

Yoorrook Justice Commission

Submission of Joshua Struthers

My name is Joshua Jack Struthers. I have heritage from Tasmania. I'm a Palawa man from Paredarerme country which is Oyster Cove/Oyster Bay.

I was born and grew up on a Bunurong country, so southeast coast of the Bay from I guess the Patterson Lakes to Frankston area.

I have a degree in science, specifically chemistry. I have recently joined with the CSIRO, but before working here I did a brief stint doing laboratory work for a hospital, in the diagnostic medicine side of finding out if people are sick. So it was, sort of, really enjoyable and definitely helped build my science knowledge.

Moving into the CSIRO, thankfully, I have been really lucky to be able to join one of the project teams among a couple of thousand within CSIRO and that has a really strong Indigenous focus. So, currently I am working with native Australian botanical plants, researching them alongside traditional owner group partners.

My submission is about my reflections of being an Aboriginal man, Aboriginal people's connection to land, water, plants, animals and culture, and my observations of the current political landscape impacting on Aboriginal people.

My family

My Aboriginal grandpa, moved over to Victoria right into this area between Frankston and Hastings when he was only 12. He moved over from Tasmania by himself because of issues with police and police pressure. Not that he'd even potentially done anything wrong or bad or anything, but just being Indigenous 70 years ago basically, the situations he had to deal with even as a 12-year-old, led to his parents suggesting he move out of the State, even by himself because he was unsafe at the time, I guess, with threats from police.

Grandpa moved over here very young, really settled in, and led a bit of a life of crime and stuff like that. That's not too uncommon with mob and stuff that have been pushed down and stuff and don't really get opportunities to do much else. So, I'm not bothered by it - he did what he had to do, and he did it well.

So, my family's been in this sort of area for, yeah, 70, 80 years at this point through my grandpa. I really, really love this bit of country and I have a bit of a connection to Bunurong Land Council or

the mob down that way, through my mum and stuff with her wanting to be part of the community and get in contact for events and stuff like that since we're not in Tasmania anymore. So, we meet with local mob and respect their country and stuff like that.

My mum was born and grew up here as well. So, my mum, growing up in this part of the country, especially in Victoria, was considered just white basically. So, yeah, the struggle a lot of mob are going through with their own whiteness and stuff, I guess that issue started in my mum's generation, a generation before.

I also have a full sister and half-sister through my mum. So, we are all Indigenous because of my mum's side of the family that's Indigenous. And yeah, my younger sister she's great, she's 13 now, really coming up, it's really good as well to see how much things have changed for the better even in my lifetime. Like, me going to primary school even high school hearing anti-Aboriginal and racist jokes, stereotypes, even I remember getting a lot of the same stuff with "you're not really Aboriginal, it doesn't really count" and stuff like that.

Connection to language, culture, community and identity

It was sort of a struggle growing up because so much of language that was lost, even the tribal name for my tribe was contested, because we've separated. And so much of it was intentionally suppressed and it was very hard to even learn about it intentionally even when I wanted to, because I remember as a kid being very interested to learn what's my country and stuff like that.

Talking to my old people like my grandpa and stuff like that, even just referring to it as Oyster Cove – "I'm an Oyster Cove Aboriginal" and stuff like that in those sort of languages because, yeah, so much native languages have been suppressed and taken. Like, even in my great-grandmother's time, it was still heavily illegal to speak Aboriginal language in Tasmania, and even for her parents and stuff, it was doubly so.

So, yeah, it's good to be able to like to know and connect to my mob like that and be able to relearn that information, because even a lot of it was, or parts of it were, able to still survive and thrive but with it still being basically illegal up until 40 years ago. And a lot of language didn't get written down and then some of it's still only coming out now but some mob are really protective about that information. So, some didn't even necessarily want to share it and stuff, for it just to be disregarded and stuff.

And the fact that even the Elders now in Tasmania with the strongest connections are basically completely white, like skin – just based on skin tone and stuff. I don't think it's right the fact white people/colonisation pushed everything into that position and now they're turning around and saying

we didn't want you to be black, so we stopped you from being black, but now you can't claim any heritage and stuff.

I do just think it's stupid, especially because it's like my grandfather is Indigenous, born on Indigenous land, my mother has the same heritage, also born within Australia on Indigenous land. So, when does anyone else get to decide that that connection's broken and stuff like that? Like, it's not like one day you can be Aboriginal and then your kids can't be and stuff like that, rather it's just a continuous trail. And even when my kids have got a quarter, a tenth of a per cent Aboriginal and stuff, because I'm only like six per cent Aboriginal or something like that but I still think that's deeply important and special to me and stuff like that. So, even, my great-grand kids I hope still identify and stuff like that, still accept that heritage, and really just like think about what it means and stuff for the struggles, but then also the triumphs of survival and stuff like that.

And that's good because like this is Australia, we've got culture and heritage here that is important and most other countries wish they had. So, we should take the absolute advantage of it and really have it to our benefit. I think it hasn't been previously, it's been a really underutilised resource, not even necessarily like resource I guess, benefit to the country.

