

A BLUE WRISTBAND VIEW OF HISTORY?

The death of Mulrunji Doomadgee and the illusion of postcolonial Australia

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On 27 August 2009 at a Canberra book launch, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd called for an end to the history wars.¹ He declared 'the time has now come to move beyond the arid intellectual debates' over the interpretation of Australian history and in particular, the impact colonisation has had on indigenous Australia.² The 'arid debates' he refers to are between those who wear a 'black armband' to mourn the unspeakable damage colonisation has done to indigenous Australia, and those who think modern Australia has nothing to apologise for. Both the radicals and the pioneers championed by each side are, he claimed, 'part of the rich fabric of our remarkable story called Australia'.³ In declaring it safe to call a truce in the history wars, Rudd is implying democratic liberal Australia has reached a moment in its history where we can agree to disagree and move forward together.⁴ The implication is we are now living in thoroughly post-colonial times, and the proponents of the history wars have become irrelevant. But if Rudd rejects both historical views, what view is he putting forward? Now that Australia has a native title regime, a permanent human rights and equal opportunity commission, various laws against discrimination, and has even had a national apology, has the nation indeed reached a point where it can leave its antagonistic colonial history behind and move onto a neutral, multicultural present?

Two months earlier, the Queensland Court of Appeal ordered that the coronial inquest into the death of Cameron Mulrunji Doomadgee⁵ be re-opened. It has been five years since Mulrunji died in a Palm Island holding cell, and this most recent legal decision was barely noticed by the media. Immediately after Mulrunji's death in November 2004 there had been a frenzy of media attention. Half a decade later and no one is yet to be held responsible for Mulrunji's death. This new inquest is likely to take years and means the Doomadgee family and Palm Island community will have to re-live, once again, the details of losing their brother.

In this article I examine the Mulrunji case in the context of the liberal, postcolonial view of history that I argue is not only being promulgated by the prime minister, but is also being taken up by wider Australia. Drawing on the work of critical geographer Doreen Massey, I define place as a process and Australia as a colonial process rather than a static area or bounded nation-space. Contrary to the postcolonial image suggested by Rudd's call for an end to the history wars, and liberal reforms such as limited land rights, anti-discrimination laws, equal opportunity commissions and the long-awaited

apology, the Mulrunji case demonstrates that Australia today is still very much a colonial place. What is now emerging is a view of history that acknowledges the wrongs done to indigenous Australians in the past but that sees itself as having meaningfully departed from this time of colonial violence. Distinct from both the 'black armband' and unreservedly celebratory views of history that competed throughout the Howard years, what is emerging now is a 'blue wristband' view of history which denies the existence of colonial power relations while actively reproducing them.

Death in custody of Mulrunji Doomadgee

Aboriginal deaths in custody are not a new issue for Australia. What was outstanding about the death in custody of Mulrunji Doomadgee was the fact that the arresting officer Senior Sergeant Chris Hurley was actually charged with an offence.

Palm Island lies off the northeast coast of Queensland and is home to around 3000 residents, almost all of them indigenous. Located 50 kilometres from the mainland, it is accessible only by a two hour ferry ride that does the return trip three times per week, or a far more expensive 40 minute charter flight. On his way to go fishing on the morning of 19 November 2004 Mulrunji walked past Hurley and Indigenous Police Liaison Officer Lloyd Bengaroo, who were in the process of arresting a young man, Patrick Bramwell, for a public nuisance offence. Mulrunji, who knew Bengaroo, said to him something to the effect of 'you're a black man too, why can't you help the blacks?'⁶ Seemingly unworried by the comment, Bengaroo told Mulrunji to keep walking, which he did. Hurley took an interest in it and asked Bengaroo what Mulrunji had said.

What happened from that point is subject to competing claims. According to Hurley, Mulrunji then turned around and swore at the two police officers. Community witnesses say Mulrunji neither swore nor turned around, but was simply singing as he continued walking down the street.⁷ At any rate, Hurley drove a police van down to Mulrunji and arrested him. Protesting that he had done nothing wrong, Mulrunji resisted getting into the van and Hurley grabbed him by both legs and forcibly pushed him in.⁸ When Hurley opened the van upon their arrival at the police station, Mulrunji punched Hurley on the jaw and the two men had what Hurley later described as 'a struggle'.⁹ Less than an hour later, Mulrunji was dead in a holding cell. He bled to death from a severe compressive force

