

# TWENTY FIRST CENTURY APPRAISALS OF PALM ISLAND

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## Abstract

Palm Island, situated off the mid-north Pacific coast of Queensland, was established as an Aboriginal settlement in 1918. By the late 1930s close to 2,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders had been forcibly interned there by Queensland authorities. The island housed a variety of Indigenous peoples with marked differences in language and cultural heritage and was a complex community that developed a new syncretic identity. With many of the internees being classed as 'disruptive', a harsh militaristic regime was maintained by white administrators and guards. The repressive regime persisted until the 1960s and it wasn't until 1986 that ownership of the island was ceded to its inhabitants. Left with little infrastructure and minimal employment opportunities, social problems and criminality rose in the 1990s leading to increasingly harsh and often insensitive policing of the island by the Queensland police. One outcome of the latter was the death-in-custody of Cameron Doomadgee, also known as Mulrunji, in 2004, an event that provoked what was labelled as 'rioting', followed by a formal investigation by the state government that delivered a report in 2005 recommending major redevelopment of the island. The events described above resulted in wide media coverage and, in particular, the publication of three books: Jeff Water's *Gone for a Song* (2008), Jill Watson's *Palm Island: Through a Long Lens* (2010) and Chloe Hooper's *The Tall Man* (2010). This article analyses the books, more particularly *Through a Long Lens*; considers Palm Island's history as an incarceration centre through a trauma-informed lens; and proposes that just as incarcerated Aboriginal men caught in the trauma vortex have insight into their own needs, so do Palm Islanders.

## Keywords

Palm Island, historical trauma, cultural trauma, political trauma, trauma, prison colony, Aboriginal, Indigenous

The indigenous author of this article would like to respectfully acknowledge the traditional owners of the land and sea, the Manbarra people of Palm Island, and also the Bwgcolman people, the custodians of Palm Island history, those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were transported to Palm Island for penal servitude, across generations. I pay my respects to Elders both past and present.

## Introduction

Palm Island, also known as Great Palm Island, or by the Aboriginal name Bwgcolman, is a tropical island with a resident community of between 2,000 to 3,500 people. The settlement is named variously Palm Island, the Mission, Palm Island Settlement, Palm

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Community or, as the locals call it, Palms. The island is situated 65 kilometers north-west of Townsville, on the east coast of Queensland, Australia, 800 kilometers north of the Tropic of Capricorn. It is the main island of the Greater Palm group, and consists of small bays, sandy beaches and steep forested mountains rising to a peak of 548 meters. Palm Island is the traditional territory of the Manbarra people, the traditional custodians and land-owning group of the islands called The Palms; the Bwgcolman people, the custodians of Palm Island history; and those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples transported to Palm Island for penal servitude across generations (Hooper, 2008). The Island was selected by the Queensland government for the site of an Aboriginal reserve in 1914 and expanded as a prison colony for Aboriginal peoples from across Australia in 1918. It was created under the Aborigines Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act of 1987 (Wilson, 1985).

