

**Yoorrook Justice Commission****BALERT KEETYARRA OF AUNTY FAY CARTER****Introduction**

- 1 My full name is Fay Priscilla Carter.
- 2 I am an Elder of and identify with two Aboriginal groups – Yorta Yorta and Dja Dja Wurrung (though I have ancestors that came from other groups, like Granny Maggie Nelson, who was Waveroo from north-eastern Victoria).
- 3 I am the Vice Chairperson of Aboriginal Community Elders Services (ACES), a community-controlled organisation that provides culturally appropriate aged care services for Aboriginal Elders. Previously, I have been:
  - (a) employed as a Field Officer and Community Development and Welfare Program Co-ordinator at the Aborigines Advancement League (AAL);
  - (b) a committee member of AAL for several years;
  - (c) employed by the Victorian Department of Social Security as an Aboriginal Liaison Officer;
  - (d) involved in the establishment of ACES, among a group led by Aunty Iris Lovett-Gardiner;
  - (e) a manager of ACES for 16 years;
  - (f) a board member of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) for 11 years, and as Chair for 10 of those 11 years;
  - (g) a member of the Victorian branch of the National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC), including three years as Treasurer and five years as President;

- (h) an elected councillor for two terms on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission;
  - (i) an applicant to some of the native title claims of the Dja Dja Wurrung People;
  - (j) a director of the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation; and
  - (k) a member of the negotiating team for the Dja Dja Wurrung native title settlement with the State government under the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010* (Vic).
- 4 I have also held roles with the Austin Hospital Community Advisory Committee, the Kulin Nation Cultural Heritage Program and the board of Worawa Aboriginal College.
- 5 I have worked with Counsel and Solicitors Assisting to prepare this *Balert Wurrekilang* ('witness statement' in Dja Dja Wurrung language) ahead of the Elders' Truth-Telling *Wurrek Tyerrang* (hearings) for the Yoorrook Justice Commission (**Yoorrook**).
- 6 This *Balert Wurrekilang* sets out details of the experiences I have had over the course of my life as an Aboriginal person, stories of other Aboriginal people that I believe it is important be told, as well as some thoughts about things that could be changed to improve the lives of Aboriginal people. My *Balert Wurrekilang* covers the following:
- (a) the experiences of my family and community living on the Flats near Mooroopna after the walk-off from Cummeragunja Mission in 1939;
  - (b) the impacts of dispossession from our country and oppression by government and non-Aboriginal people suffered by my family and community, and other Aboriginal families and communities, and the consequent trauma resulting from this dispossession and oppression;
  - (c) the segregation and racism that me, my family and my community have suffered and continue to suffer, and the flow-on effects caused by this segregation and racism;
  - (d) the resilience of my family, my community and Aboriginal people despite the hardships we have had to face; and
  - (e) based on my experiences and the experiences of my family and community, things that could change to help address the ongoing impacts and injustices

that began with the dispossession of my people from our country and homelands.

7 I have previously contributed to a number of books and videos about my life and issues faced by Aboriginal people, including:

- (a) a book entitled '*Djuwima Djarra. Dja Dja Wurrung: Kiakiki Wangedak*' (2014),<sup>1</sup> namely a chapter entitled '*Aunty Fay Carter*' (**Annexure A**);
- (b) a book entitled '*Living Aboriginal History of Victoria: Stories in the Oral Tradition*' (1991);<sup>2</sup>
- (c) a video entitled '*Your home was where your people were*' (1988), filmed by Uncle Wayne Atkinson and published by the Koorie Heritage Trust;<sup>3</sup>
- (d) a video entitled '*Resisting Colonial Rule*' (2021), prepared as part of the Deadly & Proud Treaty campaign;<sup>4</sup> and
- (e) a video entitled '*Heal Country*' (2021), produced by VACCA.<sup>5</sup>

8 This *Balert Wurrekilang* at times refers to, and is supported by, these key information sources. I would like Yoorrook to consider these additional materials.

9 During the course of preparing this *Balert Wurrekilang*, some questions have arisen, which I understand will be the subject of requests for documents (Notice(s) to Produce). Given the possibility that further documents will become available, I have been advised by the Solicitors Assisting that:

- (a) additional documentation relevant to this *Balert Wurrekilang* may be tendered in future; and
- (b) it is possible that I will be recalled at a later *Wurrek Tyerrang*.

## Early life

10 I was born on 1 January 1935. At that time, my mother, Iris Bereniece Nelson, was living at Cummeragunja. I learnt later on in my life that I was born on the verandah of

<sup>1</sup> Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation; Dr Jessica Hodgens.

<sup>2</sup> Cambridge University Press; Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://vimeo.com/185595145>.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://deadlyandproud.vic.gov.au/stories/the-cummeragunja-walk-off/>.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.vacca.org/page/stories/news/news/what-heal-country-means-to-me-aunty-fay-carter>.

the Echuca Hospital, because Aboriginal women were not taken into the wards when there were non-Aboriginal women in there in those days.

