

INTRODUCTION

This book was written with one overarching message: that the Black Witness should be believed.

There is a silence engulfing Australia in which the Black Witness must battle. We already have the weaponry. It is contained in the voices of our elders around campfires and kitchen tables, in community meetings and in the stories we tell our children. It is in poetry, in song, in art and in journalism. But we struggle to overcome the voice of the White Witness. The White Witness speaks above us and for us, and it is always the White Witness who is heard most clearly, because they speak the language that has been enforced on us through violence. It is violence that has enacted the silence, that has made the Black Witness an 'unreliable' one, a 'threatening' one, a 'violent' one in itself. It's not just the violence of the original massacres, but the violence of the education, justice, health, child protection and political systems. The Black Witness is often told they must be legitimised by the White Witness. But this book is here to tell you that the Black Witness should be believed.

Black Witnesses speak from our lived experience, from the position of the oppressed, and because of this positioning, the evidence overwhelmingly backs our accounts. The evidence, though, is manipulated through the testimony of the White Witness, who waters down the language of violence and makes this violence invisible. When I read historical accounts of the killings on my Darumbal homelands, I think of those who are not here, those who died by the banks of creeks, who were never buried, whose gravesites are not marked. We read of so many killings, so many massacres, and yet not what happened after. Their bodies, just like their lives, were erased.

This erasure only supported the evidence of the White Witness, because in the absence of speaking, enforced by violence, we were not given the opportunity to provide and present our own evidence. In the absence of our stories, we were spoken over, and for. But our ancestors were witnesses, and they remained on this country. They tell their stories through those who lived, those who survived. As Black Witnesses, we embody that history: we are a conduit for our ancestors. The crimes of a country are told and retold upon the waters, kept in the mountains,

retained in the soil of our land. We are sovereign because we belong to this land and live relationally with it. This book is here to tell you that the Black Witness should be believed because, regardless of what the White Witness says, we have retained our sovereignty. Our testimony as Black Witnesses is not just an expression of our sovereignty; it is our sovereignty.

I began this book thinking it would be a collection of my past journalism. I have been a journalist for almost 20 years, and I was fortunate to begin in – and remain for the most part in – black and independent media. I started as a 17-year-old cadet at the small independent newspaper *National Indigenous Times (NIT)* before becoming a political correspondent for National Indigenous Television (NITV) and then the editor for the NSW Aboriginal Land Council's (NSWALC) Aboriginal rights magazine, *Tracker*. *Tracker* was abolished by the NSWALC after it received internal data that suggested our criticism of the federal Liberal government could have ramifications for the NSWALC's relationship with the state Liberal government. In the October 2013 issue, we had run a front-page story on how black Australia had voted against Tony Abbott in the recent federal election.

With no more *Tracker*, I left the NSWALC and joined the independent left-wing news website *New Matilda*, and then moved closer to home, where I was privileged to share the mic with legendary Murri broadcaster Tiga Bayles at 98.9 FM in Brisbane, a Black Witness who I am dedicating this book to. Since then, I've been working mostly freelance, with a one-year stint at *BuzzFeed News Australia* as their Indigenous affairs reporter.

I've worked in many different places, but the stories have not changed. My work has been sustained by the strength of Black Witnesses who continue to speak out and utilise journalism as a tool for advocacy, even when so often journalism has been used against us.

On looking back at my work, though, I realised that the book would change. I thought that I would be able to extract from my past stories and make claims about the power of the Black Witness. But I cringed at some of what I had written. I didn't always foreground the testimony of the Black Witness. At times, I spoke in the language that I thought was 'good journalism' because it followed the parameters set by western journalism. I have never been objective or unbiased, because I learnt very early on that our role in black media must be advocacy in favour of blackfellas, but, in the methods I employed, I ended up at times falling into the same traps I had intended to avoid. When I critique journalism, I also critique myself, and it's important that this critique is offered up because otherwise how will we get better? And so I decided to divide this book into two sections. The first is 'White Witness', a collection of essays that dismantle the

version of events presented by the White Witness. The second section, 'Black Witness', collates some of my past journalism that relies on the voice of the Black Witness and demonstrates the power of Black Witnessing.

