

YOORROOK JUSTICE COMMISSION

Individual Submission

Lisa Kelly

May I begin by respectfully acknowledging that I write this submission on Bunurong-Boonwurrung Country in the Kulin Nation. And that I come to be here through the journeys of ancestors from Ireland, Scotland, England, Northwestern Europe, Southern India and Sri Lanka. I also acknowledge and thank the Pare Hauraki iwi/tribes on whose whenua I received deep nourishment and learning in Aotearoa NZ. And warmly extend respect and acknowledgment to any First Nations person reading this submission.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission and participate in the significant work of the Yoorrook Justice Commission.

My name is Lisa Michelle Kelly, I'm a 5th generation white settler Australian born on Wurundjeri-Woiwurrung land in East Melbourne, near to Birrarung/Yarra river. I'm currently 50 years old and living on beautiful Bunurong-Boonwurrung country in Wonthaggi on the Bunurong/Bass Coast.

In my father's family, our ancestors left homelands in Ireland, Scotland and England in the time of An Gorta Mór/The Great Hunger and the Highland Clearances in the 1850's. I'm a new learner in the family history space, but know that my forebears arrived via Tasmania and came to farm on the lands of Gunditjmara peoples in towns including Koroit, Kirkstall, Tower Hill, Penshurst and Caramut. There was also family who were publicans in the Castlemaine and Yandoit areas on Dja Dja Wurrung lands.

As people who came to hold land in western Victoria, I accept that my ancestors will have played active roles in and received the material benefit from the violent effort to dispossess Aboriginal people of their homelands and lifeways - both at the time of settlement and ongoingly. The tragedy is magnified in that these ancestors were violently forced from their own lands, language and lifeways by British colonisation. They went on to perpetrate the same injustices against people they were able to feel superior to through the false construct of whiteness. I have been learning about the significant resistance of Gunditjmara people to settler colonialism. And would like to visit these towns and the ancient volcano country as

part of the process of understanding my ancestry. Slowly, over time, I am hoping to grow pathways for right relationship with this history and First peoples as a descendent of Victorian settlers.

On my mother's side, my maternal grandmother's forebears came from Scotland and England to the Swan River colony and were early settlers and farmers in the Toodyay wheatbelt district on Ballardong Country. My maternal grandfather was a Dutch-Burgher from Ceylon who migrated to Western Australia around 1950, after Sri Lanka achieved independence and his ethnic group of mixed-race descendants of English and European colonisers lost their privileged place in society. I recognise that my grandfather and his family members were white-passing, able to prove their British ancestry and migrate to Australia during the era of the White Australia policy. A time when First Nations people's lives were significantly oppressed by systemic institutional racism.

My grandparents lived and worked across the continent, in part I am beginning to suspect due to the racism they experienced as a mixed-race couple from my grandmother's family in WA. They lived in Daly Waters, where my grandfather worked for the Department of Civil Aviation as a meteorologist. The family storyline claims my uncle to be "the first white baby born in Daly Waters". I know my grandfather also spent time working on the Tiwi islands. My Mum was born in Perth and grew up in Darwin, where I understand my grandfather worked with Larrakia people on Department of Agriculture and Forestry projects at the Berrimah Experimental Farm. My Mum recounts the sad story of being told by the nuns to stop associating with her best friend in primary school, as there was concern she was becoming "too much like the half-castes". This was supported by her parents and the loss of the friendship was keenly felt, having spent a lot of her time with that friend and her siblings in each other's homes and at the local swimming pool.

In 1965 the family headed south to Melbourne to be near to extended family members who had migrated from Sri Lanka. As my Mum entered high school in Victoria she was introduced as "Louise from Darwin" and being very tanned, was assumed to be Aboriginal and harassed accordingly. The family home was in East Bentleigh, where my mother and father met in high school and became young parents at 19. I was brought home to Bunurong-Boonwurrung country in Murumbeena in 1974 and grew up in Keysborough, where I attended a Catholic primary school until the age of 10.

From my years of early childhood and schooling, I have no recollection of learning the names of traditional landowners or any history of the settlement of the colony of Victoria. I vaguely remember a school trip to Sovereign Hill and the history of the Gold Rush era being strongly upheld. An early primary school memory is of being outdoors in the playground with other children, alongside a very large dead and fallen tree where we worked on grinding up small rocks to powder. We were very industrious in this task and there was a sense that our play was about “being like the Aboriginies” – which feels uncomfortable and poignant to recount. We had clearly absorbed a certain limited representation of indigenous people. I didn’t knowingly go to school with or meet any First Nations people at this time.