Personally, I see some differences between what I'd call like the white – or I guess the term is like Anglo-Saxon Protestant and stuff like that, that white English sort of white person. I do see big differences in culture between those and just people of an Indigenous background. Like comedy, sense of humour and stuff like that, but even selflessness I feel. So, most Indigenous people I've met will almost go out of their way to give you the shirt off their back and stuff like that, really about community and interconnectedness and sharing and giving and stuff.

I think that givingness and desire to see everyone do well and stuff like that, I feel like that's a thing I've really picked up and stuff among Aboriginal people. Like, always being there to help out a mate, to help out another member of the mob and stuff like – that you might not even know that well and stuff, but just that you've got that broader connection, that you know that they've got the same mentality, the same sort of ideas, they probably help you as well given the chance. So, I think that's a big thing.

I also think that Aboriginal people have an appreciation for the specific art and culture as well, getting to see it and like really taking more the deeper understanding, like thinking about it that way, like almost like a prana energy type of thing, with seeing that art and stuff like you just feel it, like almost like a wave wash through you of like pride, sorrow, whatever the theme and like real points of the art are. If it's just like, yeah, drawing on you in that way, I just feel that there is an extra connection to it.

Connection to land, waters, plants and animals – ways of knowing and being

Tasmanian people or Tasmanian Aboriginal people also used to believe in your soul inhabiting trees, which is something that wasn't in the mainland or even in the Torres Strait and stuff. It's a very specific island thing, of people believing they were born into the trees and stuff, specifically a lot of the flower trees, so trees that produce pollen and stuff and little flowers. There's a handful of trees in Tasmania and Aboriginal people used to believe spirits would reside in those trees after death. So, yeah, tree totems and stuff and all sort of thing.

And in the Torres Strait, they don't have a word for plants or animals, it's just land organism or sea organism they've got instead. So, it's like fish, turtles, jellyfish they've got they've got a word for it, but they, like, call them, like, sea animals. And then plants, animals, everything that lives on the soil they just call, like, earth animals. So even just that perspective I feel like is so enlightening. So, what I'm just sensing in that interconnectedness that a lot of First Nations cultures around the world, sort of recognise, but then those categories defining this and that. When you have a definition around something it's essentially a boundary.

I think, yeah, looking to traditional methods of knowledge definitely will expand science even further than it currently is and I definitely feel like it has the opportunity to make up for a lot of the weaker areas in some science, like, especially around health, like, not caring about health and medicine, and how it's delivered.

Current issues facing Aboriginal people

I clearly remember towards to end of my primary school career, when The Apology discussion really started, and just hearing discourse around that. I'd say like 20 per cent of Australia was like really hateful about it, and like hearing the kids basically parrot what their parents were saying, even teachers and stuff, there was like teachers that I experienced racist comments from and stuff like that.

And now with The Voice and stuff, I support The Voice, but I don't think it's the best thing or greatest thing we really need. I think treaty is more important, but they're giving us The Voice, so they don't have to give us treaty. But I'm still going to ask for both anyway. I don't think I could ever feel like we don't need a treaty in Australia. I think especially at this point. Even in 100 years, even if it was just symbolic at that point, like, I still think it's important, because, there are still Elders that were born without the right to vote and stuff like that. Those people are still alive. Now is the best time to do it and then the second-best time is the day after today. So, the quicker we can really get it through the better. I think is super important.

I think we're really at a point where great change can happen. We just need the right people in power that have that hunger to do it and I feel like Indigenous candidates are almost always

guaranteed to have that really good fundamental background to have that empathy and want to pass those type of laws. Hopefully one day prime minister and I can change a lot.

I hate the prison system. A lot of my uncles have gone through the prison system. One of my uncles is even blind in one eye from police violence. Even though he wasn't doing anything wrong he got hit in the eye with a walkie-talkie and the stick bit went into his eye and blinded him. So, police can beat the fuck out of you, throw you in a cell and unless someone who's not a police officer can break into the prison and talk to you the only person, you're going to talk to is other people in cells or the police, like, guards, I guess. So, they can just do whatever you want, and you're basically just trapped.

But I can't really see that changing, because it's been over a decade since the Royal Commission into prisons there were over 100 recommendations and they made nearly none of them. Like, there were recommendations around why there were so many Aboriginal people being incarcerated. Why they got longer sentences. I think Aboriginal men are the most incarcerated population on the planet. I think we - Australia - should really not have that. That really disgusts me, because, like, we're a pretty progressive, and a really developed country and yet we incarcerate based on race worse than anywhere else on the planet. I think it's just wrong.

Concluding comments

Thank you for listening to me and I really appreciate that the community as a whole in Victoria has sort of really pushed for this and that Yoorrook's finally really coming to fruition and stuff, and that it is helping to inform treaty and stuff.

So, it's really proud moment and I think it's important to be a part of and stuff. So, yeah, thank you as well for that.

END OF STATEMENT