

Letetia Harris transcript

Yiradhu marang yuwin-dhu Yaladidya, miyagan-dhi bala Ingram-bu Kemp-bu, bala-du gu.yal dharran-giyalang' So I just said, 'Good day, my name is Letetia, but my name was obviously Letetia Harris. I said I'm an Ingram and a Kemp, I said I'm a proud Wiradjuri woman, and I said that I belong to Cooyal Creek. That is my belonging and my identity. I'll tell you about my language journey and I'll tell you when I first was introduced to fluent Wiradjuri language. I was working in a school as an Aboriginal Education assistant at St. Clare's College. I was 19 years old, a little baby me, fresh face, gorgeous. I wish I was back there [laughing]. Anyway, I was 19 years old, I was working as this Aboriginal Education assistant that was implementing Aboriginal perspectives into all of the classrooms in different subjects, so I was trying to be tricky about how I got an Aboriginal voice into the space.

So I was asked by a year nine English class, I remember it was a year 9 English class, if I could put some Aboriginal perspectives into English. So me being a little bit of a smart-ass, went, 'English language, Wiradjuri language,' right? And so I thought, the language, right? And I was like, you know, rung my dad, rung Aunty Judy Harris and was like, you know, what could I do? Who could I actually ask to come into the school? So Aunty Judy suggested Uncle Stan Grant, and Dad suggested Uncle Stan Grant [laughing], and I was like, 'Oh,' and Aunty Judy said, 'Bud, he works for the Department of Education.' So I worked for Catholic Education. They're not friends, they're not supposed to be anyway, but lo and behold, I rung him up and asked him and he said, yeah, literally to his bosses at the Department of Education, 'Can I go do this?' And they said, 'You can do whatever you want, Stan.' So he came over and he came into the classroom, and I was ready to get up and introduce him, I was super proud, I was like, 'This is someone who's really deadly and pretty awesome,' and I'd never even heard him actually speak language fluently, and he pointed me over to the corner and said, 'Sit down,' [laughing] didn't let me introduce him, got up, introduced himself and it was fluent Wiradjuri, and every part of me just woke up and all the hairs on my arms were lit up, you know, they were all up on ends, it was like electricity, and it was like—well, not like, I understood that that was me, that was mine, that was my people, it was like that energy that I couldn't even describe to anyone, and I was just like, 'What—' I was in awe of him and I was in awe of that, this was me, and this is the first time I'm hearing me and my language in that way and not just singular words, like giwaangi or doopi or something like that, it was actually this fluent speaking that was just resonating and it was just, yeah like a pulse, I can't even describe it still. And then about six or seven years later, I'm in Sydney and one of my mates at work—I was working in the Centre for Aboriginal Health—she came in with this tiny little newspaper article thing. It was like, this big—tiny little thing—and it said, 'Wiradjuri language being taught at Alexandra Community College,' and I was like, 'What?' and she said, 'You should do that, you should do,' and I was like, you know, it was just like, I was going to jump on it, there was no way I wasn't going to run at it, and so I went there and met Uncle Christopher Kirkbright, Aunty Cheryl Reilly and Uncle Buralinga Gumbu

I later lived with Aunty Cheryl Reilly for a couple of years, and so I met—and Uncle Buralinga his English name is George Fisher. So unfortunately Aunty Cheryl and Uncle Buralinga are both passed. I met them—they were teaching language—it was a tiny class and it was maybe nine people in it, it was, you know, unbelievable. They saw

something in me, you know? And I was just, 'Oh,' and I think we were—I was going one day a week, and after about two months Uncle Stan turns up, right, for a visit, into the language class, or two or three months maybe it was. Anyway, and he's there, and he walks up to me and you know, because he knows my dad and he knows my uncles, they were friends and still are, and I was, 'Oh yeah, and he's going to speak to me language,' [laughing], and I was packing it, and he said something to me and I think it was yama-nhu babiin marang?' or something like that, or, 'yama...—and all I could hear, it means, 'Is your father good?' All I heard was the first bit, which I knew that that was a question that I had go, yes or no, "yama" and it was like, 'I know there's a yes or no to this,' and, 'babiin' which is 'Dad'. So I just reply, looking like I'm real deadly, 'ngawa' which means yes [laughing]. And he was going to Uncle Gidj Uncle Chris Kirkbright, call him Uncle Gidj he was saying, 'Oh yeah, she's done—oh, you're doing really good with this one,' [laughing], and you know, of course, come out that I'll ask, 'Look, I seriously only recognised that,' but he said, 'Praise me up for recognising it.'