Black journalism is a voice for those who are seen as powerless, and it is also a form of our ongoing resistance. Taking control of our own representation, as Aileen Moreton-Robinson so powerfully proclaims, is part of our resistance to the settler-colonial project. As black journalists, we write or broadcast in service of our communities. We are Black Witnesses, but we also work to elevate other Black Witnesses. If the work is not in service to mob, then there is simply no point in doing it. That means that black journalism is never separated from activism; it is an arm of it. Not only is our work aimed at legitimising the Black Witness but also at revealing the motivations and intents of the White Witness.

It was through black journalism that the seed of my politics was watered and would continue to grow. In late 2006, I was home for Christmas holidays about a few months into my cadetship at *NIT*. My naivety about the state of the media had already been smashed from working on the stories about Mutitjulu, which I will discuss in chapter three, and yet I still held on to some hope in the justice system and its power to deliver justice to Aboriginal people. I had been watching the tidal wave of black protest around the tragic death in custody of Mulrunji Doomadgee, who had been killed by a white cop in 2004. Blackfellas had been calling for charges to be laid against Senior Sergeant Chris Hurley. That day, the Queensland director of public prosecutions (DPP) was delivering the news on whether she would refer the case to trial.

That afternoon, I watched the news coverage. The DPP appeared from a closed-off room with only a few cameras. I was optimistic, positive that Hurley would be sent to trial. But the DPP did the opposite. As I watched the DPP, I couldn't help myself. I dissolved into a fit of angry tears. I was young and naive and stupidly had assumed that after the waves of protests from blackfellas, including the original Palm Island protests, there would be some form of justice, some light that would stream through. My dad, a Darumbal and South Sea Islander man, came to me and said, 'You know this is what happens. You're going to see it a lot. Whatever happens, you can't be bitter.' He also told me, 'You know, only Aboriginal people will ever know what it feels like to be Aboriginal.'

I always remembered his comments, and my reaction to the DPP. Over the years, I don't think I was ever bitter, but I grew to become less naive about the state of the justice system, the way it mistreats and continually oppresses blackfellas. The system is not set up to deliver justice to

Aboriginal people; it is in and of itself a colonial apparatus designed to contain and suppress black dissent. Its work is not rehabilitative, but punishing, and in the walls of courts and jails and watchhouses there is no healing, but only further violence. I had put a certain faith in the justice system that it had not deserved, that did not fit the evidence. I wasn't bitter, and I've never been bitter, but I was and always will be angry. And my dad was right: regardless of any acknowledgement of history or pain, you can never know, unless you are black, what it feels like to be black. That is the power that the Black Witness has, but that power is also a threat to the colony.

One of my mentors, Professor Chelsea Watego, often speaks of anger as a useful emotion. But anger has so often been used against Black Witnesses. Black Witnesses are criticised for being angry and overly emotional, for not being objective. Black Witnesses are told we can never see the facts, and so we are unreliable and our testimonies are never believed. This is how Black Witnesses are seen not only by the justice system, but also by the media. The mainstream media as a whole is another colonial apparatus. Rather than being an institution that speaks truth to power, that seeks to give voice to the most vulnerable, it is used to support the interests of the powerful at the expense of who they view as powerless. And it does this so often through the denigration of the Black Witness, and the elevation of the White Witness.

I'm always growing and learning, and the lessons have come largely from Black Witnesses – Aboriginal people I have stayed in contact with over the years. I learn from their activism and from their resistances in so many forms. So often, Black Witnesses are framed in stories as if they are after something, as if there is something to be gained. This means that their motives are called into question, and they must go to greater lengths to be believed. Their testimony is often either filtered through the voice of the White Witness or made palatable enough for a predominantly white audience. But in thinking of the way the Black Witness is positioned, I come back to this question: who *really* has something to gain? I feel this is the most important question in determining the reliability of a witness.

There is a myth that is weaponised when white Australia is confronted by black resistance or protest. There is the immediate assumption that black Australia is out to obtain something. But it is the opposite. The White Witness is always seeking to gain. In a settler-colony built on the resources of black land and labour, it is always the White Witness who comes from this position first and foremost. Blackfellas are not out to gain; we are out for justice, in the form that we recognise it in. Justice means repairing community and families, revitalising language, re-

planting on the land our people have lived on for generations. This is at the heart of the Black Witness, and it is why I say the Black Witness should and must be believed.