- 11 I was four years old when the Cummeragunja walk-off happened in 1939. I do not remember a lot about Cummeragunja from those four years, but I do remember families that had walked off Cummeragunja who were camping across the river in Barmah, families camping on a piece of land that Grandpa James had been given by the Department of Education. We camped there for around 9 or 10 months. Then all the families moved over to Mooroopna and settled on the Flats. The reason they moved there was for the seasonal work because, coming off the Mission, they had to find ways to get money to buy food and what was needed. But some families never left Cummeragunja. They lived it out.
- 12 Our people walked off Cummeragunja because of the way that they were treated. Our people were not allowed to practise any of their culture or speak their language at Cummeragunja. If they were caught practising their culture or speaking their language, our people would be penalised, by having their rations reduced or having things that they valued taken away from them.
- 13 When you heard the old people talk about Cummeragunja, they loved that place. They loved the place and the community feeling there, not how they were treated. My mother talked about Cummeragunja like it was a human being. She would say, "*Oh, poor old Cummera. Oh, she was lovely, Cummera was.*" The place, not the treatment. The place, and the community feeling, is what she missed. A photo of community members at the Cummeragunja Church, including my grandmother sitting at the organ, is at **Annexure B**.
- 14 After the family left Cummeragunja, I grew up on the Flats, a settlement on the outskirts of Mooroopna on the banks of the Goulburn River.
- 15 I remember we went to Melbourne for a while. I think during the war years there was employment for Aboriginal people because of the factories. But then after the war, white people were given the jobs instead of Kooris so they moved back to areas like the Flats and Cummeragunja where there was seasonal work, where there was water close to the rivers and things like that.
- 16 I was trying to imagine exactly where our house was. When I say houses, they were makeshift houses, built by the men in the community. They used to cut down these strong saplings and make posts. I can remember the women used to sit down and sew the bags together to make the walls and they'd get kerosene tins and beat them

out for the roofs. They had dirt floors. I can remember some of the women used to get down and scrub their floors. The floors would end up really hard like concrete.

- 17 The women used to make brooms out of the young saplings, they tied them together at the top. Every morning, you'd see the women out around the camps, splashing water around to settle the dust and they'd sweep with these makeshift brooms. They used to keep the camps really clean. When they first came here there were tents they would have got from relief places, church groups and that, and then they started to make more permanent homes.
- 18 The tip at the high ground, which we called Daish's Paddock, furnished our homes. We would get tables, chairs, cupboards, beds from the tip. I remember my grandmother used to mix up buckets of water with a detergent called Phenyle. She would then wash down everything gathered from the tip, to disinfect it.
- 19 I remember Nanny and Auntie Ollie Muir brought back a roll of lino, dragging it across the highway from the tip down to the Flats. It was a long way. They laid it out and then cut it in half, then laid it out on the dirt floors in the main room. We thought we were real flash and people used to come just to look at our lino floor.
- 20 We used to move a lot to camp at different orchards for work, but always came back to our base. The women used to cook outside in camp ovens, they were campfires. The men built a couple of 'pullies', I call them. They used to set up wires down into the river and let buckets down and pull the water up. They had a big drum at the top and they'd fill that and people would go and get their water out. Everybody used to take their turn filling out that big drum and they'd go and draw their water from there.
- 21 The feeling of freedom we had; freedom and people caring and sharing more. None of us had anything, so it set the base to share what we did have. You were never without somebody caring for you. You never belonged to your parents – you belonged to the whole community.
- 22 It flooded quite often at the Flats and we used to have to move to the high ground at the tip at Daish's Paddock. It was like a holiday to us kids to put a little swag on our back and just take our bare necessities and go over there and camp. I remember one time some of the old people waiting outside the school gate for us because the water had come up during the day while we were at school and the police had come down and told the community that they had better move out. What they would do is pack up beds and things on top of tables and things like that. They would just take the bare necessities and walk across the highway. They would come down to the school and

told us not to come home to the Flats, to go home over there (to Daish's Paddock). I reckon that's fairly significant to say: 'don't go home here, go home over there', because your home is where your people were. It's not the material things, home is where the heart is.

- 23 I remember that, during the Second World War, we would have beautiful concerts all around Cummeragunja. To make the costumes, Aunty Geraldine Briggs and Aunty Ollie Muir used to do the cutting out and Nanny did the sewing on the machine. If they didn't have enough money to buy material, they'd buy coloured crepe paper. And Nanny would make beautiful costumes out of crepe paper, on the sewing machine. We had concerts, beautiful concerts. They were beautiful singers and we were good dancers. We'd have concerts all around the little towns, all around Cummeragunja. The money that was made from the concerts would be donated to the war effort and to the Red Cross, but I don't think that's ever been told. Women would get together and knit things like socks and balaclavas too, in the early days of the Mission, in the 1940s when the war was on, to help with the war effort. A photo from an Aboriginal Ball in 1947 in which I appear is at **Annexure C**.
- 24 Nanny's sewing machine has travelled through the generations and across country. It was in the museum for a while, with stories of her making stuff on the sewing machine and the concerts she used to be around. When the exhibition closed down, they sent the machine up to Swan Hill and it ended up in a shed there. It became dilapidated. I've now had it restored. It's about 160 years old. When we lived down the Flats, trucks with big trays at the back used to come down and pick up families to take them to the orchards to pick fruit and that sort of stuff. My grandmother would say "*put my machine on there, please*". And they'd have to put the machine on the truck, and it would go out to the orchards and camp out there for as long as the fruit season lasted.
- 25 Two of Mummy's sisters married New South Wales Aboriginal men, Uncle Les Saunders and Uncle Grant. And they lived in Leeton. About 10km outside Leeton was an Aboriginal community, just like the Flats, and they used to call it Wattle Hill because it was built on a hill and there were wattle trees everywhere. And when we'd go up there to stay (sometimes for a year), Nanny would take her sewing machine on the train. It was very precious to her. And it's now very precious to me. And I'll be passing it on to my daughter, Wendy, and it will be very precious to her too.
- 26 When I was 14 years old, I moved to Echuca. My mother got me a part-time retail job, and I later got a job in a fruit and vegetable shop. I think I may be the only Aboriginal

