

Submission to Yoorrook Justice Commission

Statement of Phil Howe

My name is Phil Howe. I'm a proud Gurra Gurra man.

Everyone has a different story. But where I've come from, my journey, there are a lot of people in mob that have come from a similar walk of life. I think it's important to tell that story, so that maybe they can find their connection, or reconnect, with their Aboriginality.

I grew up in a public school in Melbourne, in a very white area. It was very imperial; pictures of kings and queens, forced to sing God Save the Queen, picture of the Queen in every class room. For me growing up, I knew it was wrong. I didn't know why, but I felt completely disconnected from that whole idea. I used to get the strap a lot when I didn't sing along, or do the 'right' thing. But deep down, I knew it was something that I couldn't relate to. It was just such a form of brainwashing for all the kids.

I started my personal journey when I was very young. I just had a really hard to explain but deep connection with Country, that I think only Aboriginal people can understand. It wasn't just something like enjoying the bush. There was something at a much deeper level. I just felt a whole connection, that I was always part of that connection. My mob are river people, and I grew up on a river, I played on the river all the time. That was my happy place. So that was my own way of connecting, without knowing my full history or story.

When I was growing up, there were always jokes about the 'black sheep' of the family, but it was sort of hidden, a secret. It wasn't really talked about, and as a kid, I didn't really understand it. I just thought it was a strange way to put people down.

It wasn't until much later in life when my aunty came and spoke with us about the past, about her story. I suppose she was trying to find a connection as well, to understand who she was. So that was a really important part of my life, because it finally gave me an understanding of what I had always felt deep down. It was like a lightning bolt moment. All of a sudden, all these things that I'd been dealing with over my life made sense for the first time.

The next phase was working out where I fit. Am I black enough? What is the tone of my skin? What is my colour? What does it all mean? Can I fit, do I fit? That was something I toyed with for a long time. I got involved in community, which was my way of connecting, but without being kind of, you know...it just took a long time.

But then, I was fortunate enough to connect at a later stage in life, and once that door was opened, I realized that there were so many more people like myself, people with similar stories, mixed heritage. They had found connection there, and it was clear how important it was to reconnect in that. I think that's where spirit isn't a generational thing; it flows within you. I understood that, it made sense to me. So, if you open up, if you let spirit in, that creates connection, that creates healing. It makes you stronger in culture, more deadly to culture. You can celebrate culture, you become stronger in yourself, you get a really strong sense of journey, of your walk through life.

When my aunty had come with her story, my father didn't want to know about it. My sisters didn't want to think about it at all. It was all so deeply embedded within them. I'd already gone on a long journey. I'd taken lots of steps that they hadn't. The problem with being totally removed from culture are those questions: where do you fit, how do you reconnect. I had worked on that for years, but for them it's not something that happens overnight.

Those secrets are hidden and helped by that mask of racism. There's a put-down to it; if there's something dark in your past, it's actually a bad thing.

It was my mother who said you can't have light without dark and vice versa, that both work together, and that understanding from her was really important. But there were a lot of put-downs related to it. And when you don't visually look like how people think an Aboriginal person should...I got asked if I was Italian, French, Greek, so it was a hard thing.

Now, the knowledge is there. I'm slowly educating the kids on that part of the story. I also have Celtic heritage, so I am sharing that too. It's important to know where things are from. The Irish were brought out as sort of slave people, to work the grounds and fields. They were seen as dirty people, and I feel some commonality between Aboriginal people and Irish people. Both were treated like outsiders by the English.

Seeing King Charles recently, sitting proudly with all his adorned jewelry, the hats, the everything. I just think about Australia, and South Africa, these countries they've colonized, and that feeling that those jewels and clothes are like the beating of their chest: 'look, we've beaten these indigenous communities'. For me, it goes back to that feeling of being a kid, sitting there in those classrooms, hearing God Save the Queen, seeing pictures of the Queen, them saying 'look at us, look how great we are'. When there was that incident and Lydia said to King Charles, 'you're not my King', I just thought that was so great, so powerful. You've got to make ripples. All those years of invasion, but when she reversed the rolls, she was squashed, escorted out of the room.

