

Submission to Yoorrook Justice Commission

From: Anonymous 1491

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Submission:

I decided to make a submission to the Yoorrook Justice Commission as I believe that my early education and experiences would mirror those of many other non-Indigenous Australians raised in our capital cities. Additionally, as a social worker, I feel strongly about the current treatment of Aboriginal people within all the various socio-political contexts of modern Australia and wish to contribute to positive change. I am a white, non-Indigenous Australian woman.

My paternal family emigrated in the 1850s to Kaurua country, and in the 1880s to Bunurong Country. My maternal family emigrated to Djadjawurrung Country during the gold rush of the 1850s and were transported to Port Arthur in the 1820s. My predecessors came to this land as convicts, gold miners, and settlers. Knowing this, I realise that, as I continue researching my family history, I may find some of them were involved in the atrocities committed against Aboriginal people during colonization. I am prepared to face that shame. In primary school, I was taught about the Dutch and British explorers; Captain Cook landing at Botany Bay; and the arrival of the First Fleet. I was taught about the gold rush of the 1850s, Burke and Wills, Hume and Hovell, and other overland explorers. Attending Catholic school, I was taught that white settlers brought Christianity to a 'wild' land, and that they were 'right' to do so.

I was not taught about the impact of these events on the Aboriginal people who already lived here. I only understand now that I am much older and have more life experiences behind me, that all this education reinforced the false designation of Australia as terra nullius at the time of Cook's arrival. In secondary school, Australian history was not an option until VCE. The only historical racism and discrimination I was taught about was in English class – prejudice against African American people in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and the horror of the Holocaust in Elie Wiesel's *Night*. Nothing about racism and discrimination in our own backyard. That silence now seems deafening. To my knowledge, I had never met an Aboriginal person – even though the part of Naarm where I grew up had (and still has) an Aboriginal Controlled Community Health Organisation.

I did not learn about the lies and omissions at the heart of our history until I went to university. There I learnt about the discrimination and systemic racism Aboriginal people face every day, especially in our legal systems. I learnt that the first inhabitants of Australia were considered 'savages' based on criteria set by the British government of the day – and that the evidence to support this conclusion was falsified by Cook and his superiors. I visited Alice Springs in 2013, and it was a culture shock. The people I saw walking down the street, minding their own business were the embodiment of Aboriginal people I had seen on TV growing up; dark skin, speaking in language, living in the desert.

I lived in Alice Springs for 6 years after that, working in the community services sector, and the absurdity of my initial impressions still strikes me now. Aboriginal people should not have been so foreign to me as an Australian. After I moved back to Victoria, I worked across Gippsland and was appalled at the lack of what I perceived as basic services for Aboriginal people that were taken for granted in the Northern Territory: culturally safe hostels to stay in when having to travel to regional

centres for medical treatment; night patrols to get home safely instead of staying in town; regular bush buses to allow travel between communities and town. In Gippsland, I saw little to no evidence of support to sustain what language and culture is left; no culturally appropriate residential aged care; and limited access to ngangkari (Pitjantjatjara word for traditional healer). The Northern Territory is a deeply divided place, but these vital assets and services exist there (however underfunded and/or understaffed they may be). I was told by colleagues who had lived and worked in Gippsland longer than I that due to the comparative percentage of Aboriginal people per population – about 27% in the Northern Territory, compared to 1% in Victoria (ABS 2022) - the funding is just not available for these services. Having seen their benefits, I strongly believe that these services are essential for Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as well.

I am ashamed of my ignorance of Aboriginal people and culture before moving to Alice Springs, and I bless how that experience opened my eyes to the impact of colonization on Aboriginal people. I hope that future generations of non-Indigenous Victorians grow up knowing whose land they live on, can learn some of that nation's language, and are instilled with a respect for Indigenous ways of knowing and being. I also hope that the Treaty process can help to heal the past, to whatever degree may be possible and in doing so open a future path that all Victorians can walk together in unity.

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