girl who worked in a shop in Echuca. I think it would have been different if I had black skin. I think I was accepted because I was not noticeably Aboriginal and my skin was a bit fairer.

## Impacts of colonisation

### Segregation

- 27 The memory of hospital verandahs is something that is very strong in me. I can remember later on in my life when we were living down the Flats, somebody from the community would be in hospital in Mooroopna. We'd go to Mooroopna Hospital and our people would be on the verandah, they would not be in the ward. They were not allowed inside, they would be treated on the verandah. So that verandah is something that really stuck in me.
- 28 When I was about 12 years old – and that age, 12, was very important to me – I got appendicitis and I was taken to the Mooroopna Hospital to have my appendix removed. And when I was in the bed, my grandmother came down and whispered to me, *"Fif,"* – she used to call me Fifi – *"don't tell them you're Aboriginal, because they'll put you out on the verandah"*. And that sort of sticks in my head too. I still get emotional now, because I can hear her, *"Don't tell them that you're Aboriginal because they'll put you out on the verandah"*. And so I didn't, I kept quiet. That bothers me now too, that I kept quiet, that I didn't stand up for myself. Nowadays I would stand up for myself, but at the age of 12, I didn't quite have the strength to do that.
- 29 Mummy, my mother, worked at the Echuca Hospital as a part-time sweets cook. When I was about 16 years old, she got me a job at the hospital as a wards maid. The day I started work, my mother took my arm and said, *"Fif, I've got something to show you that's important."* She took me to that verandah and said, *"You were born right there."* She did not think there was anything wrong with it, but I sure did. *"You were born right there, that's where you were born"*. By then, by that age, I was very much aware of discrimination against our people. But our people did not want to make trouble. There was always that fear, of getting into trouble.
- 30 Aboriginal people were also treated for serious problems on the verandah of the hospital. My Mummy's brother, Uncle George, had really bad emphysema, and he was treated on the verandah. I recall that Aboriginal people were treated on the verandah until at least the 1970s.

- 31 I also remember going shopping with my grandmother and some of the old Aunties. Our people would be made to stand along the wall, and were only called forward to be served when there were no non-Aboriginal people left in the shop. If they were serving one of our people and a non-Aboriginal person walked in, they would stop serving the Aboriginal person and start serving the non-Aboriginal person.
- 32 This would also happen in hospitals, at the doctors' office, at the dentists' office and so on. Aboriginal people were always treated as second class people. They always had to wait to be served and had to keep their place.

### Massacres

- 33 I've got a really sad story about Mummy's elder sister, Aunty Ruby Muir, who was adopted into the family. Aunty Ruby had two brothers, Uncle Charlie and Uncle Billy. When they were children, they were brought down from Barkindji Country on a paddle-steamer to Cummeragunja. My grandmother took Aunty Ruby in when she was about 6 or 7 years old, and Aunty Ruby was reared as my mother's older sister. I didn't know that Aunty Ruby was not related to my mother by blood until I was married. A photo showing the Nelson family from 1914, including Aunty Ruby, is at **Annexure D**.
- 34 Aunty Ruby did not know the full story about why she was adopted into our family until she was dying in her 90s, when she was living in a nursing home in Mooroopna. For her entire life, Aunty Ruby believed that she was sent to Cummeragunja because her mother had given her away. On her deathbed, she was asking, "*why did my mother give me away?*"
- 35 Aunty Ruby's great niece, Kerry Muir, who was Uncle Charlie's granddaughter, researched why the three children were sent from Barkindji Country to Cummeragunja. Kerry found out that there had been a massacre of Aunty Ruby's family in Barkindji Country, near Mildura. Aunty Ruby, Uncle Charlie and Uncle Billy were found in a water tank. The whole family had been massacred. The children were hidden in the empty water tank, to protect them. The welfare or whoever at the time gathered up the children and put them onto a paddle-steamer, and the children were brought down to Cummeragunja.
- 36 When Aunty Ruby was close to death, my cousin, Lillian Tamiru, and I visited her to tell her the story that Kerry had researched. She was close to death and very frail. We said to Aunty Ruby, "*We've come to tell you a story that's going to make you*

*happy, because you're going to find out your mother didn't give you away. We'll tell you what happened to your mother".*

- 37 We told Aunty Ruby the story of the massacre, that her mother had been killed in the massacre, and that her and Uncle Charlie and Uncle Billy were found by the police hidden in a water tank. We told her the whole story.
- 38 She was lying there, very frail, with the bedclothes right up. When we finished telling Aunty Ruby this story, she pushed her bedclothes down and put her hand out to me and Lily, and grabbed our hands. She was thanking us for telling her story to her. She was such a beautiful person. She was such a beautiful, beautiful person – so kind and gentle. She went all through her life thinking that her mother had given her and her brothers away.
- 39 At Aunty Ruby's funeral, I read her story. Aunty Ruby's husband's family had never heard the story and so were shocked. But they said to me afterwards that they were glad to have heard it.