Anyway, we—Uncle Chris Kirkbright, Auntie Cheryl Reilly and myself—and Buralinga and myself, I followed them around, about—I was their shadow, but they pushed me into teaching, right, and they said, 'No, you're going to get up,' and I remember, we're in Bathurst at the moment filming, we were in Raglan, which is literally on the outskirts of Bathurst. We'd come here for a community workshop—they were going to teach at it, and I was just following them around, like this little kid, and they—he—and they said, 'What are you going to teach tomorrow?' and I went, 'What?' [laughing] and they said—I went, 'What are you talking about?' We're in the hotel which was—I think all four of us in two rooms in this dodgy dive of a hotel because you didn't get any walang, you got what you got [laughing] it's like you're turning up or if we had some—you didn't get any money. So we turned up there and they were asking me what I was going to teach the next day. I literally wrote a thing called the Family Kinship Game, in language, which was a sort of fluency game with a cheat sheet. I still teach that today. I made it better now [laughing], but I still teach that today.

Yeah, so then we did that for a decade. I moved to—oh, I don't know if it was a decade, but years, moved to Newcastle, moved to Canberra, had my son, moved to Newcastle, like went all around from—but still always kept this—always kept working on language with them and we'd work on resources and trying to get resources developed off the smell of an oily rag, always keeping in contact with Uncle Stan, moved back home to Cowra, was teaching back home where my father lives, because I don't want to get shot by people in Cowra saying that I'm calling it 'home.' I taught some language in the school because they discovered that I could teach, that I was—I could speak Wiradjuri, and so I tacked onto my job a little bit of language for the year 7 classes, and made sure I cleared it with Uncle Stan as well, and was communicating heaps more with Uncle again, Uncle Stan, and so then he was pushing me towards, 'I want you to go do this uni course, I want you to do this uni course. I'm going to—this uni course is about to start,' and it was two years probably before the course even started that he was telling me about, that this is going to start. He forced me [laughing] into doing the course. I brought along my deadly brother Harry who I'd helped with language and taught him a fair whack of language and—oh, so the course was Wiradjuri Graduate Certificate in Language Heritage and Culture, CSU, Charles Sturt University.

Yeah, so I brought my mate Harry Lambshead along to come to the course with me and learn, and lo and behold, first day of the course I'm stirring up Uncle in Wiradjuri and teasing him and he was teasing me back and joking around, and then he started paying me back for that, so I end up having to get up and teach them, 'Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes,' in Wiradjuri, and little bits he would just say, 'Get me up a bit more,' and he'd get me up a little bit more, you know, in times. Then by the next cohort starting, when this was only run for 18 months, he said, 'You can come in and teach the mornings,' for the Wiradjuri Graduate Certificate in Language, Heritage and Culture, and I went, 'Oh okay, me and Harry.' So me and Harry had a little—the little pair that ran around teaching language together, we come there and we teach in the morning, we go to go to our last subject class, and he says, 'Where are you going?' I said, 'Well I'm going to class because we've still got our class going,' and he said, 'No, you're not.'

So I think we attended maybe six hours of our own class during that last subject, and we taught the new cohort that would come through, and then been doing it ever since, so that was 2015 when he asked me to do that, and so yeah, I was also teaching at TAFE as well because he asked me to do that as well, so when the Tumut community and elders asked for someone to come in and teach language at the TAFE, they called Uncle Stan. Uncle Stan said, 'Call Teesh,' and then made sure that we were okay and we weren't dodgy when we came in and Harry and I went in and taught there, and apologised to the elders because we were so—you know, younger people teaching them their language.

