taken from Petrus in the horrific clearances of the coloured township. As his shop is destroyed, so is his character. His slide into abusive, drunken resentment quickly follows.

Your turn

- 1 Write a piece of short imaginative fiction that presents a different end for Petrus Zwane. What might he have become had he not been dispossessed of his home, his store and his identity in the community?
- 2 The viewer is shown Petrus building two structures: his store and then his and Sandra's new home after the clearances. Compare these two parts of the film and Petrus' actions in each. How has he changed? How does his body language convey this change?

The dramatic nature of Petrus's change is shown in his vitriolic outburst against 'the white man' and against his innocent wife.

To hell with the white man. They take our homes, our families. They move us like cows from one place to the next. And we're supposed to believe we're human. How can we believe that? You know what? My wife is white. She's brought me nothing but bad luck and misery. Her skin is a curse. (Chapter 12 1:12:50)

The outburst moves from completely justifiable outrage at his treatment at the hands of white South Africans and the government, to an illogical and vengeful racism. Petrus transmutes his anger at his treatment into a hatred of all whites, including Sandra.

Sandra's older brother Leon also demonstrates a marked change in identity. Initially caring of Sandra, the weight of society's prejudice and his father's ill-directed anger weigh heavily on Leon and he takes the easy option of disowning Sandy. The viewer sees the seeds of Leon's change in his dialogue when he says to his mother, 'I love Sandy, but, it's hard Ma' (Chapter 4 0:23:56). Fabian and Dimou represent Leon's change with a change of costume. Replacing his school uniform with the army uniform he will wear for his two-year compulsory military service symbolises both his change in character and a change of people with whom he identifies.

Your turn

- 1 Write a character study of the change in Leon. How does he change? What factors influence this change?
- 2 In addition to his costume changing, a particular **prop** is also used to represent Leon's change in character. What is it and why is it appropriate?
- 3 As a class, discuss how you feel about Abraham by the end of the film. He says to his wife, 'I'm so sorry. I was wrong. I have to tell her.' What brings about this change? Do you believe it is genuine?
- 4 Compare Abraham's rejection of Sandra ['No. She made her choice' (Chapter 11 1:03:06)] with the rebuke he receives from Sannie ['No. You made your choice' (Chapter 14 1:24:51)]. How is dialogue used to show the justice in his suffering?

Now that you've considered some of the choices that Fabian has made in his exploration of identity and belonging in *Skin*, you need to start thinking about how these ideas and language choices could inspire your own writing.