#### Removal (and death) of children

- 40 Aunty Margaret was my grandfather George Nelson's sister, and the daughter of Granny Maggie Nelson (who we called Granny Mag) and Grandfather Henry Nelson. A photo showing the Nelson family from 1914, including Aunty Margaret, is at **Annexure D**.
- 41 Like many of the young girls at Cummeragunja, Aunty Margaret was taken from her family to a training home for Aboriginal girls in Cootamundra in New South Wales. Aboriginal girls were taken from other missions as well. They were taught to be servants and housekeepers there.
- 42 Aunty Margaret would have been in her teens or early twenties when the training home got in touch with Granny Mag and Grandfather Henry, who were still living on Cummeragunja, and told them that Aunty Margaret was coming home for a holiday. They went to go and meet Aunty Margaret at the train station at Echuca. The train pulled in and they waited, but she didn't get off the train. They noticed her bag being put on the station platform. It turned out Aunty Margaret had died. They'd buried her at Cootamundra and they never even let her family know. Granny Mag and Grandfather Henry never found out what happened to their daughter. That's something that's always disturbed me.

- 43 So that's Aunt Margaret's story. To this day, I believe our family needs to know what happened to Aunt Margaret, how she died and where they laid her to rest, so that we can visit her and have some closure. That's what I believe. We don't even know what she died of. Maybe the records should show that. Because having that information helps you have closure. It helps you say, "*Oh well, gosh, that's what happened.*" You either mourn about it or you accept it and get on with life. But at least you know. You know what it is.

#### Connection to language

- 44 My children have asked me, "*Why didn't they teach you the language when they came off the Mission*" – they weren't allowed to talk on the Mission – "*but why didn't they teach you when they came off the Mission and you were living down the Flats?*" I believe that one of the reasons the old people did not pass language on to us because they did not want us to get into trouble, like they did, for speaking language. I believe it was because they felt as though, for the young people to survive, they had to practise the white man's way. They were made to feel that they weren't going to get anywhere by practising culture. I think they were protecting the young people against being penalised, like they were penalised. They were so protective of us.
- 45 The old people used to still speak their language, but just in a little group over there, whispering, choofing the kids away. They would have a yarnning group in a circle and talk it in their language, but they would not let us kids hear what they were talking about. They would drop words sometimes though. "Dhomanyini-yalka", that's one word that they used quite often, openly, to greet you. It means 'my dear', or 'precious', or 'darling child'. "Djitika" is meat, or then they'd say things like "no batjelan", meaning "no money". So you picked up language with them just dropping things like that.
- 46 We've got a tape of my grandmother speaking her language, but she never spoke her language to us. She speaks differently when she's speaking language on the tape. When she was talking English she'd be real bossy, but then when I hear her speak the language it's just this different way of saying the words. It was beautiful and soft, it touches you.

#### Connection to culture

- 47 At Cummeragunja, Aboriginal people were not allowed to practise their culture. Our people were forced to believe that practising culture was a sinful thing. They were told, "*You've got to read the bible, you've got to practise the white man's religion, all*

*that other stuff's just pagan stuff*'. As a result of that, my grandmother was very religious – she'd almost walk around with the Bible under her arm. A lot of the old people of her age were like that. I think it was easy for our people to adopt the white man's religion, because they were already very spiritual people.

- 48 My grandmother once told a story about how the kids at the Mission used to make and beat possum skin drums, while the women and men danced. But the Mission stopped them from making the possum skin drums, took them off them and told them they couldn't make them. They weren't allowed to do anything cultural. My grandmother said the kids then started to get the pillows off their bed, roll them up real tight, put them between their legs and beat the pillows. They used to go out into the bush where nobody knew about it and do the ceremony out there. So, they used to make things happen in their own way. But if they were caught doing things, they'd be punished by taking rations off them or taking something that they valued off them or hurting them in some way. They had to become a bit sneaky, I suppose, in order to do some things that they needed to do.

#### Land and injustice

- 49 Aboriginal people did not have any opportunities to buy land, while land was sold up to people living in England. Now you get this generational wealth, built up, everywhere.
- 50 After the Second World War, Cummeragunja lost most of their land because they gave it to white soldiers coming back from the war. But our people that came back from war to live on the Mission did not get anything. They weren't entitled to it.
- 51 There was a piece of land near Barmah that Grandpa James inherited from the Education Department. They gave him this piece of land and we were all camping on that land. We camped there maybe 9 to 10 months, then all the families moved over to Mooroopna and settled on the Flats. I don't ever know what happened to that land.