Oh some of the joys of teaching language is the first thing of watching what people do, the same way that I did with Uncle Stan, was, when people hear their own language for the first time in a fluent way, and they just, 'That's me, that's mine, that's my identity, this is who I am,' and their whole—I watched people just, [deep breath], you know, they fight—it's like they haven't breathed [laughing] for all that time, they've been holding their breath, and that's the best bit. I love watching people pass on language, so I'm like, 'You've got this and then you pass it on.' I love watching people's brain be able to think in their own language, and when they think in their own language, that's fluency. So when they're able to hear and communicate back, that's brilliant, yeah, it's inspiring as a teacher.

Challenges in teaching language are—teaching our elders is something that doesn't feel like the right way because—and they have living memory of these things, they have living memory of the language being whispered, and they have all that stuff there and they should've been able to have that. So we're always—we go in and we apologise, that we shouldn't be—but we're being instructed by Uncle Stan as well, at the same time, so they've—elders are very accommodating and really caring, and they love it, and they're the best speakers too, they're just the best [laughing] because you know that they've heard the language their whole—part of their life, big fluent pieces, they know lots of language singular words, so you're able to just go, 'Oh.' They're the absolute best speakers. And the other challenges are accountability, so you know, you drop a pebble, but how do you make sure that, you're like, 'I'm here, I'll give you this—I'm teaching it, not giving to you, I'm teaching you language, this is yours,' but how do you make sure that people then continuing the journey to make sure that they're doing it right? They're checking. Sometimes you teach people and then they think that they have the authority to then take this—a space that isn't necessarily theirs to take. They still need to ask permissions. So there's always—there's those things. If we can

educate about that, then the less mistakes get made, right? So if we can really be mindful that this is language reclamation, right, and that we are able to—people are able to make mistakes, and they're able to be fixed, because I've made mountains of mistakes, but I've fixed them. I'm sure there's mistakes that I don't know about that I'll have to go and fix, and that's okay, this is Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes' in Wiradjuri language, all right? [singing]

I know of lots of Wiradjuri spaces and I know of my space that I use music to sustain language and cultural practices, more specifically as well. So we have lots of people like Uncle Stan Grant who've produced lots of music and songs and CDs that have either translated songs like, 'Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes,' or other English songs into Wiradjuri, which is 'Silent Night,' things like that. There's actually one he's got, 'Hymns of my Old People,' that he's translated all of them into Wiradjuri language, which is so beautiful, and it literally hits the target audience that he wants, so if you've got, 'Hymns of my Old People' you can tell that that's sort of around his age group with the elders and things like that, keeping those things alive.

Then you've got kids' songs, and he's got lots of those songs as well. People have been singing for ages, so [gulambali wibiyanha galing-ga} there's—that means, 'pelican sitting on the water,' and he's got those type of songs that he's created, which is so awesome because then you've got these songs that actually teach you Wiradjuri language sentence structure, right? So you're like, 'Oh I understand that because this is blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.' Kids are singing it, adults are singing it, and they're unbeknowningly knowing the actual fluent language structure, so when they get to someone like other teaching, other language lessons and I go, 'D-d-d-d-d,' and they go, 'Oh, I already know this!' which is powerful, or they've learnt language and then they're cementing it with that music. Then there's other ways that people are using it, yeah Auntie Swannie, I call her, Auntie Swannie which is Auntie Elaine Lomas, she uses music in the Wiradjuri Graduate Certificate, and sings—and she's written her own songs about being proud, right? She's used tunes that people recognise, so that they're able to quickly map and drop those words in, and she talks about being proud of being Wiradjuri and being—it being awesome and respectful and powerful. These words that she puts into her songs are amazing, they really lift people and she gets them in a choir and she makes them do them in loops and stuff like that, and they remember the words and she teaches some of Uncle Stan's songs, like 'Waltzing Matilda' is probably one of the hardest songs to learn [laughing], and it's got a lot of words and it's very wordy to try and get your tongue around, but she teaches that and they remember it.

So they are using—and they acknowledge everyone, they acknowledge each other in the songs that they've developed and things like that, it's powerful, and these are elders teaching. That's powerful, right? You can't get better than that. The other way is ceremonial songs and things like that, so I've written songs that have come to me. They're very traditional-sounding, and some of which have come to me that I had to go look up the dictionary because I didn't know. This song is—I call it the, 'Sending Them Home' song. So in the Tiddas, there's a scene that's a funeral and it's in Wiradjuri Country, and you wanted to use this 'Singing Them Home' song and I would normally be, 'Oh no,' but because it's in a theatre and it's heard once, it's not in a film or something that keeps going out and being recycled, it maintains its power in reference to the space.

