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# My family have been celebrated as pioneers but I knew their colonial history wasn't fully told

*Suzannah Henty*

We have the opportunity to address the violence of colonial systems. To ignore this opportunity is to perpetuate the actions of my forefathers

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When I was younger, I always knew that my family was part of a history that was not fully told. It is hard to put a finger on the feeling you have when you learn your

**W** family history from a book, or the uneasiness that was felt when I started challenging the narratives I was taught. As a child, I knew that I was a descendant of a British banker family that came to the continent we now call Australia on a ship called the Thistle and that I was the sixth generation from their arrival. But just as I always knew we arrived; I knew equally that Aboriginal people had been living on the continent for hundreds of centuries before my family.

My family arrived in Portland Bay in south-western **Victoria** in 1834 and seized, colonised and occupied the Gunditjmara homelands. I am a descendant of this colonial family through James Henty (1800-1882). Ever since their arrival, my family have been celebrated as pioneering colonialists, instrumental in the development of the state of Victoria in the settler colonial nation-state of Australia, which is reflected in the monuments and memorials across the region.

When I was in high school, my history teacher told the class that history was in the room and pointed to me. We studied the arrival of my family, as well as other colonialists, and briefly, almost as a side note, the impact of settlement. The words that would correctly describe what happened, ethnic cleansing and genocide, were never used. We were certainly never told that this was written into the current system of Australian governance. The anxieties about recalling the past and recognising the impact of this history on the present are either too weighty for us to handle, or we are still keen to keep up the myth of a peaceful and just settlement on the grounds of *terra nullius*. Either way, it's time to face the facts on the ground.

The state of Victoria was not discovered, as the history books tell us, it was established following a violent war between the British and Gunditjmara peoples.

It is time to recognise that the stories told by colonial monuments do not tell the truth of invasion but perpetuate a false history and the ongoing dispossession of Aboriginal land. And let's not get carried away - they are underwhelming concrete blocks with plaques. Their importance is measured by the amount we decide. In truth, the only real history these monuments reveal is the colonial hysteria following invasion that was focused on rewriting history to silence Aboriginal resistance and cultivate settler belonging.

**■ ■ *As a Henty, there is a fine line between knowing when to speak and when to be silent***

As a Henty, there is a fine line between knowing when to speak and when to be silent. I think all settlers should become more comfortable with this space. On the weekend of 19 June, a monument celebrating my forefathers' invasion was spray-painted with the words "Sovereignty never ceded". Days before, I had published an article in the Portland Observer addressing the history of my family, labelling it a

legacy of terror and arguing that financial resources and full control of the future of these colonial monuments should be handed over to the Gunditjmarra.

I was approached by a local journalist who asked me to comment further. Having already argued in the article that I unequivocally support the wishes of the Gunditjmarra, I had nothing more to say.

In order to actively dismantle colonial systems, Aboriginal-led initiatives and demands must be upheld to ensure Aboriginal self-determination. For me it seems clear: the celebration of invasion through defending these colonial monuments and memorials legitimates ongoing passive and active acts of occupation across Australia.

In the global context of challenging colonial monuments, now would be the time for all members of settler colonial families to come to terms with our role and responsibility in the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples in the colonial era. Aboriginal peoples have been fighting against occupation since invasion and not only have Aboriginal Nations faced genocide, they have been victims of a systemic silencing of their voices and a far-reaching erasure of their history. What is indisputable is that how the history of Aboriginal land is recalled, remembered and taught should not be in the hands of the occupier.

Before us is an opportunity to address the violence of colonial behaviours and systems. To ignore this opportunity is to perpetuate the actions of my forefathers. But to challenge the stories these monuments celebrate would be to move beyond shallow displays of solidarity and performative reconciliation.

Black Lives Matter is a transnational movement, and we must not use the overwhelming nature of this moment as an excuse to resign ourselves from our individual and collective responsibilities here in Australia. The principles of justice on which practices of reparations can be built must be locally enacted. Towards self-determination and against oppression, solidarity is not a performance.

Suzannah Henty is an emerging art historian currently completing her PhD

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**Lenore Taylor**  
*Editor, Guardian Australia*



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