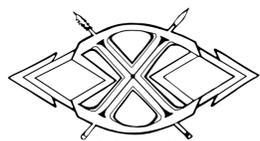


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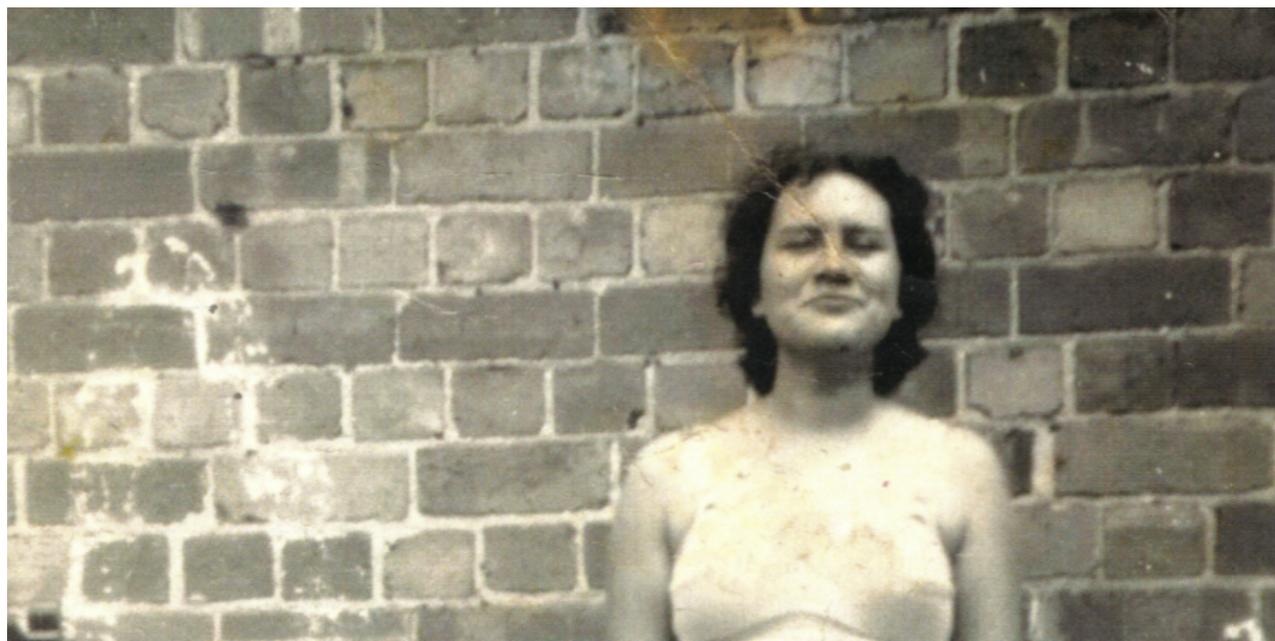
# “I want to be known as a Gundijtmara activist”

By Meriki Onus

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**Meriki Onus sits down with her Nan, Alma Thorpe, to discuss her amazing life as a communist, an Aboriginal Health Worker and above all, a Gundijtmara activist.**



“I want to be known as a Gundijtmara activist” 86 year old Alma Thorpe (nee Brown) reflects as I sit around her table on an April afternoon after having spent the day tending to the well cared for garden in her home of almost 4 decades, nestled in Northern Melbourne suburbia.

Known to many as ‘Aunty Alma from the old Fitzroy’, to me, my siblings and my cousins, she is known simply as Nan. Our family’s matriarch. Born during the Great Depression in 1935. Like many of her generation, the Depression had really shaped her formative years and would influence her politics and perspectives for the entirety of her life. I remember that she’d

always lecture me at Christmas time when I was growing up about how good we had it and that for her at my age getting an orange, if you were lucky, made for a good Christmas. She explains that simply having a good feed was the best Christmas gift, "Dawn Austin was the best pudding maker there was," Nan chuckles.

Nan is perhaps best known for her work in the establishment of the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service and the Weeroona Aboriginal Cemetery, she is acknowledged for this in the [Aboriginal Honour Roll](#). However, not many would know that she also is a pioneer for the role of Aboriginal Health Worker. Although I'm not a fan Black women humbling themselves, because we are often erased from the history books, Nan is humble and this did not come up in our round the table discussion that afternoon but I felt it important to mention nonetheless.



*NAN AT THE OPENING OF THE MORWELL ABORIGINAL HEALTH SERVICE, 1971 OR 1972.*

Nan was able to enter China through her communist connections and observed the '[barefoot doctors](#)'. This is where they came up with the concept of the Aboriginal Health Worker which she then worked tirelessly to roll out nationally. I can walk into almost any town in the country and mention to the Elders of that time that I am Alma Thorpe's grandchild and people know her work within Aboriginal Health.

Starting work at 12 in a shoe factory in Fitzroy, she never had the chance to finish high school "you had to be pretty rich to go higher (in school)". She tells me that her aunties and mum were either cleaners or servants and that her father, James Brown, a second-generation Scot, worked on the Victorian Railways. He taught nan a lot, she says, even though he was drunk most of the time. He was also heavily involved with the unions, "my dad was a communist, let's put it that way". Nan was a communist too, which she still hesitates to say. Sadly, James Brown died in the streets of Fitzroy, a young man gone too soon.

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*13 YO OLD NAN WITH HER COUSIN DOTTY LOVETT.*

You weren't allowed to have interracial marriage back then, not without permission at least, but "poor white people were allowed to break the rules". Nan says that poor whites were the lowest rung in society. I was surprised by this and asked why she didn't think Aboriginal people were the lowest rung, she just smiled knowingly and said, "there wasn't a rung for Blackfullas; we were the dirt the ladder stood on".

