

Submission to Yoorrook Justice Commission**From:** Jackie Mansourian**Dated:** November 2024**Submission:****What has been your experience learning about First Nations history and culture in Victoria's education system? Do you feel it was comprehensive?**

I was nine years old, and was walking along a street in Footscray with my dad, when a car roared past and we heard a man's voice yell out to my father 'Go back to your own country you w-g.' I wasn't fully aware what was happening. My dad in his anger and shame at being ridiculed publicly in front of his daughter, yelled back in English and his own mother tongue, Armenian, 'This not your country. This country of Aboriginal people' or something very close to that. I didn't know what he meant then. But that incident and his response stayed deep, as do all experiences of racism, especially when a child witnesses and feels their parents being shamed. We had been in Australia for two years. He had witnessed the 1967 Referendum in our first year after arriving. That is how I imagine he would have learnt about First Peoples in Australia.

My father opened my curiosity - who were these people he was referring to? There it stayed, a dormant but open question for many years. Nothing in my primary or secondary school learning in the late 1960's and 70s helped me understand who these people were that my dad used against racist white Australians as his own shield. Then in 1982, I began my Social Work studies at Monash Uni, and there was an Aboriginal Studies elective. I chose it. Here I would finally learn. I was the only student in my cohort to do it. The course inspired me to do my first short placement with the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, under the leadership of Uncle Jim Berg. From then on, there could be no looking away. No not knowing that racism, violence and denial of First Peoples had been the basis to the colonisation in Australia.

What changes would you like to see in Victoria to promote better understanding and respect for First People?

I believe that there is genuine good will and openness and commitment to recognise, admit and have relationships based on justice with First Peoples by many non-indigenous Australians. However, I also believe there is deep fear and shame by these many nonindigenous Australians. Fear, not about losing property, or land (as disinformation campaigns have lied about) but fear about saying the wrong things, sounding ignorant, racist, misinformed and misinforming others. What we need to say to one another as non-indigenous people is that it is ok, we have to unlearn in order to learn and listen. There are many, many incredible First Peoples cultural educators, artists, musicians, advocates, Elders, writers, journalists, poets, academics, film-makers, thinkers, activists and more... who teach culture and truth-telling to non-indigenous people with immense generosity. We need to let go of whatever is holding us back (our ego? our embedded racism because we live in such a deep-rooted racist place?) unlearn our fears and assumptions, and then attend, participate, watch, read, listen to the voices of First Peoples of Victoria and across Australia, as they share their stories of cultures. There are so many, many rich and deep opportunities that are created by First Peoples for other First Peoples and for non-indigenous people. I returned back home to Melbourne in 1998, after many years of being away. That

is a long time ago now. But one of the things that helped ground me were the sentiments of Aunty Jill Gallagher that I have carried with me in these past 26 years, is to be proud that you are living on the land of the First Peoples of Australia who have the oldest living, continuous culture in the world.

In what ways do you think non-First Nations Victorians can contribute to the process of truth-telling and treaty?

Importantly, non-First Nations Victorians must advocate and hold the Victorian Government to account for their part to be carried out in 'good faith' during the Treaty negotiations. The current Government have made the commitment. But it is important to note that it not a bipartisan position. As citizens of Victoria, we must hold the current Government and any future Government accountable to the Treaty making process. There are many submissions made by First Nations Elders, Traditional owners, First Nations Victorians held and accessible in the Submissions Library of the Yoorrook Justice Commission, that have been made over the past few years. They are moving and challenging. Yet is essential to watch, listen and feel these stories and experiences as evidence of past and present injustices experienced by First Nations people. Their truth is our truth. On this basis, as non- First Nations Victorians, we can decide to take our ongoing responsibility for present and future justice, as defined by First Nations Victorians

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