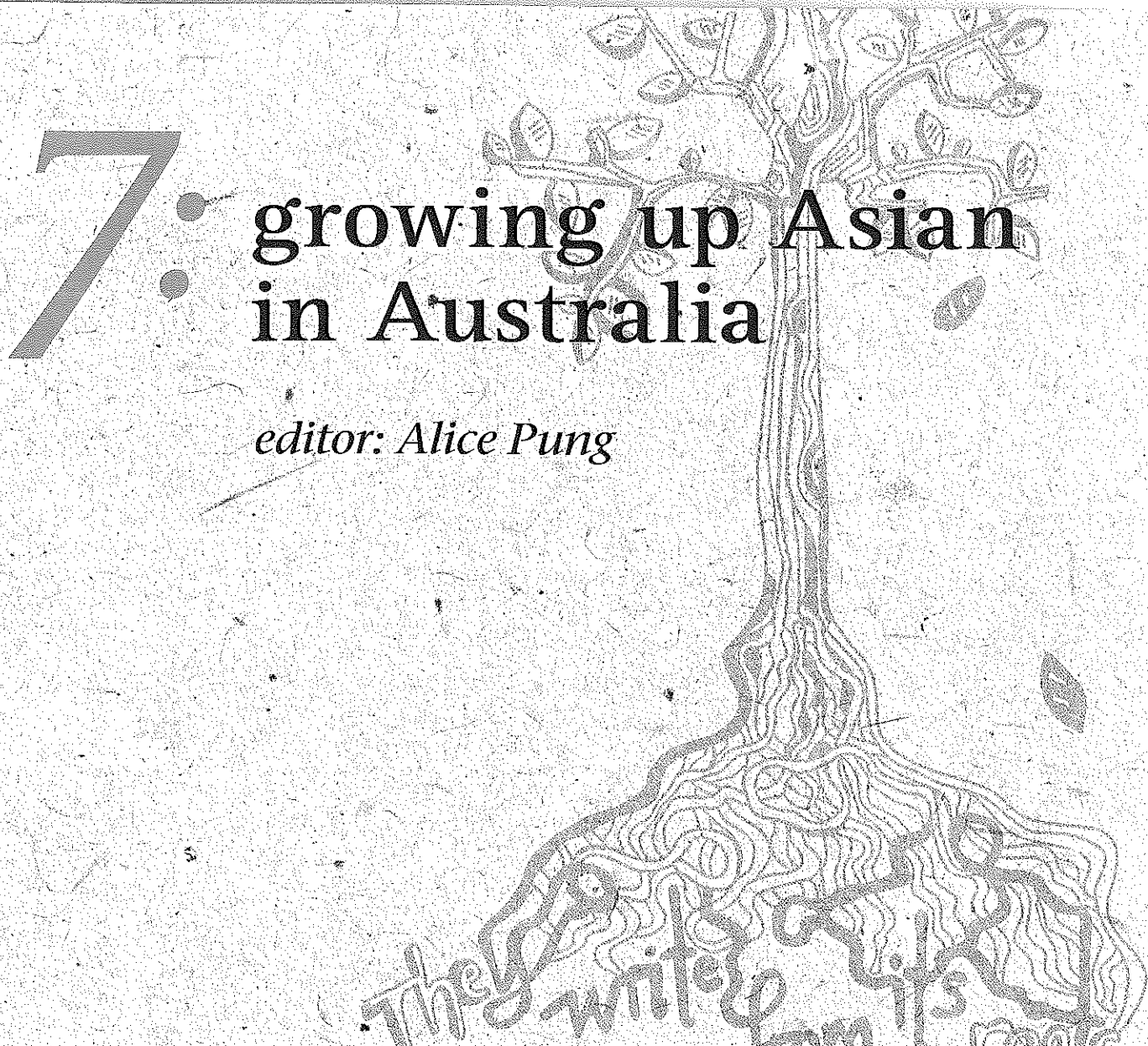
Below are some activities that may give you an overview of some of the ideas associated with *Exploring issues of identity and belonging* that are explored in *Skin*, and the way verbal and non-verbal language choices are used to explore them.

Your turn

- 1 Develop a concept map creating an overview of the ideas associated with identity and belonging that you have considered so far.
- 2 Choose one of the ideas examined above and make a list of different forms that you could use to effectively write about it. For example, you could write a feature article or a reflective essay about how individuals represent their identity.
- 3 Create a list of the changes you would need to make to change *Skin* from a film to a short story. Choose two of these changes and discuss the effect they would have on the reader.

7 growing up Asian in Australia

editor: Alice Pung



In *Growing up Asian in Australia*, Alice Pung, who herself grew up Asian in Australia, has collected over 60 stories from first- to fifth-generation 'Asian-Australians' from countries including Bangladesh, China, Hong Kong, India, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam. The authors' texts are created in a variety of forms, and provide insights into the experience of 'growing up Asian in Australia' and the issues this raises about identity and belonging. Authors tell their own stories, or fictionalised versions of them, from 'a uniquely Asian-Australian perspective' (p. 1). In the introduction, Pung comments that 'our authors show us what it is like behind the stereotypes' which, she suggests, have developed because 'Asian-Australians have often been written about by outsiders, as outsiders' (p. 1). She claims that while these 'distant observers' have plucked 'the most garish fruit from the lowest-hanging branches of an exotic cultural tree' (p. 1), unlike them, the writers of stories in this collection 'are the tree, and they write from its roots' (p. 1).