REFERENCES

1. The history wars famously involved the 'black armband view of history'; a pejorative phrase used by conservatives to attack historians who they thought focussed too much on the negative impact of colonisation on Australia's indigenous population, contrasted with the 'three cheers' view, which saw Australian history as predominantly something to cheer about. See Graeme Davison, *The Use and Abuse of Australian History* (2000) and Stuart MacIntyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars* (2004).
2. David Mark, 'Rudd calls for end to "history wars"', *ABC News online* (27 August 2009) <abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/08/27/2669177.htm> at 27 August 2009.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Hurley v Clements* [2009] QCA 167. It is a custom in some indigenous communities to avoid directly naming a deceased person for a period of time after the death, as a mark of respect. Mulrunji was the name nominated by the family and means 'the departed one', see footnote 1 of *Boe Lawyers Final Submission on behalf of the Palm Island Aboriginal Council* (16 August 2006 [query date and web reference]) <boelawyers.com.au/current%20focus.html> at 30 October. Chloe Hooper notes that in fact the indigenous witnesses in the Palm Island case continued to refer to the dead man as Cameron, with only the lawyers and journalists using Mulrunji, which she claims was consistently mispronounced. See Chloe Hooper, *The Tall Man: Death and Life on Palm Island* (2008). This claim is consistent with the family-supported memorial website for Mulrunji <myspace.com/mulrunji> at 30 October 2009, which directs that the name is pronounced 'moordinyi'.
6. *Boe Lawyers*, above no 5, 21–22.
7. *Ibid.* 23. See also Jeff Waters, *Gone for a Song: A Death in Custody on Palm Island* (2008).
8. *Ibid.* 22. See also evidence of Christopher Hurley in *R v Christopher James Hurley*, Indictment No. 4/2007 as reproduced in Hooper, above n 5, 229.

The blue wristbands denied the ongoing occurrence of colonial violence (by insisting on Hurley's innocence) at the same time as they implicitly asserted the need for such violence in the maintenance of the nation.

which cleaved his liver in two and ruptured his portal vein. He also had four broken ribs and a black eye.¹⁰

A couple of hours after his arrest, members of Mulrunji's family went to the police station to ask after him. Knowing that Mulrunji was dead, Hurley told the family that he was asleep and that they should come back later.¹¹ Hurley had already notified his superiors in Townsville about the death and two detectives, Darren Robinson and Raymond Kitching, were on their way over to Palm Island. Both knew Hurley as a colleague and it was common knowledge that Hurley and Robinson were close friends. Hurley picked them up at the airport and had them over for dinner at his house that evening.¹² Over the course of the following week the detectives conducted an investigation that concluded that Hurley and Mulrunji had had 'a tussle' in between the police van and the station; that Mulrunji had accidentally fallen up the single step leading into the police station, and that this fall alone had caused his death.¹³ It was this version of events that, when it was announced to the community, sparked a riot on Palm Island.

A drawn out coronial inquiry eventually led¹⁴ to a lengthy and damning report that concluded that Hurley's actions had caused Mulrunji's fatal injuries. The report also found that Mulrunji's arrest was an inappropriate exercise of police discretion, the police investigation was unsatisfactory and deficient, and that Hurley had lied about falling next to Mulrunji and had in fact punched Mulrunji several times while he lay on the floor of the police station.¹⁵ Despite the report, it took a significant political battle for Hurley to be charged with manslaughter and assault in February 2007, becoming the first police officer in Australian history to be charged with an indigenous death in custody. The Queensland Police Union (QPU) reacted with vitriolic outrage, threatening to strike¹⁶ and launching a huge public campaign in Hurley's support including radio advertisements, press releases, and the sale of blue awareness wristbands, imprinted with Hurley's police number, 6747. Hurley stood trial in June 2007 before an all-white jury in Townsville and was found not guilty on both charges. He was immediately welcomed back to policing at a station on the Gold Coast.¹⁷

In 2008 Hurley won an unprecedented appeal against the 2006 coronial report that had held him responsible for Mulrunji's death. The decision included an order that the costs of Hurley's appeal be paid by the Doomadgee family and Palm Island community.¹⁸ In June 2009 the Court of Appeal overturned parts of the decision.

The court subsequently made a costs order granting indemnity certificates to both parties.¹⁹

Australia as a colonial process

Mulrunji's death and its legal and political aftermath were not isolated, local issues for Palm Island or for the state of Queensland, but were part of the ongoing, colonial process that is Australia. Geographer Doreen Massey understands place as a process rather than something that is fixed in time.²⁰ Massey uses a diversity of examples to show how place is both spatially and temporally contingent — it changes from moment to moment, constantly evolving into something new. This is an obvious departure from thinking of places as static, bounded areas. The process that is Australia today implicates not only the police officers who work in indigenous communities, but all non-indigenous Australians, whose 'settled' lifestyles could not be maintained without the ongoing dispossession of indigenous Australians from their culture and their land. That dispossession has always been and continues to be violent — the popularly-sanctioned violence of the law is what keeps the white Australian state safe from indigenous otherness. It is not a coincidence that indigenous Australians are arrested and imprisoned at wildly disproportionate rates to the rest of the population, nor is it due to the legacy of colonialism. Rather, the over-policing and imprisonment of indigenous Australians is an integral part of today's Australia. That this process continues unabated at a moment in history when the Australian state has embraced a rhetoric of equality and postcoloniality makes the process all the more harmful and problematic.