On reflection, the little exposure I had to First Nations culture was through books and reading. I remember the book *How the Birds got their Colours* (told by Mary Albert, published 1985) being in our home. The film made of the book *Storm Boy* by Colin Thiele (1976) had a big impact on me, for the character’s relationship with pelicans and an Aboriginal person. As did the book *The Nargun and the Stars* by Patricia Wrightson (1974), which gave me a glimpse of an Aboriginal world view and spirit beings that made a deep and lasting impression. More recently I have come to learn that Wrightson drew on the creation stories of a range of nations, including the Gunai-Kurnai people. This was done without permission, at a time when very few Aboriginal authors were able to publish. While I value the impressions of indigenous storytelling that filtered through to me in this way, I recognise that the appropriation of First Nations culture is a harmful part of ongoing colonisation and it is fitting that Wrightson’s books are no longer in print.

As a child growing up in Victoria I benefitted greatly from time in bushland, near to creeks, lakes and rivers on frequent family camping trips. These were at places including the Buckland valley near Mt Buffalo. As well as holidays involving water skiing and fishing with family friends at Yarrawonga and at what my Mum says they called the “Moe pondage” in the Latrobe valley. I never heard any mention of the First peoples of these places, what had happened there during colonial settlement and their experience ongoingly.



Me around 2 years of age with my parents, Nanna and Pop and aunties, possibly at Jells Park near Glen Waverly, 1976

In 1984 my parents, younger sister and I relocated to Sydney for my father's work in banking. We lived on Bidjigal and Dharawal lands in the southern suburbs of Sydney where I completed my education in Catholic schools. In year 6 of primary school I was in the same year as a girl who was the only visibly Aboriginal person in the school. Who was bullied and tormented with verbal racial harassment by the other students. She was often distressed and in tears at school and I remember sticking up for her a bit and telling people to "leave her alone". But I regret that I never befriended or stood alongside her in any meaningful way. And that it is very possible that she was of the Stolen Generations. She did not continue on to the same high school and I don't know how her life unfolded. Otherwise, I knew no other

First Nations people throughout my education, a reality which continued into my university study and workplace environments. Importantly, I never questioned this. I recognise I was very effectively insulated from the ugly, uncomfortable and unresolved history of this country since 1788.

In my schooling I learnt no history of the impact of colonisation on First Peoples, in terms of massacres, government control through missions and reserves, the forced removal of children and destruction of families by the churches and State. Or anything about the significant resistance of Aboriginal nations and extended periods of frontier warfare. Living in the Sutherland Shire in NSW, a lot of civic pride was upheld in being the landing place of Captain Cook. His image was the Council logo and emblazoned everywhere. In early high school, the *Diesel and Dust* album by Midnight Oil cut through this somewhat in 1986/87. I remember copying an image from a magazine of Peter Garrett carrying an Aboriginal flag onto the front of my school folder. And of being directed by a Greek-Australian teacher to recover my folder. She was clearly threatened by the image and I felt this was censoring.

In 1988 I remember feeling sceptical about the school assembly for the Bicentenary, where we were all presented with a commemorative medal. But I was totally ignorant of the significant demonstrations taking place in Sydney and the strong call for treaty negotiations at that time. Yothu Yindi were huge in my last year of high school with their song *Treaty* (1991). While I registered this message and request at a certain superficial level, I can see that I was essentially disinterested in what that meant or what it had to do with me and my life.

Both my paternal and maternal grandparents also left Victoria in their retirement years and moved to warmer climates in NSW. I spent a lot of time with my Mum's parents on Yuin country in Merimbula as a teenager. Sadly, these loving, gardening, community-minded and environmentally active Christians held racist views of First Nations people based on disproven ideas of eugenics, evolutionary difference and intellectual inferiority. These views weren't expressed openly or often. I could feel for myself that they weren't right and didn't take on these grosser racist attitudes myself. My father's parents were more openly derogatory in the way they spoke about the indigenous people where they lived in Coffs Harbour. And my grandfather seemed to harbor darker, white supremacist views about racial purity and bloodlines that alarmed me. It saddens me that my beloved elders sought to imprint these wrong views on my young self and to perpetuate the separation, harm and

injustice they engender. I recognise they were shaped by the conditioning of their generation and can see that in many respects I've been shaped by them in turn.