These are the sorts of conversations that need to be had, to be brought to the fore. You see someone get a taste of their own medicine and they don't like it. Well, that's a good thing, because they can start to see it from other perspectives.

These things, they're generational. They go for hundreds of years. You can't just get over them. You see mob around, drinking in parks, and people are ridiculing them, saying 'why drink outside in the streets'. But this is their home, this is their Country, their connection. The alcohol was exposed to us, to a culture that didn't have those things, and it has caused so much grief, everything that has been introduced causes that grief. But then you see other people do it on Melbourne Cup day, and it's totally fine. It's our mob who have the repercussions of it.

There are all those differences. You see people who have been brought up in a really strong Aboriginal culture, they have to deal with the differences in white culture too. You are taught not to look into the eyes of the Elders, but in white society it's the reverse, so there's backlash even in things like that too. How should you behave? When you finally have an understanding of Aboriginal culture, of practice, you build empathy and understanding of something that is important, of practice that happens.

Education is a really important starting point for this. When I grew up, we learnt about Captain Cook. He was praised, he was a great explorer, but the whole of black history was never told. Never once did we hear about the genocide, the displacement, the brutal killings, the poisoning of water, the means of divide and conquer, the breaking up of peaceful cultures.

All we were taught was that there were people here, Aboriginal people. This was the 70s. There was never anything spoken beyond that. It was from a really imperial, displaced point of view. Just a group of people who were thought to have no culture, and were less than human.

As I said, the whole area was very white. There were maybe two other people who weren't white. Because of that, I saw racism all the time. I still see and hear it every day. Even more so after the referendum, which was a terrible day for Aboriginal people, and a thing that was never meant to be political, just a Voice. If only we could just embrace the cultural practices that are so good for the country, have people stop and appreciate how deadly culture is, we'd be stronger as a nation.

The referendum was such an emotional time. I remember waking up the next day just so sick, my whole body felt sick. It was just a sad, sad day. We weren't able to celebrate culture, to put an Aboriginal voice up front. It was a backward step. I felt shame, not just for the country, but worldwide. Especially being a country without a treaty. Now, I try not to think about it too much. It's just so hard. I have aunts and uncles spreading the word, putting so much effort into it, but it's just so much harder now. Even if we were to do it again, before the Elders go, what would happen if there was another landslide against it? It's just too hard. I don't think about it too much.

I'd been really hopeful. But one of the most divisive things is getting Aboriginal people divided and concurred amongst themselves. Pushing Elders to fight between themselves. It causes so much displacement and distress; it makes it so hard.

Moving away from that, art has always been a calling for me. I painted from when I was young. Always had an implement in my hand. I was always drawing. I struggled at school, I couldn't read, was a bit of a class clown, but my drawing was always good, and I used to get praised a lot for it. That was my way of expressing myself.

All of that was fine until I got to high school, where I really struggled. I can learn by hearing stories, but seeing words written, or reading out of books, I just don't take in the information. From what I hear, I think schools are better now at identifying different learning styles, and for Aboriginal people particularly, learning from storytelling and doing. My middle boy is very much one of those; he learns by seeing others do.

For me, I really hear stories. I remember Uncle Nicholson telling a story on Wurundjeri Country, and I can still quote lots of it. I can remember it, just from one yarn. It's funny, when it is told that way, I can remember. But words from a book, I can't remember anything.

The hard part for me is spoken language, pronouncing Aboriginal words. When we are young, we have this ability to learn language. That's been denied, and now, I just struggle with it. I love a good yarn in language, but my brain just doesn't grasp language now, it's almost beyond me. It's sad. If I'd been taught it at school, or at a

young age, given the opportunity to learn language, it would have been better. And the complexity of the language, the economy of words, the strength of some words, it's something everyone should learn. If kids can learn it, they'll have a much better ear for it, they'll be able to sing in the future, do all those things denied to the previous generations, the lost stories, all that.

For me, my art has returned a bit to being similar to what I did as a kid. When I see a place, I draw it from my memories of it, or my stories of the place. I don't see landscape like a European sort of horizontal plane. That doesn't capture the company. I see it from an aerial view, showing the rivers, the land, the connections.