Further to her understanding of place as a process, Massey understands space as heterogenous and dynamic rather than as essential and static in meaning. Space is embedded in power relations — individuals and social groups are placed in distinctly different positions of power depending on where they are.²¹ The spatialised power relations within which Palm Island is located are severely colonial. The island was first gazetted as an indigenous reserve in 1914. It functioned as an open-air prison for indigenous persons who were considered dangerous, including 'half-castes', who were regarded as not only a social problem, but also a biological threat to the white race.²² Palm Island was seen by the Queensland government as a particularly attractive location to place indigenous people because it isolated them from white people.²³ Indigenous people

9. Christine Clements, *Findings of Inquest into the Death of Mulrunji* Townsville: Office of the State Coroner 27 September 2006 p 14, <austlii.edu.au/au/journals/AILR/2006/81.html> at 30 October 2009. Note that this decision has been overturned but the second inquest has not yet begun.

10. *Ibid.*, 7–9.

11. Boe, above n 5, 48.

12. Clements, above n 9, 10–11.

13. Waters, above n 7, 73.

14. Almost two years later on 27 September 2006.

15. Clements, above n 9, 10–11.

16. Renee Viellaris, Cameron Atfield and Amanda Watt, 'Police strike threat in support officer', *Courier Mail* (Brisbane) 27 January 2007.

17. Sarah Volger and AAP, 'Officer welcome back on Coast duty', *Gold Coast Bulletin* (Gold Coast) 22 June 2007.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Hurley v Clements & Ors* (No 2) [2009] QCA 207.

20. Doreen Massey, 'Power-geometry and a progressive sense of place' in Barry Curtis Jon Bird, Tim Putnam George Robertson and Lisa Tickner (ed), *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change* (1993), 66.

21. *Ibid.*, 61.

22. *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody 1991*, Regional Report of Inquiry into Queensland Appendix 1 (a): The Aboriginals in Colonial Society 1840–1897, <austlii.edu.au/au/other/IndigLRes/rciadic/regional/qld/ch5.html#Heading22> at 10 December 2008.

23. *Ibid.*

from at least 57 different language groups were sent to Palm Island during its life as a penal colony.²⁴ Families sent to the island were separated and only allowed to see each other with permission from a white superior.²⁵

In 1986 the Queensland government relinquished direct control over Palm Island and passed it onto the newly formed community council, which was given title to the land under a 'deed of grant in trust'²⁶ — a species of land title created specifically for the self-administration of former missions and reserves. Under such a deed the land must be used for the benefit of the community, meaning that private ownership of land is unlawful.²⁷ While these legal moves were positive in terms of indigenous self-government, they were accompanied by a swift withdrawal of government infrastructure from the island.²⁸ The physical isolation of Palm Island combined with the cumbersome legalities of its land tenure scheme have made it very difficult to attract any kind of investment.²⁹ As the residents on Palm Island are either former reserve inmates or their children, there is also no economic base upon which to begin local industry. Palm Island today is a place of severe poverty. Houses are badly overcrowded (averaging 17 people per house),³⁰ run-down,³¹ and unemployment is over 90%.³² Suicide and domestic violence rates are disproportionately high.³³

The persistent conditions of poverty and despair on Palm Island can be attributed in part to the island's isolation and lack of infrastructure, but in larger part to the fact that the networks of social relations and understandings that constituted Palm Island as a penal colony in the early 1900s have not shifted. For Palm Island to move from being a place of coloniality to one of postcoloniality will require more fundamental and wide-ranging shifts than the granting of limited civil and land rights to indigenous Australians. Those shifts need to be wide-ranging not just in the sense that significant change needs to occur on Palm Island, but also throughout Australia today. Spatialised power relations are not just about certain places being more violent or more impoverished than others. They are about the power and prosperity of some places actively weakening the power and prosperity of others. If place is understood as an ongoing process constructed through networks of social relations and understandings, then it is contingent on and interconnected with that outside of itself. In terms of Australian geography, it is not simply that remote indigenous communities are worse off and subject to greater control than regional towns and cities, but that those towns and cities could not continue to exist as they do without the ongoing displacement and control over remote indigenous communities.

