

Yoorook Justice Commission Submission

My submission is based on multiple experiences. These include:

- My migration from Aotearoa to Australia in my teens during the time that Joh Bjelke-Petersen publicly threatened to poison the water supply of 'natives.' At that time, people like me were still labelled as half-caste, and many other groups were openly vilified in the media, by politicians, and casually in conversation. *Intersectionality* was not a concept, but it was shockingly clear, even then, that Aboriginal people were subject to extreme racism, and that Aboriginal women were treated even worse.
- A tertiary education in Australia, including a focus on gender, race, colonisation, and cultural anthropology, particularly in Aotearoa, Australia, and the Polynesian cultures. I have worked closely with First Nations colleagues and stakeholders, taken courses delivered by Aboriginal leaders, been active as an advocate, ally, and activist, and twice participated in Yolngu-led cultural tours into North-East Arnhem Land.
- A tangential and partial understanding of some elements of certain Aboriginal cultures that were remote enough for colonisers not to have seriously damaged their culture, language, and connection to land. This has enabled relatively uninterrupted cultural transmission for some groups.

These experiences have allowed me to develop both a sense of how meagre my knowledge of any Aboriginal culture is and a powerful awareness of what I, and we non-Aboriginal people, could learn if we allowed the time and space to listen and try to understand.

I also preface my submission by stating that, as a result of our colonial history, all our major current systems and processes were imported from the UK. These systems were established during a specific period by and for one group: white, educated men. Since then, they have been tweaked, as a result of decades of campaigning and activism, to slightly better accommodate other groups. However, power and access have continued to be dominated by the groups these systems were designed to serve. I suggest the system has been twisted and corrupted in countless small and not-so-small ways, further entrenching power and control, albeit less visibly. I don't believe the way this system operates suits or supports openness, cooperation, collaboration, or distributed power.

Recommendations

Here are some things I hope the Commission will have the power and opportunity to support and address, and that the Victorian Government (whoever is in power) will whole-heartedly champion over the long term:

- The Uluru Statement from the Heart and its principles
- An enduring voice for Aboriginal people in the Victorian parliament, with access to resources, time, and fair compensation for their deep knowledge and effort
- Meaningful input into all areas that affect their lives
- Recognition that, as the First People of (what is now called) Australia, specific rights should be accorded to Aboriginal people, both as caretakers and original inhabitants of the land, and as Indigenous people whose ancestors and culture have been deliberately and actively destroyed and undermined

- Collaboration and co-design integrated into government policy and practice affecting Aboriginal people, with the explicit aim of improving outcomes—particularly in areas where they experience negative outcomes, such as health, social services, child protection, family violence, housing, education, policing, and corrections
- Effective anti-racism strategies and efforts to promote more honest representations of Aboriginal people and culture
- Compensation for the immeasurable harm done to culture and people, including the stolen generations; the land and artifacts taken, sold, or destroyed; and the ongoing trauma of historical violence and dispossession
- Processes and agreements to support Aboriginal people in gaining access to and input over land, sea, and cultural sites
- A mechanism to identify and rectify colonial symbolism in Victoria, such as statues and plaques that honour the murderers or perpetrators of dispossession and violence against Indigenous peoples
- Mechanisms to increase public recognition and remembrance of Aboriginal culture and people, particularly women and children.

Personal Reflections

While on Yolŋu Country, I learned profound lessons from the women: that things take time but will unfold as needed; that Country needs to be cared for, and in turn, a cared-for Country heals people; and that, to change, one must abandon preconceived notions of what is needed.

As an anthropologist, I undertook some study prior to my first trip. Despite my academic background, I found it difficult to comprehend the kinship system, which seemed incredibly complex, with multiple systems operating in different ways. From a theoretical perspective, I could not understand why any culture would need such a multifaceted and intricate system.

The one element I did grasp was the use of moieties: Dhuwa and Yirritja. I loved this concept. I became Yirritja after being adopted by my 'sister.' I realised that this system allowed all of my existing relatives and kin to be identified by moiety. The relationships are direct and equally close, regardless of the number of people linking them. This contrasts with the English kinship system, where close relationships are few and become increasingly distant through generations and bloodlines.

I eventually realised that this intricate system has one clear purpose: connection. Every Yolŋu person is connected in multiple and direct ways to every other member of the community.

This is what is important: connection—to culture, to Country, and to community. This is what we all need and must learn.

I think this is my own statement from the heart. I began with my head, felt it in my body, and it ends in my heart. I guess this is how it needed to be.

Wishing you strength, courage, and support in your work.