I've always seen and captured Country in that way. I've always needed to tell the story of the river, the twists and turns, how the mountains relate to it the lines and motifs.

I have a wild dog in a lot of my work, which is really significant. It's kind of like my totem. It showed itself to me when I was in the outback, at one of the upside down rivers. It was a nice night, and I was going to sleep. As I was falling asleep, I saw this wild dog, this Dingo, coming into my camp. I saw the silhouette, with the light catching its eyes, and I quickly sketched it. That dog then became significant in my work. It says so much about my heritage; it's a survivor, it has learnt to adapt, there's just something about them.

The other one I have is a black cockatoo. They have something that is so spiritual, an ancestral sort of cry across the horizon. When you hear them, they are unmistakable. Both of them are so spiritual, they have this incredible command. They're telling you something on such a higher level, and you realise how insignificant we are. We are just this single thread in the whole tapestry. I just really love them, they're so deadly.

The other one is the magpie. My grandma always said that when she died, she was going to come back as a magpie. We used to laugh, and say 'yeah, yeah'.

Much later, my family and I moved to this area that had no trees, it was all we could afford, this new estate. Anyway, there was this peck peck at the back door, and I looked out and couldn't see anything. Then I heard it again, looked out, and still couldn't see anything. I opened the door, and this magpie just walked in past me. No fear, it just walked in. Walked to the head chair of the table. My eldest was a baby, and he was in a highchair, and I got my camera out to get a photo, because it was just so crazy, the magpie was just so comfortable. And my phone rang. It was dad, saying that my grandma had just passed. It was this incredibly emotional, profound time. Deep down, I just knew there was something more. That connection to the magpie, I felt like it was always in my life. So that has been another one, such an important creature. Their spirit, their singing, the way they greet each day. I just love their spirit.

When I think about all of this, what I want to say to other people whose journeys have been like mine is that you aren't alone. You do fit. There are different shades of black. It's just so important to understand that we've all been displaced. Some have been stolen, some are trying to fit in, some are journeying. Some have gone to war and come back but then not received the acknowledgment or privilege of the white fella.

There have always been stories about mob being moved around, forced to move. And as time has gone on, we've had different generations of migrants come, and we mixed.

That's my story. And I've seen more and more mob have that same story as me, so I think it's important to have connection, to understand that we are stronger together. If you can reconnect, I think you will like it. It will be an awakening. You just feel so much better. There's nothing bad that will come of it, it will strengthen you as a person, it will give you knowledge to pass on to your kids, to the generations.

I'm trying to play catchup, but we are all playing catchup at different levels. Songlines, storylines, the knowledge of Country, there is so much being passed through, so much knowledge out there. We can get each little bit of information, each little grain, and we can put it together to reconnect culture as a whole.

It's time for us to be proud, to put that knowledge together. It's a really important time, with things changing. Even though we've had the referendum results, there are still positives happening.

It's still a long, long way to go. But we are making steps for the next generation, for the kids. We see those steps play out with equal rights, with education. We want reductions in the age of death, deaths in custody, better outcomes across the board. No-one should have statistics like our community. We should be the same as every other Australian. You see mob so exposed in their day-to-day existence, and we need to understand their plight. I was lucky. I had a roof over my head, I eventually got an education. So many of our mob don't.

When you walk through communities, you see another side. You see our need to strengthen together. We've had purpose and belonging taken away. Without purpose and belonging, we are such lost souls. A lot of these souls are away from Country, away from story, away from culture, told it is not ok to celebrate. That's why we need an Aboriginal Voice, to make those changes. We've seen white fella attempts at this, and they've failed dismally. They go out, buy a house, give people this and that, but if you give someone something and there is no reason for it, no purpose, it is meaningless. Culture is everything we've learned, everything we've earned. You don't get it for free, you have to work. The Country is a hard Country. Our Elders knew that, they would teach those values, instill survival. They're the values we need to instill in our kids. Those deadly, strong, survival skills. That's what has kept us going as the longest culture in the world, our ability to adapt. We need to keep adapting as everything changes.

We aren't going back to a traditional way, because so many values have changed. But that's ok. We know we have to adapt, to evolve and change. That's our way.