Geographies of irresponsibility

Spatialised power relations and the inter-connectedness of places of poverty and prosperity suggest a corresponding politics of inter-connectedness which Massey labels geographies of responsibility.³⁴ Embracing such politics would mean recognising the multiple networks of understandings, relations, processes

and experiences that intertwine to form place, and drawing lines of responsibility along the multiple trajectories of the networks that extend out from it. Such a model has yet to be widely embraced in Australia. Scott Veitch argues that Australian common law organises *irresponsibility*, legitimating the ongoing dispossession of indigenous people and the effective disavowal of Australia's racially violent past on the grounds of equality, freedom and formal justice.³⁵ While the legal system has incrementally moved away from the now unacceptable policies of racial discrimination and genocide, the Australian state still depends on the continued dispossession of indigenous people from their land and their culture. While legal measures such as *Mabo*, anti-discrimination laws, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and the apology do represent movement away from the blatant racism of Australia's colonial foundations, they also reiterate, as Stewart Motha has argued, that the law of the coloniser is the only valid normative system.³⁶ Indigenous 'rights' are recognised only within the white legal system and on terms defined by it, thereby reinforcing the hegemony of that system, the subordination of indigenous laws and the un-thinkability of it being any other way.

In recognising indigenous rights, the colonial state is attempting to redefine itself and its legal system as postcolonial. But the legal system that grants indigenous land rights and prohibits racial discrimination³⁷ is the same legal system that incarcerates indigenous Australians at over 15 times the rate of non-indigenous Australians,³⁸ undermines and belittles indigenous ways of knowing,³⁹ and refuses to acknowledge that its foundations lie in violent conquest.⁴⁰ The Commonwealth government that apologised to the Stolen Generations is the same government that not only maintained but extended the policies of the Northern Territory Intervention⁴¹. The Australian government boasts about (some) families in remote communities feeling more safe and secure with increased police presence, but fails to recognise the systemic reason those communities are unsafe and insecure in the first place.⁴² As Andrea Smith has argued in regards to hate crime law, when a state founded on genocide purports to protect or support racial minorities, it reproduces white supremacy by masking the racism of the state itself.⁴³ The legal reforms ostensibly made in the interests of indigenous Australia have an effect of entrenching the relation of irresponsibility from non-indigenous Australians towards indigenous Australians, by creating the illusion that the law protects or even promotes indigenous interests.

Purportedly postcolonial legal measures might be classified as *non-performative* anti-racism. While there is no doubt that such measures do achieve anti-racist results for particular individuals, they fail to change the fundamentally racist structure of the space in which those individuals live. The stark colonial Australian landscape of prosperous white cities and severely impoverished black areas has not significantly changed since these measures have been instituted. Sara Ahmed explains how acts that acknowledge the existence of

24. Palm Island: Future Directions, Resource Officer Report, State of Queensland (January 2006), 27.

25. RCIADIC, Regional Report of Inquiry into Queensland, Appendix 1(a).

26. Now governed by chapter 3 of the Land Act 1994 (Qld).

27. s 35 Land Act 1994 (Qld).

28. Waters, above n 7, 41.

29. Andrew Boe, 'Palm Island — Something is very wrong' *Australian National University Public Lecture Series 2005* (28 September 2005), 8.

30. *Ibid.*, 5.

31. Waters, *op cit*, 150–165.

32. Palm Island: Future Directions, *op cit*, 35.

33. Boe, above n 5.

34. Doreen Massey 'Geographies of Responsibility' (2004) 86B(1) *Geografiska Annaler Series B, Human Geography* 5.

35. Scott Veitch, *Law and Irresponsibility: On the Legitimation of Human Suffering* (2007), 99–114.

36. Stewart Motha, 'The Failure of "Postcolonial" Sovereignty in Australia' (2005) 22 *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 107.

37. In certain circumstances. See especially the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth) is excluded from the *Northern Territory Emergency Response Act 2007* (Cth): s132(2).

38. 'A statistical overview of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in Australia' (August 2006) *Australian Human Rights Commission* <hrhoc.gov.au/Social_Justice/statistics/index.html#toc9> at 14 December 2008.

39. See for example the Hindmarsh Island Bridge affair, critiqued in Diane Bell, *Ngarrindjeri Wurrurarrin: a world that is, was, and will be* (1998).

40. Irene Watson, 'Illusionists and Hunters: Being Aboriginal in this Occupied Space' (2005) 22 *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 15.

41. *Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007* (Cth). Section 132 excludes the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth) from operation in certain areas of the Northern Territory.

