

Submission to Yoorrook Justice Commission

From: Anonymous

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Submission:

I write this presently having just returned from a men's cultural day on my Bumboora Bik (Aunty Country), up in Coranderrk. While I feel overwhelmingly honoured and blessed to have the opportunity to dance, laugh, harvest, create, connect, heal and practice Culture with Community, I would be lying if I did not feel an underlying resentment for the lack of opportunity I had to do this growing up. Culture and Community have been there for me in the darkest of times. Culture and community have been there even when parts of them have actively worked against me. Culture and Community have saved my life. I come from several generations of incarcerated Indigenous people. The transgenerational trauma runs deep, to the bones, across these generations, and beyond. Pinpointing the moment of colonial interruption to my family's history coincides with the flourishing of harm across the descendants of my Ancestors. I would be lying if I did not feel a deep-seated resentment toward the colonial project because of this, despite my best efforts to make peace with my situation.

Like most Aboriginal people, my situation is both personal and broad, affecting not only me, but of course my family - and most importantly, my unborn child. It has taken me 31 years to finally be at peace with bringing a child into the world, one where I can wrap them in Culture from their day of birth, welcome them into Community and dedicate my life to strengthening their Connections - those which I did not have the privilege of being raised with. I spent so much of my life resenting this country, resenting its people and resenting myself. Having lived through an extremely turbulent childhood, with a heroin-addicted, thieving, violent, narcissistic mother and a grossly depressed, alcoholic father, being homeless for roughly four years, numerous suicide attempts and dozens of completed suicides from close friends, I am finally proud to say that I have survived to achieve first class honours in psychology and am currently undergoing a PhD.

I owe so much of it - the survivability - to Community. This is despite the fact that on a repeated basis, Community has often been rejecting to me. While one matriarch of my kin might celebrate and welcome me, another might abrasively question my identity, trying with all her might to tear it apart and strip it away. I have lived my entire life with these questions, wondering why my grandfather would lump this on me before he died, and the attacks always raises so many convoluted feelings of distress. It is only exacerbated by the broader, genealogical rejection from the Registered Aboriginal Party which only recognises information that they have on hand themselves. None of it takes into account broader accounts, personal or family history, and often won't even consult you on it. The legal implications for them to accept membership from any party who wasn't a bonafide, established, genealogical presence makes sense in their efforts to appease a colonial system which punishes

Aboriginal people for the colonisers' historical injustices. But doesn't this system in and of itself defeat its own purpose?

We know vastly the systematic destruction of information, the targeted assimilation programs, the stolen children. We know how purposeful the bans on language, Cultural practices and deliberately poor record keeping were. How is this the system that we are to rely on for our own Cultural heritage? I understand the preservation of integrity, but the cost is dire. Every time another attack comes, even just a question of it (though I'm seldom afforded an audience) it is incredibly triggering. And it only gets worse. I have no recognised identity other than the one I hold myself. My own mob can't help me because they feel it might jeopardise their own standing in the eyes of the Victorian government. Honestly, I can't help but question that if my grandfather wasn't only semi-literate, that if he hadn't have been in and out of jail from the age of 18, if he had access to a program like The Torch, rather than getting bashed, held down and tattooed - three raggedy dots on his penis, and a "V" for "victory" on his bicep- by seven prison guards as a teenager on his first night in jail - only to ask why they did that, only to be answered "to teach you to not look like such a prick" - if he had've instead later been able to fully reconcile the identity he then hid away that night, that we as a family might have a standing on equal parity with the other members of the land council. Instead he died at the age of 65 - pretty standard for an Aboriginal man in this country. He was let down by his hospital after they performed a rushed surgery which put his organs into failure. He had finally returned home to Country, reconnected, and had just began to find peace. Instead we then bear future generations to not only struggle with their identity, but also face rejection from their own people. People who benefitted from not being treated like my grandfather. People who were privileged to reconnect through a legal lens some decades ago. The entire situation feels backwards. Despite my feeling, despite my truth, my story just gets cast aside. The Community members that don't do that I cherish and hold dearly. Some are members of local Aboriginal organisations, others are also members of the land council. It puts me in a hard space, and I only hope that it's reconciled by the time my child is born. It has always been such a paralysing fear that they be born without connection to Culture, so much so that I didn't want to have a child because of it. It's taken for me to move regionally, connect with local organisations and do everything in my power to afford me privileges that should be my birthright.

Despite what I don't have, whether they accept it or not:

I am an [REDACTED]. I was born and raised on my traditional Country. My direct Ancestor is [REDACTED]. She was the daughter of [REDACTED], and granddaughter of [REDACTED]. Her brother was [REDACTED], who was stolen by sealers along with many other [REDACTED] people. Her first husband was [REDACTED]. He was abusive to her on many occasions, and due to her upbringing with the [REDACTED] family she felt she deserved better, and was well versed in the English ways of life and language. She left her husband at Coranderrk after her family passed, and joined the [REDACTED] family which travelled what is now the Hume Highway. She briefly settled in [REDACTED], met my [REDACTED] ancestor who was a fruiterer there and they had my great-great grandmother, [REDACTED]

██████████ in 1869, before eventually returning to Coranderrk and passing away only six years later. This story, along with the tale of ██████████ was passed to my great-great grandmother, who passed it to my grandfather, who passed it to me. My grandfather, ██████████, died proud, at least. He had to live his entire adult life telling people he was Greek to justify his dark skin, yet at least he retired and passed on Country. That is more than can be said, unfortunately, for many of my Elders at community groups. It breaks my heart to see them without recognition or historical Connection, always searching endlessly for their home. We need an alternate form to recognise the historical Connections that fall through these gaps, one that celebrates individuals who are committed to serving and participating in Community, but also protects integrity. The consequences otherwise are dire. There's more to say, but that's enough for a night.