#### **Welfare**

##### Cummeragunja

- 52 At Cummeragunja, our people were taught to be welfare recipients – ring the bell, line up for your rations.
- 53 When our people walked off Cummeragunja, they received no help from the government whatsoever. It was like the government said, *"If you don't want to stay*

*here and be looked after, then you go look after yourselves*", and they did. It was hard for them, but they did. They call our people the 'sharing and caring people', well those were the days when there was real sharing and caring. That's what helped us survive.

- 54 Uncle Doug Nicholls was like our policeman on the Mission. He had a white horse and he used to warn us and the families about things that were going to happen that weren't good, particularly if the big black maria (police car) was coming. He would ride the horse down through the Mission, singing out "*barramandain coming, barramandain coming, barramandain coming*". This meant that the police or welfare, which is *barramandain* in Yorta Yorta language, were coming. When this happened, the kids would be hidden or they would swim across the river. But unfortunately, some of the kids still got taken by the welfare.

### The Flats

- 55 My grandmother raised 19 children on the riverbank of the Flats. She kept them away from welfare. She fed and clothed them, had them educated – but kept them away from welfare. The grandmothers and the old Aunties had to do most of the rearing of the kids at that time, because after coming off the Mission and becoming fringe dwellers, the mothers and fathers had to go out and look for work.
- 56 Welfare would come and just go through our place. No introduction, just walk in and start checking how many beds you had, what was on the beds, what was in the cupboards. Nanny used to save food tins, like baked beans and powdered milk, and fill them up with dirt, push the lids back on and put them all up on the high shelf in the cupboards. So that when the welfare opened the cupboards they thought, "*oh, she's got lots of food, she'd doing well.*"
- 57 When we'd go to Leeton, and we walked from Wattle Hill into town to the school, we would pass the Letona cannery. The Letona cannery had a tip where they would put damaged cans. Although there was nothing wrong with the contents, there'd be a dint in the can so they couldn't label them. My grandmother knew everything that was in those tins. They had a serial number at the bottom, might have been 'C25' or 'B13', she knew what that meant and what was in there. So, before we left to go to school, we'd get a list: "*call in and get me – three B22s from the tip, two C25 ...*" So, we'd have to call into the tip and get those cans. You know what, that kept us fed because the contents were really good. They'd be baked beans, tomatoes, fruit, tinned peaches, apricots. She knew everything that was in that can by the number. She was amazing.

58 It kept us fed, and it was hunting and gathering. It was being independent and resourceful. The old people knew how to do that in a legal way.