I see this in my art. I am mindful of my story, telling it how I see it, not having grown up with traditional knowledge. I am finding my voice. I am learning all the time. The acceptance from Elders and from mob has been really good in understanding my journey, my story.

But I am also finding a difference in mind shift from displaced mob. We've got to be really careful that we don't disallow those who have been displaced or stolen, who find themselves on another Country, to not express themselves. They have to practice their practice, do their language, do their culture, whatever it is to make them feel connected. We need to share knowledge. Whatever that is. It is going to make us deadly together.

When we have white fella capital cities, there are language groups that are becoming strong, but there is detriment to those around them. I think that's something that only really strong Elders can address. They need to be mindful and make sure we don't get this sort of capitalist mindset where mob is just making money, and we do things that undermine how we got here in the first place.

I am seeing that as a trend. Mob wanting to go back to WA, to Queensland, to other Country, despite being settled here with family and kids. It would be detrimental to us. They are deadly people, and we need them in community. It's ultimately strength in numbers. We are strongest when we are together.

I remember seeing one man do a song from Country, but then he was so apologetic after, saying he shouldn't have sung it while on Wurundjeri Country. I felt really bad for him, you could see how emotional he was. He had felt it was safe, that he could share, and we should be able to share culture and language.

He was carrying a lot. He was from Tassie, his mob had experienced genocide. He's a descendant, and to be able to express that, no-one should deny it. I always think about Michael Long, his walking together. That's such an important thing. That message of togetherness across the journey. If we can be inclusive, that is a step in the right direction.

If we can practice different cultures, if we can learn, if we have Elders helping and saying 'here you go', then together, we can fill the missing gaps. Because there are still so many gaps.

And, of course, that goes both ways. When people visiting other Country, working around the place, visiting, maybe their child moved, they shouldn't be denied from Country.

That's part of what I hope for my children. I want them to understand deadly culture, to feel reconnected, to feel strength, to share knowledge on to their kids. Whatever they do, I don't want them to feel less Aboriginal. It's so important that they understand that they carry a legacy through, that it doesn't stop.

It's made me stronger now, to know I've been accepted, to know my journey. I need to teach my kids that as well. There were so many years of not talking, or hiding the truth, hiding the stories. Stealing kids. It's so important that mob understand and reconnect, become proud of their Aboriginality.

They aren't lost. They may have been stolen, but they can reach back into community, they may not have grown up with culture, with language, with dance, with song, but they can heal by stepping back into mob and finding out about history, being proud of history. There's no need to sweep it under the carpet, or sneer, hide it as a joke. If we don't talk about these things, then it all will be lost.

Some of this comes out in my art. I think, for example, there's this real white fella idea of Aboriginal people as 'traditional owners'. We don't own. We are a small connection of Country, we are a small part of it. A lot of my art is paying homage to this beautiful

Country, to the trees, the rocks, earth and sky. How connected it all is, and how important it is to preserve for the future.

The only way to have a future in Australia is to sustain the river systems, the bushlands, the ocean. White fellas have had a few hundred years at it, and we've gone completely backwards. But we can repair it, we need to. We need to heal Country, which in turn will heal all of us. It will heal our ancestors, our spirits, our totems. Through my art, I hope to educate people about this, about the old trees, the manna gums and the red river gums, hundreds of years old, so full of spiritual significance. Birthing trees, scar trees, generational trees. Taking the trees back from road developments, putting them out as a totem, like a bird, or a spirit. Not only is that healing for myself, but for us all. We've lost this habitat, and we need to try to heal it. We don't want to look at the trees as short-term economic reward, rip the uranium out of the ground, rip out the copper and forget. We don't want to lose the species, scarring the Country. If we keep taking, Country will bite back.

I've seen that change over my life. The seasons, the different weather, losing it. We are seeing those patterns of change. Torrential rain instead of soaking rain. The impact on animals, on plants. We are getting those big floods washing through, instead of soaking into Country. Those introduced species of plants and animals are flourishing, taking habitat.

We need to reinstall things. Clean the rivers and have them flowing, instead of damming them for our own purposes, letting them flow into the bays, getting them back to being connected. We need to fight against these long-term impacts and get a better future for all Australians.

END OF STATEMENT