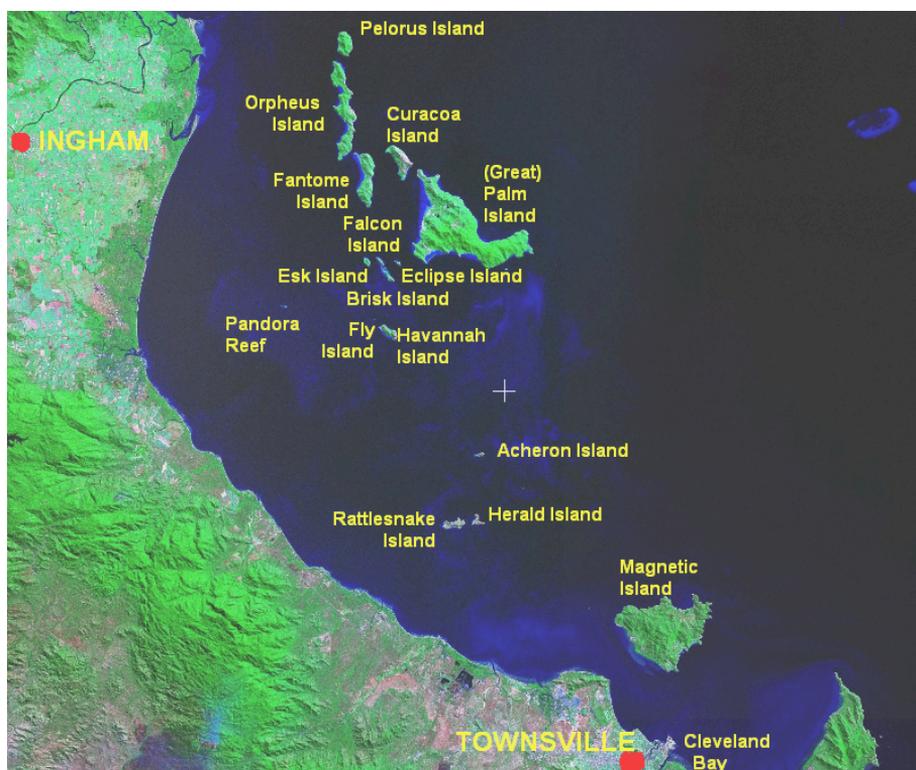


Figure 1 – Palm Island, surrounding islands and Queensland coastline (source: Wikipedia)

The Palm Island reserve was established with a clear purpose in mind. The island was seen as an ideal place to confine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were regarded as ‘problem cases’, and as uncontrollable on other Aboriginal reserves where they had been herded under the provisions of the Act. Single mothers of mixed-race children and so-called criminals recently released from prison were also sent to Palms. No Aboriginal peoples were allowed to leave the island without the government superintendent’s permission, a nightly curfew was imposed, and all outgoing mail could be censored. Speaking Aboriginal languages was forbidden (Hooper, 2008).

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By the late 1930s, close to 2,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples had been forcibly interned on Palm Island by Queensland government authorities. The island housed a variety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with marked differences in language and cultural heritage, resulting in a complex community that developed, over time, a syncretic identity. With many of the internees being classed as 'disruptive', a harsh, militaristic regime was maintained by the government-appointed administrators and guards. Through amendments to the Act, by 1939 the Aborigines Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act had become a total police control instrument. The repressive regime persisted until the 1960s. It was not until 1986 that ownership of the island was ceded to its inhabitants through a Deed of Grant in Trust (DOGIT). Today, as a result of these policies, Palm Island is home to a diverse number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from many different language groups. Left with little infrastructure and minimal employment opportunities, social problems and criminality rose in the 1990s leading to harsh and often insensitive policing of the island by the Queensland police. One outcome of the latter was the death-in-custody of Cameron Doomadgee in 2004, an event that provoked collective action by island community members. A formal investigation by the state government delivered a report in 2005 recommending major redevelopment of the island (which has not yet occurred). Senior Sergeant Chris Hurley was charged for the death-in-custody, and was acquitted by an all white jury in Townsville in June 2007, causing further protest and social unrest.

### Palm Island – Learning from history

*The trauma stories become and remain the centrepiece of the healing process (Mollica, 2006: 51).*

The three books written about the death-in-custody of Cameron Doomadgee on Palm Island on 19th November 19th 2004 are very different in context, content and thematic analysis. Cameron Doomadgee, also known as Mulrunji, died in the police cell on Palm Island after being arrested by Senior Sergeant Chris Hurley for allegedly swearing at him. Mulrunji died of wounds that have been described as more representative of a motor vehicle accident within 40 minutes of being placed in the police watch cell, after a physical altercation with Hurley (Koch, 2005).

While making comment on Hooper's and Waters' books, this review focuses more particularly on Joanne Watson's more recent work, written after 30 years of oral history collection on Palms, and consequent to her PhD thesis, because Watson's work allows the trauma and resilience stories of the Palm Island peoples to be centre piece. In the foreword of Watson's book, Rachael Cummins says the "Bwngcolman have their own stories... which capture daily events of life on Palm" (2010: vii). Hence these stories are a valuable source validating the impacts of historical, social and cultural trauma across generations. Also, they allow us to consider the promotion of post-traumatic growth as shown by populations such as the Palm Islanders in recovery from politically induced trauma. While we recommend this book, there is need to voice a note of caution. Martin Nakata (1998: 2) warns that reading such texts can be "an emotional journey that often involves outrage, pain, humiliation, guilt, anxiety and depression" Readers of *Palm Island - through a Long Lens* will face such a journey.