Throughout my 20's and 30's I lived and worked on Gadigal and Wangal lands in Sydney, both studying and working at the University of Sydney. And I was plainly still very uneducated as I recall feeling inwardly dismissive of the first expressions of apology for the Stolen Generations in the late 1990's. There were 'Sorry' books that people could write messages in local cafes and I remember thinking defensively "Sorry for what?!" I took part in the Sydney Harbour Bridge Walk for Reconciliation in 2000 and was very moved, particularly by the visible elation of First Nations people. And then sadly like many other white Australians, I did nothing in particular to carry that moment forwards.

I always made annual return visits to Victoria to see family and friends in Melbourne and the Mornington Peninsula area. I was never aware of the names of traditional owners in either city until the practice of Acknowledging Country began to come into use in the early 2000's. I remember enjoying learning the true name of the Yarra River when the Birrarung Marr parklands opened in 2002. When my mother's father's remains were buried in the Bunurong Memorial Park cemetery in 2007, I was still unaware that this was the name of the rightful landowners.

I studied visual arts at Sydney College of the Arts and was a practicing professional visual artist throughout my mid-20's to mid-30's. My training was pretty much entirely focused on European cultural traditions and my interests largely continued in this groove. Tracey Moffat rose to prominence when I was a student and the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative was near to where I lived, yet I never went there. I was involved with running artist-run galleries and coordinating exhibition and publishing projects, but don't recall personally knowing or including any First Nations people or artists.

I have recently unearthed an image of myself at age 20, standing in front of my first exhibited artwork. It was a part of a group show with student peers held near to The Block in Redfern, in the final year of my degree in 1994. It gave me a shock to remember that at this time I had a naïve fascination with the Australian explorers. In this artwork I'd hand-stitched the names of four of them, positioning them amidst an enlarged, relief floral wallpaper pattern made with mattress ticking fabric. At age 50, I'm appalled and uncomfortable that I upheld the

names and harmful deeds of white colonisers with so little awareness. And I'm also seeing it as an expression of my own family, social and racial conditioning. I would like to learn more about each of the men I named, the people whose lands they wrongfully entered and what happened as a result. This could be a form of personal reckoning with my time and role in the visual arts.



'Given, to prove...' Lisa Kelly and artwork in student exhibition, Chippendale 1994

While practicing as a visual artist, I earned a livelihood working part-time at University of Sydney Library. For close to 20 years I benefited from the collection and resources of the library, where I began my ongoing process of self-education about Australian history. I became aware of the historian Henry Reynolds and learnt a lot from reading *Don't Take Your Love To Town* by Ruby Langford Ginibi (1988), *Jackson's Track: Memoir of a Dreamtime Place* by Daryl Tonkin and Carolyn Landon (1999) and *Jackson's Track Revisited* by Carolyn Landon (2006). Germaine Greer's 2003 Quarterly Essay *Whitefella Jump Up: The Shortest Way to Nationhood* was also an inspiring read to me. And I remember travelling out to the Hawkesbury river to read and reflect on *The Secret River* by Kate Grenville (2005) in situ - particularly the potent, horrific telling of a massacre.

I'm thankful for the work of writers, historians, artists and filmmakers that helped me begin to imagine and empathise with the still largely unheard histories that the land and First Nations people endured and carry. Yet I remember wanting to visit the Aboriginal Tent Embassy that was established in Victoria Park right adjacent to the University library in 2000 during the Olympics. And feeling too intimidated to do so - which I now understand as a combination of white fear, fragility and conceit. I began to attend more indigenous cultural events and festivals like *Yabun* on Invasion/Survival Day and *Message Sticks*, where it was helpful to experience simply being around more First Nations people. As was a trip to Darwin in 2002 for an exhibition project, where I had my first vivid experience of the reality of living in an Aboriginal country in close proximity to Asia.

But I've come to see that for a long time I've been merely *consuming* the cultures of indigenous and other peoples of colour. Without really listening to what was being said. I recognise that nothing in my family upbringing or school education gave me an awareness of the violent reality of settler colonisation. Or caused me to question the near total absence of First Nations people in my life. This effective segregation has been particularly poignant to reflect on. Conversations with my Mum tell me how much more context she, her siblings and parents shared with Aboriginal peoples – admittedly in states other than Victoria – and how that was totally lost in my sister and my generation. I can see how much I've been fully and effectively insulated by white privilege.