## Racism

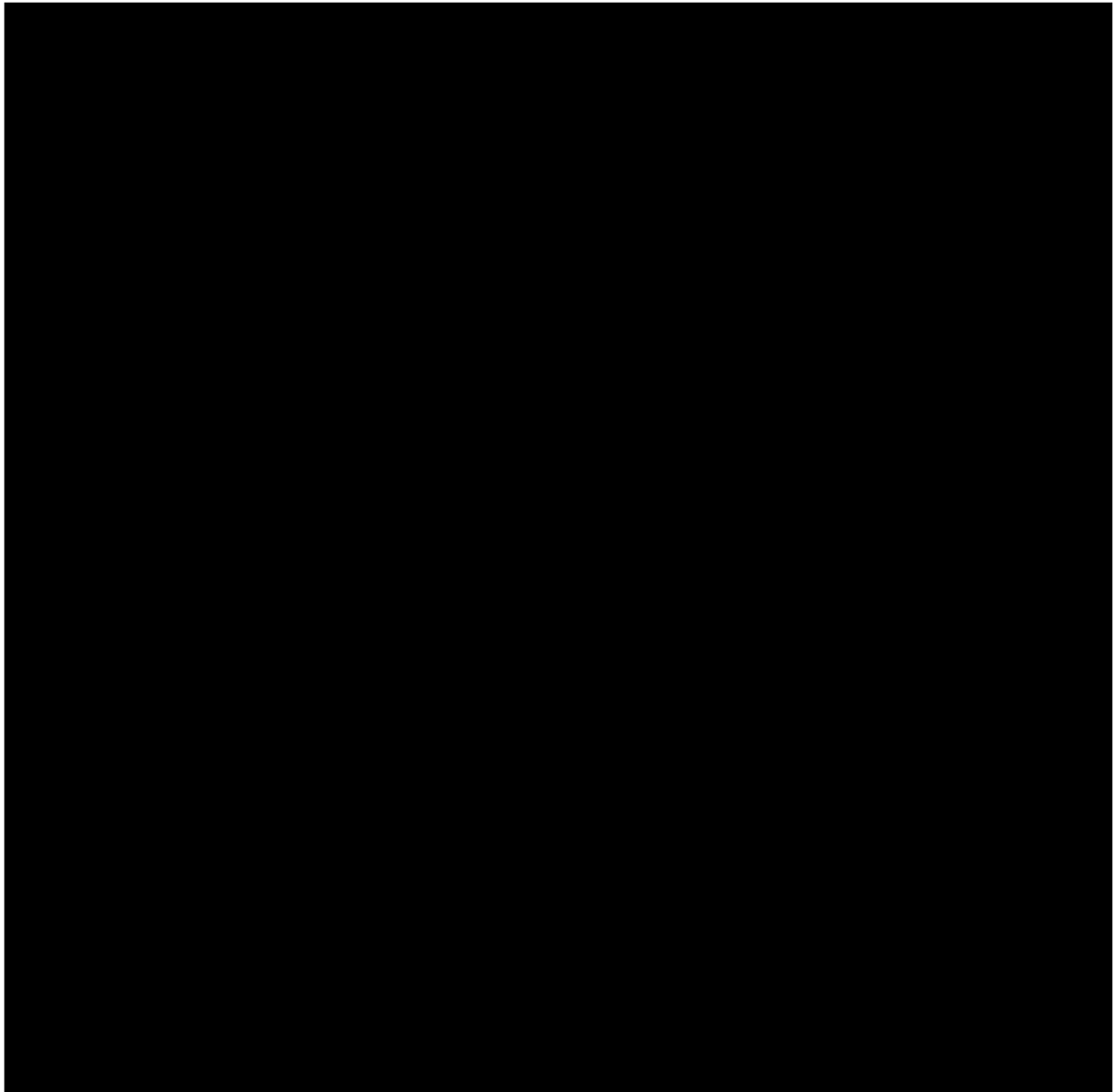
### Experiences of racism and identity

59 When I was at school, there was so much discrimination against our people.

60 I'm a cleaner. I'm a fusspot. I clean inside and outside, all the time. One day, my kids asked me, "*Mum, what are you always cleaning for, why don't you cut it out?*" I said that we used to go from the Flats up to the state school, as a group. We'd all stick together. The non-Aboriginal kids would stand on the fence, chanting, "*Here come the dirty blacks from the Flats*". I'm thinking, nobody will ever call me a "*dirty black*" ever again. So, I'll keep everything clean, so that that won't happen.

61 My mother-in-law was a very racist person. When the man who was to become my husband, Leslie Carter, first said he was going to marry me, she said "*I don't want any picaninnies running around my backyard*". My mother-in-law used to make dresses for me, saying that I needed to look well-dressed. She was very racist.

62 We Aboriginal people are affected by people who claim to be Aboriginal to get a good job or a benefit of some kind. I used to go to this program for Aboriginal Elders run by the City of Casey at the Aboriginal gathering place. The City of Casey used to accept people saying they were Aboriginal and let them into the program. There was a man and his wife who started coming to the program. Quite a few of us thought this man wasn't Aboriginal. He was quite a good artist, and because of his claim to be an Aboriginal Tasmanian, was making money out of it. I spoke with some Elders from Tasmania about the man, and they said they hadn't heard of him, and that he didn't come from the area he claimed to be from as far as they knew. We concluded that he was only claiming to be Aboriginal to become recognised as an artist. The City of Casey didn't do anything about it, and so I ended up leaving the program as I didn't want to be in the same room as this man. Others were upset about me leaving the program, but I felt I needed to be true to myself. I have real concerns about non-Aboriginal people claiming an Aboriginal identity just to make money.



Ongoing racism

67 Racism is alive and well. But it is more covert now. It is an undercurrent. Aboriginal people are still treated differently. We're treated inhuman. But let me tell you, at my age, at 87, I can read it. I can read it like I'm reading a book. I know who is genuine and who is not. That's for sure.

68 I think what has helped me is that I am not noticeably Aboriginal. My skin is fairer and my features are different. And so you're more acceptable to non-Aboriginal people. But sometimes that really bugs me because you have to really, really try to convince people that you are Aboriginal.

69 I am wanting to write a song about this and I've started off with the first little bit. It starts off by saying:

*Look around you, can't you see,*

*Aboriginal people just like me.*

*Our colour has faded, our features have changed,*

*But in our hearts, our culture remains.*

- 70 A lot of young people, and Neane my granddaughter has spoken to me quite a lot about this, are really having trouble convincing people that they are Aboriginal. People just don't understand what it's all about because they don't know our story, they don't know our history. Both of Neane's mother and father are Aboriginal. Her mother is Wamba Wamba, very strong. Her father is Yorta Yorta and Dja Dja Wurrung, very strong. This is her heritage. She's not going to give that up or give it away, but non-Aboriginal people won't let her be who she wants to be. I'm talking about Neane because she's my granddaughter, but it happens to so many fairer-skinned young Aboriginal people.
- 71 My sister, Marlene, has a son named Luke, who had been working in America as a heart specialist. His two daughters had been born and raised in America. And he came back to Australia with his wife and two little girls. So the little girls started school out here. And, of course, the youngest one, Zoe, is so proud of being back in Australia and finding out more about her Aboriginality. And so her father and grandmother had been telling the girls about their culture and who they are, and telling them stories.
- 72 Last year, Zoe went to school and put her hand up in class: *"I have something to say"*. Very, very forward, strong little girl! *"I am Aboriginal, and I belong to Yorta Yorta and Dja Dja Wurrung tribes"*. Well, she got into trouble with her teacher, didn't she: *"You're not Aboriginal. You shouldn't say that you are, you shouldn't tell lies, you shouldn't tell lies in class"*. Zoe became so upset, went home and told her father what had happened and why she was so upset. Her father got in touch with his mother, Marlene, my sister. Marlene then got in touch with the school and gave them a blast. Then she got in touch with Murrindindi (Gary Hunter, Wurundjeri) and asked him to go to the school and do a cultural program, which he did do. Murrindindi rang Marlene and told her the day he was going to go to the school, so she went too, and she was so pleased and proud of how he ran a cultural program for the whole school. This was a good outcome, but why should that little girl have gone through that?