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There are parallels between Watson's work and my own PhD (Atkinson, 2009). My PhD focused on the relationship between Aboriginal male violence and generational Post-Traumatic Stress. In listening to Aboriginal men in Australian prisons, I found the men began to provide answers to their own needs. In the listening, as they felt heard and acknowledged in the multiple human rights violations of their earlier years, they began to make sense of their own stories of abuse and abuse of others (ibid). Through Watson's oral history work, and through the long lens of what can be termed historical violence-trauma in colonisation, Watson (2010) gives a generational voice to the traumatic impacts of official, state-sanctioned violence on the Manbarra and the Bwgcolman peoples. In both situations oral history identifies many of the human rights violations Palm Islanders had experienced, individually and collectively, over generations, which drove their anger, leading to the actions resulting in their incarceration. As they found and told their stories, they also clearly understood that the future belonged to them. Within those oral histories is recorded the failures of the state to provide basic and rightful essential services, legal processes and functions of justice. However, within their stories are the seeds of resilience, in their resistance to the state imposed human rights violations (Brennan, 2007).

Chloe Hooper is a novelist had written an essay for *The Monthly* entitled 'The Tall Man: inside Palm Island's Heart of Darkness' (2008) prior to completing her book. Andrew Boe, barrister-at-law who was handling the legal affairs for the Doomadgee family, brought Hooper to Palm Island in the early years of the case. By all accounts Hooper developed a close relationship with Cameron Doomadgee's sister Elizabeth. In the book, *The Tall Man*, Hooper focuses on character and intimate detail, as she follows and documents the legal proceedings - coming to know who Mulrunji was through his family. However, Hooper also presents a misunderstood cop, Hurley, who, as a 'white pioneer', 'charismatic', and 'classically handsome', ventures into 'the badlands'. Hooper, according to Watson (2010: 154), sees Palm Island as a "black hole into which people have fallen and the future is hopeless". Palm Island could be understood better not as a "black hole" into which people had fallen, but as a place of incarceration as Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples were made displaced peoples in their own country by the Queensland state.

Watson (2010) presents another picture; using words to describe the Island and friends she made amongst the Manbarra and Bwgcolman, people rich with staggeringly brave stories and a humorous, tragic, inspiring history, resilient in survival. Senior correspondent with the ABC, Jeff Waters, in *Gone for a Song: a death in custody on Palm Island* (2008), brings the skills of investigative journalism as he examines what happened between Mulrinji's arrest by Sen. Sgt. Hurley and the long years of coronial inquiry, court action and Hurley's eventual acquittal of responsibility for the death of Mulrinji (2008). Waters contextualises the problematic investigation and the distressed state of the Palm Island community with regard to both the multiple injustices before and after Mulrinji's death and the protracted inquiries and court cases. He begins to explore the stories of a dislocated, displaced people who were forcibly removed to Palm Island during Australia's colonial history in order to attempt to construct an understanding about the fractured lives of the Munbarra and Bwgcolman of Palm Island. Mulrinji's death in custody sparked not just protests on Palm Island, but protests across Queensland and Australia. The story continued as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people protested at a rally on the 15th April 2011, in Brisbane at Queens Park, and in Perth, to highlight the lack of justice, and to mark 20 years since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody brought down its findings.

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So how do we understand all of the ingredients that come together in this case to compound multiple human rights violations and traumatic outcomes across generations? More importantly, how do we provide context to healing or recovery in the largest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in Australia?

Palm Island was established as a penal institution, just as Australia itself was invaded to establish a penal colony. Are there lessons for us, as we consider the island called 'The Palms' by its inhabitants, established as a penal institution, and the island now called 'Australia', remote from the British Isles, where penal servitude was commonplace, for the oppressed, disposed and rebellious? First we need to know the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' histories – the history of Palms as lived and known by the people who now call this island home. Then we need to acknowledge the profundity that occurs when we can acknowledge the burning down of the police station and courthouse barracks, seen as acts of violence within Australia, in contrast to recent rebellions in the Middle East where similar acts of liberation against repressive regimes were applauded by western observers. We come to know and hopefully accept our own contribution to this layered trauma and our own responsibility to rectify historical human rights violations.

### **Through a Long Lens**

Watson (2010) provides an intricate and comprehensive story about Palm Island across its painful and compelling history, confronting the reader with the facts of the layered generational injustice and resultant trauma of colonial conquest, mirrored in this one small community. Watson's (2010) timeline is very different to the timeline provided by Hooper (2008) and Waters (2008) of Mulrunji's death and the subsequent legal processes. While her timeline begins with the aftermath of Mulrunji's death in custody, Watson then takes us back, introducing us to the Carpet Snake Country of the Manbarra, intruded upon by the business of the frontier in the mid- to late 1800s. In a short few pages she allows us to see into the violent heart of the frontier, and understand more fully the creation of Palms, described by Les Malezer as the "end of the road", a "detention centre for political prisoners", the end point of our "trail of tears" (in Watson, 2010: 19).