"At least in Fitzroy you could be Black, even if you had no rights. A lot of people in the rural parts of the country pretended they were white for survival."

For some context on what life was like for Nan, and what the prevailing attitudes to Aboriginal people were when she was growing up, it's worth noting that when Nan was only 2 years old, there was an 'initial conference of commonwealth and state Aboriginal authorities'. The conference was attended by 'chief protectors of aborigines', white men who were often doctors, academics and bureaucrats, who were given the power of life and death over Aboriginal people. These people are often still today decorated in the medical and academic fields. One Protector, Sir John Burton Cleland, also an academic who was said to educate an entire generation as a Professor of Pathology at the University of Adelaide commented: "*A very unfortunate situation would arise if a large half-caste population breeding within themselves eventually arose in any of the Australian States. It seems to me that there can be only one satisfactory solution to the half caste problem, and that is the ultimate absorption of these persons in the white population.*"

The conference had other high level Australian academic, medical professionals and public servants discuss ways for the Aboriginal race to be bred out of existence. They spoke of a fear of 'half-castes' growing in number, of a possible Black uprising in Northern Australia, and they spoke with a disconcerting ease about white supremacy and about the inferiority of Aboriginal people. And although the language has changed, you could see the same thinking that still influences white Australian attitudes and Aboriginal policy today.

Nan suggests a couple of times that you need to understand the Half Caste Act to understand what her life was like back then. The Act was designed "to assimilate the Black people." It gave the Aborigines Protection Board the power to influence where people lived, where they worked, and who they married. Nan said there was a lot of pressure for her to marry white. She refused. "I was supposed to marry white too, but I married Black... I was determined that my family would be Aboriginal." In Fitzroy in the 30s and 40s and 50s all the Black men were her cousins so she had to be extremely intentional on who she chose to be her partner. She met my Pop, Gunnai man, Alister Thorpe, at a Sir Doug Nicholls event in Fitzroy.

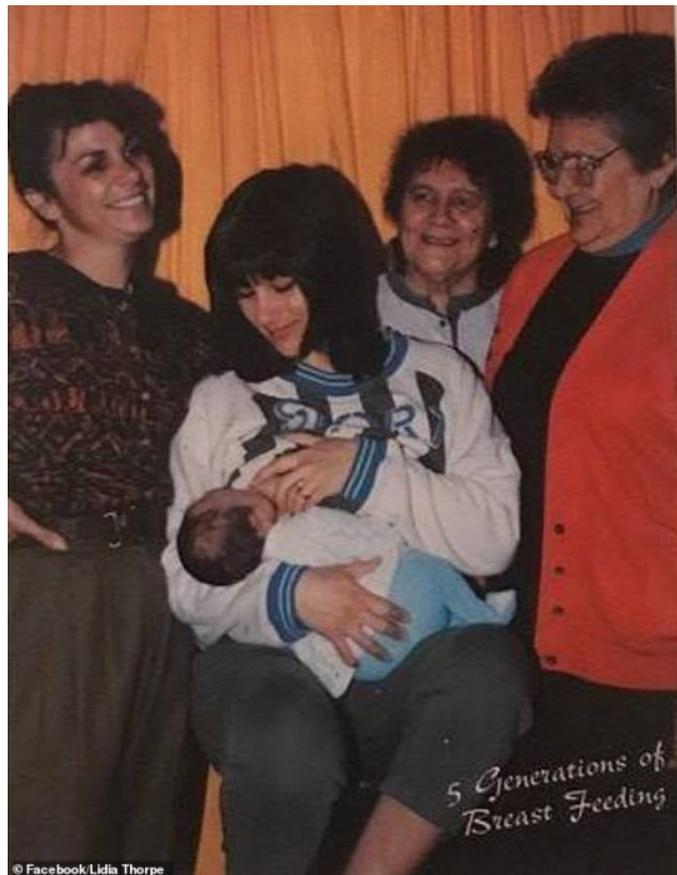
Considering the thinking around assimilation and the government's commitment to "breed out the Black". It appears that Nan's commitment to marry an Aboriginal man was in itself an act of resistance to the day's status quo.

Back in the day, nan says Aunty Marge Tucker, Geraldine Briggs her mother (Nan Edna Brown nee Lovett) and other strong Black women from the community were communist because it gave them a voice. The communists had a restaurant called the Bella Lichart and Aunty Marg Tucker used to sing there under the stage name "Princess Lardia". Nan Edna used to dance there with Aunty Joyce Johnson "because you were allowed to have a voice" which I assumed to mean there were a lot more freedoms for a Black woman in communist social and political circles.

"And that's what it's all about, the working class" The Aborigines Advancement League was set up by Black unionists. Communism was the only way of life, there was no choice in the depression. Nan's uncle was the secretary to a Communist Party in St Kilda. He was killed. She believed he was murdered because he was a communist. Which makes sense as to why nan seems hesitant to talk about it.

"STOP IT, stoop it" Nan yells at one of her many dogs mid interview, the one on my lap looking for extra attention in my face. "He (her white deaf dog from Bung Yarda) drives me mad, he just looks at me all day so lovingly, reminds me of a man but I don't believe it." Most that are close to nan knows that she loves her dogs and has always had more than three living there at one time.

"I've had a full life." she said with conviction.



"My grandchildren are who I am but, of the future, I hope they are sensible in the future of their own dreams but never lose who they are."

I think most of us carry the Gundjtmara activist tenacity when we continually question the status quo.

So, remember her legacy, and when you hear her name know that she is many things but, above all of them, she is a Gundjtmara activist.

By Meriki Onus

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