So being able to culturally connect with our own language and actually hearing that 'Sending Them Home' way, like a funeral song, 'sending them home' meaning sending them back to the Dreaming. Yeah, it's really powerful in that theatrical space and it allows the audience to actually feel that energy that we feel and we resonate with in that—we as Wiradjuri people and as Aboriginal people—we feel that energy in that space of grief and that—and we understand the Dreaming, we're like, 'This is something we are thinking, breathing, doing,' and so that—I think that's really powerful to be used in the theatre. Especially with the funeral song; I don't let people record it because it's—the way that it came to me was very special, it was definitely a communication with the old people, and I sing it and I put myself in a space when I sing people home, that is definitely another cultural space that I wouldn't want people to just think that it's a funeral song and you just sing it at a funeral and it loses its significance, and also they're dancing with stuff that they don't really know, right?

There's lots of situations where people hear a song and they think, 'Oh, because of the Colonial word, because the white world goes, 'Oh you hear a song and you can repeat it and sing it and you just get a guitar and dah-dah-dah,' our songs have got cultural and spiritual significance, and they're connected to ceremonial action]. So they're not for, 'Oh, let me just film it and share everywhere,' you know what I mean? Some of us, some of our songs are, 'Yeah,' I think, 'Go for it, get it out there and get people hearing it.' We've just got to be aware of what is what and be okay with it. What it's for, public domain and what's for special times, special things, sacred things. Don't try and take someone else's story, you know? You ask permission. It's really the most basic of basic things. 'Can I film you?' and, 'Do you mind if this gets put on YouTube?' [laughing] 'Can I film you, do you mind if I put this on Facebook?' 'Yes, I bloody do,' 'No, I don't want you to film me.' And then other times, 'Do you mind if I film you and put this on Facebook?' I'm like, 'Go for it,' because it's something joyous and fun and awesome; it's just like, ask the question and be real about if you've—don't take photos of people that they don't have permission, so don't film people that you don't have permission because it's not a performance, that's the thing, it's not a performance in that space. It's yeah, bigger than that.

So in the digital space the challenges we have—the biggest challenge—is access, and it's access on all sides, so an old person, maybe accountability first, so when you put something out, make it right. Check with people. Don't just run with something because you've had two minutes of language, you know? And you go, 'Oh yes, I know how that works.' Check it. Get multiple people to check it, and people that have that language fluency, get them to check it so that you're not like, 'Oh I'm not putting out stuff that's not right,' and ask permission of the things you're going to share, same thing, ask permission of the things you're going to create. But I think one of the biggest things is, when we create digital media, a lot of the time we're like, 'Oh right, here we go, we've made it, there you go,' but every time that they need to access it, they need internet. So then we're not really getting to the people, or all the people, that we actually want to give access to.

You know, 'I don't have internet, I don't have data, I can't watch that 30 times that I need to, to be able to remember that language and to be able to have that pieces of language, because I don't have that money.' The other thing is the same way of getting

people's stories told that they want to be told, how did they have access to the digital media to make that happen? So it's like this loop that you constantly have to be asking the question of, how am I making this accessible? And that also, the digital data is a piece, it's a tool, it's not the lot, right? It's the tool, it's not the whole picture. I was asked by someone the other day, 'Oh, this one wanted to sign off with a language word,' and I said, 'Yeah, are they mob?' 'No.' 'Where did they learn it?' 'So they've obviously got a relationship?' 'No, they've seen a video of blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, and now they want to use that to sign off,' I said, 'No, this is about relationships, right?' You know, so immediately I'm watching what happens in this space, thinking, 'Oh, come on.' Digital? The digital data, the digital resource that gets created is a piece of the full picture. If you don't get face-to-face teaching and learning, you may be mispronouncing it all over the place because you might have digital data that's animation, and you can't see where the mouth—the tongue goes in the mouth, and you know, what way it's supposed to be placed. It has to be a piece of all these tools and resources, but you have to get the face-to-face so that this is the supplement that helps it, keeps kicking along, and so that you're able to retain and retain because you're watching this digital information, and you've got access to the digital information. And the people that are telling the stories have access to make the digital.