Until recently, nothing in my environment and life experience had penetrated this privilege and my white cultural conditioning enough to make it visible to me. Until a few breakthrough

moments began to disturb the force field. One was participating in an artist-led tour of The Block in Redfern (SquatSpace *Tour of Beauty*, 2009) where Aunty Jenny Munro spoke with the group and collectively referred to us as “white cunts”. This was a shock. Which I responded to at the time with internal righteous indignation, but now see as a critical moment. The second was in 2018, reading author Peter Carey acknowledge that as an Australian “You wake up in the morning and you are the beneficiary of a genocide”. This struck deep, no doubt because Carey was an author I respected and whose white voice I could more readily hear.

By this time I was living in Aotearoa New Zealand, where I’d moved for a relationship in 2015 and was very blessed to live and learn on Hauraki lands and waters for eight years. I’d definitely taken my white blindness and privilege along with me, feeling wholly entitled to migrate there as an Australian citizen. With no understanding that the possibility was only enabled by the generosity of Te Tiriti o Waitangi/Treaty of Waitangi. I learnt a lot about my whiteness living in community alongside tangata Māori. Since 2022, I’m very thankful to have had opportunities to begin the personal work of (un)learning about white supremacy and settler colonialism through a range of peer-to-peer education projects.

In 2023 I made the return move to Victoria to be nearer to family and continue this learning work in my place of origin. I’d been very heartened by Anthony Albanese’s commitment to the Uluru Statement from the Heart at the time of his election. Then the result of the Voice to Parliament referendum was a painful reality check – as was learning the views of close family members that I’d spoken to about it in the lead up to voting. Opportunities to show solidarity with First Peoples are emergent in the convert Buddhist spiritual community in which I am an ordained member. Together with others, I’ve been advocating for a deeper commitment to Acknowledging Country at our events and gatherings. And that a percentage of retreat centre profits be returned to traditional owners through the *Pay the Rent* platform. It is also feels very important to be bearing witness to the ground-breaking work of truth-telling and Treaty negotiations here in Victoria.

To finish, again I thank the Commissioners and the Yoorrook Justice Commission for the opportunity to make a submission. I’ve valued being able to read other submissions and inspired in particular by those of Suzannah Henty, Keicha Day, Elizabeth Balderstone and the appearance of Premier Jacinta Allan. I’m aware that my own reflections have become

lengthy and may or may not be entirely relevant to the strictly Victorian brief of the Commission. I think this is due to not having had a forum or invitation to reflect about my racial upbringing in Victoria before, which I am deeply thankful for. Thank you for taking the time to read my submission. If my recollections or reflections have caused any offence or hurt, I sincerely apologise.

I would also like to mention the resources that have been most significant to my learning to date, for the possible interest of any non-indigenous readers:

(white) Awareness is Revolutionary - international online course for Triratna Buddhist community members.

Gathering at the Gate – Aotearoa NZ based online course on settler colonialism, critical family history and ancestral recovery.

Decolonizing Solidarity – Australian website and book by Clare Land.

I will close my submission with an Acknowledgment of Country and dedication verse written for the *Gathering at the Gate* course in March 2024.

Lisa Kelly

Wonthaggi

November 30th 2024

Acknowledgement of Country and opening dedication

With respect I name

The rightful land owners here in – *place name* -

eg. *The Bunurong-Boonwurrung people of the Kulin nation.*

I acknowledge the ancestors, elders, law-keepers

And all people holding unceded sovereignty,

Continuous custodianship

And deep, loving care for these

Lands, sky and waters.

Gathering here

As respectful guests,

Forgive us our trespasses -

Forgive us our ancestors.

Reckoning with harm caused.

Healing harm received.

Choosing remembering over forgetting.

Giving before taking.

Heartened by truth-telling.

Requesting permission and protection,

In learning to rightly walk upon these lands.

Calling forth, as much as we can,

Of love, of respect and of faith.

*Acknowledgement and dedication to open a period of group practice/learning/
sharing for white/settler/non-First Peoples by Gambhīrachittā /Lisa Kelly.*

*Line 11 from the Our Father and lines 20 & 21 from the The Ratnaguna-Samcayagatha Verses on
the Perfection of Wisdom.*

*29th April 2024, day of Victorian Premier Jacinta Allan's appearance at the Yoorrook Justice
Commission, the first leader of an Australian government to give evidence at an Indigenous-led
truth-telling inquiry.*