Palm Island was established after a cyclone demolished the Hull River reserve in 1918. A returned serviceman, Robert Henry Curry, oversaw the construction of an "institution which had the appearance of a well run military establishment" (Watson, 2010: 35). Curry would later become known as 'mad dog Curry'. Palm Island, more so than any other Aboriginal Reserve in Queensland, became a stark example of living 'under the Act', where a harsh militaristic regime was maintained by white administrators and guards. Police power was supreme. Often these police were damaged individuals themselves, in need of the ability to use their powers over subjugated others. During the 1920s and 1930s large numbers of Aboriginal peoples from all over Queensland, including the Torres Straits, were sent to Palms for trivial offences, or for standing up to authorities. Policies of imprisonment, containment, punishment and control of Aboriginal peoples, as Watson (2010) points out, are demonstrated in Palm Island histories as the ultimate punitive destination for this state-wide system of post-frontier repression. Children grew up hearing and living with the stories of their parents, including the traumatic stories of removals, incarcerations, the multiple individual and group human rights violations that become the fibre of historic and social trauma.

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Watson (2010) allocates chapters 4 and 5 to Curry's time – a state of constant apprehension, and the 1930 rampage, when Superintendent Curry went mad and shot and wounded two people, set fire to several buildings, killing his two children. Later in the day Curry was shot by one of the Islanders to save other lives. This islander was subsequently charged for his 'offence'. These are stories Palm Island children have heard in their families as part of their own traumatic history (Watson, 2010). Palm Island was assigned multiple roles over the 1930s and 1940s, continuing as a detention centre, as an industrial school for Aboriginal children, as an old peoples' home, as a general health clearing house, as a service centre for the infectious diseases hospital for nearby Fantome Island, and as a general holding centre for the mentally ill. Social controls increased, as The Act was amended to enable total control over people's lives. While Islanders were required to work 30 hours each week, they were not paid wages. In 1957, the Palm Island workforce demonstrated their discontent, through strike action. The catalyst for the strike was the attempted deportation of Albie Geia, who had disobeyed the instructions of the European overseer. In response, the Queensland government dispatched 20 policemen and a patrol boat to put the rebellion down. Seven men and their families were shipped off the island in leg irons and transported to settlements on the mainland. Even when Palm Islanders confirmed their human right to dissent, the State continued to enact its power over them through the use of its police force. The repressive regime persisted through the 1960s. In 1974 only one of the 1,200 workers on the island received an award wage. A second strike that year erupted when the government sacked the local community council and threatened to turn control of the island over to Townsville city municipality. By 1980, there were 99 people for each wage earner on Palm Island, with an average of almost 12 people in each house.

Formal state control over the island was relinquished in 1986 when title of the land was ceded to its inhabitants through a DOGIT. While the DOGIT reforms gave residents on all state Aboriginal reserves a greater say in their administration, on Palm Island the changes led to the removal of much of the government infrastructure. Houses, shops, a timber mill, a dock and farming equipment were disassembled and shipped to the mainland. The handover of local government functions to the Palm Island Aboriginal Council meant that the Palm Island Council became responsible for up to 59 essential service functions, while local government councils have approximately 34. Police, with their long history of total control of Plan Islander lives, felt themselves immune from scrutiny or repercussion.

### **A time-line of the Palm Island, Mulrinji - Hurley legal issues**

On the 19th November 2004, at around 10.20am, Cameron (Mulrinji) Doomadgee was arrested by Senior Sergeant Chris Hurley for swearing at him and being drunk and disorderly. Forty minutes later, Doomadgee was found dead in the Palm Island police station. That afternoon, police detectives, who include Hurley's close friends, arrived on the island to begin their investigation. Hurley claimed Doomadgee had tripped on a step. Mulrinji's autopsy results were announced at a public meeting on Palm Island on the 26th November 2004. He had died from massive injuries, with a liver almost cleaved in two, four broken ribs, a ruptured portal vein and a haemorrhaging pancreas. The pathologist claimed they were the result of 'a fall.' Hurley claimed that Mulrinji had tripped and fallen over a step. Hundreds of Palm Islanders forcefully protested and were accused of burning down the police station and Sen. Sgt. Hurley's residence. Hurley went into hiding on the mainland.