Oh, copyright and intellectual property, yeah, well that's a hundred percent. You need to know what you're putting out there, and who's going to be accessing it, and for how long they're going to be accessing it, and a lot of the time people are like, 'Well I want this out to my mob,' and so they just let it keep going because they want their mob to be able to speak the language. Sometimes you've got CDs or something like that, and you're like, 'Oh, well they pay for that,' and they pay for another one and another one and another one. Or they pay for licensing of something, you know, for a period of time. Yeah, so you know, once again, you're back in access, but especially around stories. Cultural intellectual property. Some communities want their story to be told, but within that—or a story to be told and they want to have a digital representation of that—in that I would tell communities to have something within it to say that, 'This is the cultural, intellectual property of blah,' right? Because it'll be surface knowledge of the story [laughing] generally, otherwise they might be getting digital resources and creating digital resources that are sort of kept in a way that only certain people can access it, but that keeps the deeper depth of the story alive.

So there's so many ways around it. We have specific protocols, but we have specific protocols around who teaches, right? Who teaches our language, and they need to adhere to a digital space as well. So Wiradjuri should be teaching Wiradjuri language. You know, I would press that further, Wiradjuri with actual proper language knowledge, should be teaching Wiradjuri language, you know? I don't know how that is able to be monitored, but yeah, that's what we really should be doing, we should be adhering to those things. We still should be adhering to the community protocols when we're producing something. So we should be saying—asking permission still—from our elders, from the storytellers, from the story holders, all those things. When we're putting out things, we should be checking them, and they should be being done by our own mob, or not should, they need to be being done by our own mob. Should is too empty. [Wiradjuri should be responsible for using their own language in music, you know? And that's just—it should be our thing. I will share a song with you, but I am

very serious that this isn't a song that I'm sharing with you for you to go and sing. This is a song that I'm sharing because it demonstrates the power of my language

nginha bala marambangbilang nginha bala marambangbilang nginha bala
marambangbilang ngawa ngawa nganha bala marambangbilang nganha bala
marambangbilang nganha bala marambangbilang ngawa ngawa wargu nginha
marambangbilang nginha Wiradyuri ngurambang nginha ngadhi bagaraygan yambuwan
marambangbilang

It's a relational song, right? So it's about relationships being recognised and so just to let you know that we—my son, Luke Wighton and myself have helped teach the kids—oh well, my son and Luke have taught kids at dance about the relationship that I'm singing about. So I talk about here, here is exceedingly good, marambangbilang means exceedingly good. I sometimes use it for deadly. Here is exceedingly good. Here is exceedingly good, and they're pointing to all the places that are close to them, that are in relationship to them, that is exceedingly good, and then they point at people, they can say that is saying, nganha bala marambangbilang they can point to the magpie, right? They're bringing this relationship of this exceedingly goodness on their country, right? And then they talk about—then I say the question, wargu nginha marambangbilang?' means, 'Why is this exceedingly good?' And then I say, it's Wiradjuri Country, because it's Wiradjuri Country. Because it's my mob, right? It says, yeah, 'wargu nginha marambangbilang nginha Wiradyuri ngurambang nginha ngadhi bagaraygan yambuwan marambangbilang' means, 'This is my mob. Everything here, in all its entirety, is exceedingly good.' It's basically that I'm connected to. The thing that I would like to add is that I want to thank the teachers that have nurtured me for 23 years and pushed me sometimes, along the way into even doing things that I really didn't necessarily want to teach or do but who keep pouring goodness into me like Uncle Stan keeps directing me and Uncle Gidj keeps directing me, and so I want to thank Uncle Stan Grant Senior, I want to thank Uncle Christopher Kirkbright. I want to thank my beautiful aunty and uncle that are in the Dreaming, Aunty Cheryl Riley and Uncle Buralinga in the Dreaming there, that I used to call Babiin Gaama I used to call him Father Storm and he called me, Bubay Migii Little Lightning, so yeah.

So I want to thank them for what they've given me, what they've given my son, and what they have given our people, and I'm just truly grateful.

[end of recording]