## Culture, Community and Resilience

### After the Cummeragunja walk-off

- 73 Once our people left Cummeragunja, they had to adapt and survive by themselves. It was hard for them, but they survived. They survived by sharing and caring for each other. The men would go out hunting and finding food, and they would bring the food back to share with the community. I remember that, all day and half the night, some kid would be banging on the door and saying, “*Mummy wants a cup of sugar*” and “*Mummy wants a cup of tea*”. It was just given, without expecting to get it back.
- 74 On the Flats, you’d have one of the men go out rabbiting, another one would go maybe learn shearing, another one would be a fisherman, another would be out there picking tomatoes, beans, peas and bringing these back, and they used to share it. That’s how we survived. You know, somebody would come back with a big load of fish. Those fish would be taken around. And that’s how we survived. It was hard times but I’m very, very privileged that I had those experiences. I think it’s what gave me my strength to carry on. I learned so much from those old people. I think that’s the problem today, there’s not enough interaction between old people and young people. We should try and bring that back stronger. I am lucky to say that my kids had old Aunties around and raised by the village who loved and cared for them and their children have benefitted from that. So, it can be something that grows within a family. But if you’ve got a family that hasn’t started off with that, and there are many of our families that sadly had broken down too early and haven’t been able to pass that strength on throughout their families, that’s a very sad thing.
- 75 Even though our cultural practices have not been passed on to us properly, one of the things that was passed down was the value of family and extended family and community. I believe that this is what helped us survive, because we really cared for one another and shared what we had.
- 76 I talked about this topic in an interview at the Flats by Uncle Wayne Atkinson in 1988. In this interview, I said that:

*I guess the feeling of freedom we had, a really good feeling here of freedom and people caring and sharing more. None of us had anything, so it set the base to share what we did have. You were never without somebody caring for you. You never sort of belonged to your parents, you belonged to the whole community.*

*Quite often when we were kids, when the older people were ready to come back here, we'd say, "Can we stay for a while?" So it was quite okay for you to stay there with an Auntie for a while. They didn't worry about you because they knew you were being well cared for.*

#### Working in welfare and practising culture

- 77 When I worked at the AAL in the 1980s, when the economy was getting bad, I helped over 200 families by providing clothing, food vouchers and furniture. We also provided assistance with housing, rent, gas and electricity bills, transport, and funds for emergencies. I used to pick up supplies from the AAL op shop and deliver them to families in need, and ferried people to and from train stations, clinics and the like, around the whole of Victoria.
- 78 I have worked in Aboriginal Affairs for over 40 years. Working in welfare is such a heavy load.
- 79 When you work in welfare, you get into survival mode and practising culture is not in the forefront. Our people have been caught up in this survival mode, trying to live in both worlds, and they have not had the opportunity to do the cultural business and fight for justice properly.
- 80 But we are still trying to practise culture. I recently had a session with young people at an Aboriginal gathering place, where I showed them how to make adornments, like emu feathers for skirts, necklaces, head pieces and earrings. I am not an artist, but my children are.

#### Native title

- 81 I was involved in negotiations with the Victorian Government for 18 months regarding the Dja Dja Wurrung Traditional Owner group's native title claims, where we achieved a native title settlement in 2013. I went to an event recently, where the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation received the official title to a parcel of land where we are planning to have a community centre.
- 82 Everything we do is to repay our ancestors. I am proud to be able to do something for them, because they did not have a voice and they were not able to do anything about what was happening to them. I think that what I have done with the native title negotiation team has made me feel as though I have contributed to rectifying the past.

### Repatriation of the Jaara baby

- 83 One of the most emotional things that I have been involved in was helping to repatriate the Jaara baby.
- 84 She was a little baby girl, and she would have been about two or three years old when she died. She must have been very special, judging from all the burial goods that were with her. Our people had buried her high up in a tree on Dja Dja Wurrung Country. In around 1901 somebody chopped the tree down and she fell out. She was handed into the police and the police took her to the museum. She had been left in a drawer there for nearly a hundred years.
- 85 When they let us repatriate the Jaara baby to Country, I was part of rewrapping her, with the late Nora Murray and Lillian Tamiru. It was the most emotional thing. It was amazing how well kept she was. You could still see her little fingernails and her toenails. All of the little gifts and burial goods were still with her. There were emu feather bundles, woven fish nets, native beeswax, wooden pegs for drying out skins, kangaroo tooth jewellery, and kangaroo, possum and wallaby sinews. There were some European items with her as well, such as a little white leather booty and a steel axe. She was wrapped up in a woman's linen dress, and then a possum skin cloak around that. We had to prepare another possum skin to wrap her in, because the one that she had been wrapped in was falling apart.
- 86 We rewrapped her and had a ceremony to take her away from the museum. We took her up to Country and we reburied her in a tree and had a ceremony for her. It was wonderful.