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On the 28th February 2005, a coronial inquest into Mulrinji's death began on Palm Island. Within days the State Coroner, Michael Barnes, stood down due to objections over his role in clearing Sen. Sgt. Hurley of prior complaints, while working at Queensland's Crime and Justice Commission. The inquest recommenced on August 1st 2005, now overseen by the Deputy State Coroner, Christine Clements. Clements handed down her findings, on the 27th September 2005, claiming Hurley had lost his temper and fatally assaulted Mulrinji. She wrote to Queensland's Director of Public Prosecutions, Leanne Clare, recommending that her office consider laying criminal charges. On December 14th 2005 Clare determined Sen. Sgt. Hurley had no case to answer and that the death was a tragic accident.

Public and media pressure forced Attorney General Kerry Shine to announce there would be an independent review of the case's evidence. Consequently, on January 2007, the same month that Patrick Bramwell (who was in the cell when Mulrinji died) committed suicide, A-G Shine announced that senior legal figures, Sir Laurence Street and Peter Davis SC, had reviewed the evidence and determined there is enough to prosecute Sen. Sgt. Hurley, who had been officially suspended. Hurley, who was charged with manslaughter and assault charges, was the first police officer in Australia charged over a death in custody. Hurley stood trial on the 12th June 2007, and was acquitted by a non-Indigenous jury on the 20th.

### **Palm Island – historical, social and cultural trauma – the way forward**

The events described above resulted in wide - national and international - media coverage and, in particular, the publication of the three books discussed in this article. Each book, to some degree, has considered Palm Island's history as an incarceration centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In Paul Wilson's 1985 book *Black Death – White Hands*, his analysis of criminal statistics in Queensland, averaged over the period January 1977 to May 1984, provided a stark critical analysis of the outcomes of the structural violence of the state in its incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Table 1). The Palm Island figures demonstrate that 86% of violence involved the offender exhibiting heavy drinking patterns and, in most cases, the victim was also drinking; 38% of incidents involved people who were married or in a de facto relationship, and, of those, 90% of the offenders were male (Wilson, 1985). Wilson attributed the extreme crime rates to historical, social, economic, housing and educational factors, and an 'alcohol culture' that perceived not drinking to be antisocial. Further contributing factors were the employment circumstances of Palm Island and the destruction of society and traditional culture and structures.

Twenty years after Wilson published *Black Death – White Hands*, little has changed for the Manbarra and the Bwgcolman, the traditional owners and the history keepers of Palm Island. While Wilson (1985) examined what is called 'criminal' behaviour – homicide and serious assault - he did not delineate the close relationship between homicide and/or harm of others, and suicide. There is a very thin line between harm of self and harm of others. In 2003 Palm Island, with a population of 3,500, had witnessed 16 youth suicides, a number that has continued to increase (McMullen, 2007). In his book *Aboriginal Suicide is Different*, the sociologist Colin Tatz (2005) wrote that Aboriginal youth suicide is as much as 40% higher than in the non-Indigenous population. He continues by stating: "Aboriginal suicide has unique social and political contexts, it must... be seen as a distinct phenomenon" (Tatz, 2005: 1). As Hooper has

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emphasised, Palm Island is a community in crisis, where the young “inherit a community with 92% unemployment, where half the men are dead by 50, where they own nothing, control nothing, have sovereignty over nothing but their own bodies”. (Hooper, 2006: 2). The Queensland government declared a ‘state of emergency’ at the time of the forceful protests after the autopsy results were announced at the public meeting on Palm Island on the 26th November.

	Aboriginal Communities in Queensland	Queensland	Palm Island
Homicide	39.6	6.15	94.3
Serious Assault	226.1	45.9	929.9

Table 1: Estimated violence rates per 100,000. Source: Wilson (1985)

The stories of Palm Island demonstrate generational historic, social and cultural trauma. According to Mollica (2006), historic trauma refers to the collective emotional and psychological injury, both over the life span, and across generations, resulting from a cataclysmic history of genocide or forced subjugation in colonial conquest. In Australia, Palm Island demonstrates this more clearly than any other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community that was established as a reserve or mission. Social trauma is directly reflected in the behaviour of humans as social beings, and the way in which trauma both binds people together, and creates feelings of separation – a fracturing of social relationships (Atkinson, forthcoming). Cultural trauma is a state wherein cultural knowledge and practices have been weakened to the extent that they fail in their capacity to imbue individual and hence collective existence with meaning and value, with social mores that provide structure to communal wellbeing.

Richard Mollica (2006), in his work with traumatised refugees and displaced peoples, has written that all work with traumatised populations must be trauma informed. If we are to be serious about trauma informed services, we must recognise the innate capacity within all of us to restore our physical, mental and spiritual selves to a state of full productivity and quality of life, no matter how severe the initial damage. Mollica (2006) calls this the biological, psychological, and social power of self-healing. Palm Island has that innate capacity, as is demonstrated by the courage islanders demonstrate as they fight for their human rights in spite of the multiple human rights violations they have experienced (Smallwood, White and Kotiw, 1997).

In her preface to Watson’s book, Julianne Schultz, editor of the *Griffith Review*, reiterates the importance of understanding the full detail of the trauma and pain that many people have endured on the Island as an essential first step to making the future:

*Joanne Watson captures the spirit and history of Palm Island in a way that helps make sense of the past and the present and also provides important pointers for the future. Understanding the full detail of the trauma and pain that many people have endured on the island over many decades is crucial to the process of recovery. For those of us who only hear about this remote tropical island when shocking events give it ‘news value’, Joanne Watson’s detailed research and oral history fills many gaps. The shameful policy that created Palm Island has an enduring legacy, yet the warmth and humanity that percolates through this story is a remarkable testament to the capacity of the people to survive and prevail.*

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*Understanding the past is the essential first step to making the future* (in Watson, 2010: vi).

In researching the life stories of Aboriginal men incarcerated for violence crimes, Atkinson (2009) found that over half (58.6%) of the study population had symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, and that majority had been exposed to a significantly high number of traumatic stressors. More importantly, listening to what they said they needed to turn their lives around provides us with a way forward for Palm Islanders as well, demonstrated in part by Watson (2010), and through the voices of incarcerated men. The men said in effect that as they told their own stories healing took place, as they saw more clearly the layered trauma that locked them into reactive behaviour (Atkinson, 2009). As Mollica points out “these stories are historical because the storyteller believes that the story is not just about herself, but also her culture and society” (2006: 28).

The men talked about the importance of reclaiming culture as a source of strength and power to transform their own lives. The men said that art and music was a source of self-healing from trauma. The men said that on their release from prison employment opportunities were needed to provide both a sense of purpose and structure in their lives, therefore increasing self-esteem and relieving the boredom that can contribute to alcohol misuse. Some of the research participants identified that the lack of purpose and structure that results from a lack of employment makes it hard to integrate into society, affects self-esteem, and is a contributing factor to alcohol misuse through boredom, which can then increase violence in the community (Atkinson, 2009). The link between violence and high unemployment, and the need to increase employment opportunities as part of the process of empowering people financially, physically, mentally and spiritually, is consistently referred to in the literature (Aboriginal Women’s Task Force on Violence, 1999; Al-Yaman et al, 2006). The men said alcohol education and alcohol restriction would be helpful to them on release from prison. The men suggested incorporating traditional justice into legal systems was important, because they felt the Australian criminal justice system was discriminatory. Finally, the men placed great importance on breaking the trauma cycle in their own children’s lives by providing safer and more harmonious environments for the next generation. There appeared to be a clear understanding of the process of generational trauma and distress, with many of the participants suggesting that it was the environment that was the cause of the generational patterns that led to their incarceration. There was a clear desire by the majority of the men to provide a safer, more harmonious environment for the younger generation (Atkinson, 2009). So it is with Palm Islanders.

### Conclusion

Les Malezer, present co-chair of the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples, has stated that Palm Island is “the epitome of oppression of our people by the Queensland colonial and state governments” (cited in Riley, 2004: online). For most of its history, Palm Island has functioned as a place of secondary incarceration, employed by successive state governments as the final solution to ongoing Indigenous problems. The Palm Island community carries the burden of the island’s history.

In *Palm Island: Through a Long Lens*, Joanne Watson gives the first substantial history of the island from pre-contact to the present, set against a background of some of the most explosive episodes in Queensland history. *Palm Island – through a Long Lens* is

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often heart-wrenching and at times uplifting. It is a compelling book that should be read by anyone interested in the profound intergenerational effects of colonial conquest. It is indeed, 'through a long lens', but also a microscopic lens taking us deeply into the heart of what it is to be a Palm Islander. In this we must accept our collective culpability – this forms part of the Australian heritage. The layered historical, institutional violence of the state, and agents of the state, and the resilience and tenacity of the Manbarra and Bwngcolman peoples to not only survive but to challenge regimes of repression and oppression, is inspiring. Palm Islanders can show us the way forward, if we accept our responsibility to listen and learn.

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