### Reflections on our history

- 87 I sometimes think to myself, *"we are the kindest people, to be able to know what happened to our people, and still survive"*.
- 88 It is important not to forget your past. It does not matter how painful it is. If you bury our past, you bury our ancestors without a thought.
- 89 I've had a pretty good life, in the long run. Many, many ups and downs. We adapt and adopt. I think we're the most adaptable people in the world. I do. I think how we've survived and we're still here, talking about being Aboriginal, is amazing. They've tried so many things to make us go away. They have removed our children, tried to breed out the colour, sent men away from the missions and split up the family units that way. But we will never go away.

## What needs to change

### Cultural awareness in the community

- 90 I believe that we should be doing more to make people aware of Aboriginal people and culture in the community. For example, if teachers were already culturally aware, then what happened to Zoe at her school would not have happened. There's no cultural awareness training. It comes after they've been trained, after they've come out of university, after they've been wherever they've been educated, and then they get in touch with Aboriginal groups about a cultural awareness program. It should be built into their training. It should be there, built in. It shouldn't be an afterthought.
- 91 I have spoken to non-Aboriginal people in their 50s and 60s who feel shame about not knowing about us and wanting to find out about us. There are so many genuine people around who want to know more, which makes you feel a bit better.
- 92 History should be told right from the very beginning. It can be a real healing process, for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, when you face up to history and acknowledge it.

### Challenges with identity

- 93 I believe that, today, there is not enough connection between our old people and our young people. We need to bring that back. If a family has older people around them, to love and care for the kids, the kids will benefit from that.
- 94 I believe we're lucky, really, our family, that we know who we are. We know who we are. And we can trace that. And we can tell who we are. There are so many families that don't know who they are. I think of the Stolen Generation mob. And the families that have broken down because of alcohol and drugs – they're not able to give the young ones a good place. I believe that our family has done well.
- 95 I think knowing who you are, where you come from and where your roots are, gives you so much strength. And I pass that onto young people. I say to them, "*Find out who you are. Trace it. Find out. Once you know who you are, then you can build on it. That gives you that basic building block to build on.*" I say that to young people all the time.
- 96 I am lucky to say that my children and my grandchildren have grown up with old Aunties around them, who loved and cared for them. But sadly, many of our families

have broken down too early, because they do not have that connection and have not been able to pass on that strength.

- 97 There are so many young people who I ask, "*Where are you from, babe? What family do you come from?*" Because that family name gives you so much information. But they don't know. They just say, "*Ah, don't know*". I say, "*Have you tried?*" But, "*no, no, no, I don't want to talk about that*". They get that, sort of, attitude. But if you can grab them for a while and talk to them, like, "*Find out who you are. Sit down and draw a family tree. Just draw a tree. And find out who belongs on that limb. Who belongs there? Find out.*" Then that's good. That's healthy. That's good for them So many Aboriginal families do not know who they are, such as the Stolen Generation mob, and the families that cannot give the young ones a good place to grow up. Once you know who you are and where your roots are, it gives you so much strength. But when you ask some Aboriginal people what their family name is, they just do not know it. They do not want to talk about it. They say, "*Shame job, that's a shame job*". So, we still have a long way to go.

#### Healing Country

- 98 During NAIDOC Week in 2021, I spoke with VACCA about the importance of being on Country and healing Country.
- 99 In this speech, I said that:

*It heals you to be on Country, it heals you. If you heal Country, you heal people - it goes hand in hand. Healing Country is healing people.*

...

*Non-Aboriginal people can embrace Aboriginal cultural knowledge and understanding of Country by listening to Aboriginal people. It goes hand in hand too - Aboriginal people need to bring non-Aboriginal people into the fold, into the Country, onto the Country. Invite them to come onto Country, because I think non-Aboriginal people are a little bit hesitant to go on to Country and make out they know everything.*

*I think to invite non-Aboriginal people on to Country, tell them the stories, let them walk Country with you. I have experience with non-Aboriginal people being on Country, they do appreciate it and I think they do start to feel the feeling of spirituality on Country. I think it's important for us to reach out, put*

*out our hands and invite them to Country, talk about our Country, and talk about our feelings and let them work with us. I think that's important.*

- 100 I believe that we cannot talk about connecting with culture and Country unless we first talk about disconnection and what happened to our ancestors, who were disconnected from their Country, from their culture. Because they were dispersed off country so early and so quickly, they had to adapt. Our people are the most adaptable people in the world. So you've got to go through that sad part of disconnection before you come to how we reconnect now. That's why we cherish so much every little thing that's been found. Even a tree with a scar on it. It's a relic, something precious. And it's strange, I guess it's a spiritual thing, but we find with most Aboriginal people that you can walk country and you can spiritually read it. It's like walking in the footsteps of the ancestors.

Dated: 29 April 2022