The blue wristband view of history is dangerous because it creates the illusion that Australia has addressed or is in the process of addressing the wrongs of the past and is now building an anti-racist, socially just postcolonial nation.

racism in order to overcome it are generally non-performative, meaning that they do not do what they say.⁴⁴ Gestures that declare racism has been overcome do not actually overcome racism if the wider space in which that gesture is situated is still embedded in racism. Non-performative anti-racist gestures effectively announce that 'we know racism exists, and now that we have acknowledged its existence, it doesn't really exist anymore'.⁴⁵ Legal anti-racist gestures such as anti-discrimination legislation implicitly assert this message, instituting state mechanisms to address racism and in turn suggesting that racism is something that exists in less enlightened individuals or institutions and not in the state itself. Non-performative anti-racist gestures make white Australians feel better about themselves and their state while both maintaining and hiding the ongoing colonial process. They create the illusion that the state is taking responsibility for racist injustices while in fact entrenching the relation of irresponsibility that exists towards indigenous Australia.

Part of police anger over Hurley being charged was that members felt betrayed by the Australian community, particularly those who live in the cities and celebrate non-performative anti-racist gestures, but who are far removed from the indigenous despair that police in indigenous communities face on a daily basis. The Queensland police establishment argued on numerous occasions that Hurley and all police working in indigenous communities are doing it for the rest of us⁴⁶ — they are out there on *our* behalf, enforcing *our* laws, doing *our* dirty work, taking responsibility for the maintenance of *our* nation. And this argument has great weight if the collective 'we' being assumed in these statements is white Australia. For as long as Australians like Hurley join the police force and are posted to remote places that are sites of indigenous poverty, despair and dysfunction, non-indigenous Australians in settled towns and cities can forget about that despair. The everyday reality of indigenous dispossession is far from the view of most Australians, and is only further obscured by the existence of very public non-performative anti-racist gestures. This is not to deny that there is also support for anti-racist gestures and for increased police presence in remote communities from indigenous Australians — the issue is by no means a settled or straightforward one for indigenous communities.⁴⁷ But in terms of how these measures relate to non-indigenous Australia, while men like Hurley go to the remote frontiers to deal with the ongoing dispossession, non-indigenous Australians,

Police protest with \$5 wrist wrap

Thin blue band



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whose lifestyle depends on ongoing indigenous dispossession, can take comfort in their government's 'postcolonial' reforms and get on with their lives.

A blue wristband of history

Awareness wristbands have been used in various colours and styles for a range of causes including several incurable diseases, anti-bullying and human rights. The QPU released the first batch of 4000 wristbands imprinted with Hurley's police number on 8 February 2007, two weeks after it was announced Hurley would face trial for manslaughter. Sold for \$5 each at police stations throughout Queensland, the initial 4000 sold out in a day.⁴⁸ The funds raised from the blue wristbands were put towards meeting Hurley's legal costs, but QPU vice-president Denis Fitzpatrick stated 'It's not a significant amount of money we're trying to raise. It's more an issue with regards of support and solidarity of our member'.⁴⁹ Fitzpatrick called the wristbands 'a silent protest'.⁵⁰ The wristbands were silent in the sense that they did not produce an audio sound, and also in that their message was not clearly articulated. In media interviews and advertisements that accompanied the release of the wristbands, QPU representatives spoke about the need for increased police numbers, for better video monitoring in cells and for resources to implement the recommendations of the Royal

42. Jenny Macklin MP, 'Australian Government Response to the NTER Review' (23 October 2008) available at <jennymacklin.fahcsia.gov.au/internet/jennymacklin.nsf/content/nter_measure_23oct08.htm> at 12 June 2009.

43. Andrea Smith, 'Unmasking the State: Racial/Gender Terror and Hate Crimes' (2007) 26 *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 47.

44. Sara Ahmed, 'Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism' (2004) 3(2) *borderlands e-journal*.

45. *Ibid.*

46. See for example the statement of Queensland Police Minister Judy Spence on 'The Law Report' (11 November 2008) *ABC Radio National* <abc.net.au/rn/lawreport/stories/2008/2416076.htm> at 12 November 2008.

47. Marcia Langton, 'Trapped in the Aboriginal reality show' (2007) 19 *Griffith Review* 145 and 'It's time to stop playing politics with vulnerable lives' *The Age* (Melbourne) 30 November 2007.

48. *Ibid.*

49. 'Police wear colours for colleague: Bands of support' *Cairns Post* (Cairns) 10 February 2007.

50. *Ibid.*



51. Ben Dillaway and Geoff Chambers, 'Copping it on the radio' *Gold Coast Bulletin* (Gold Coast) 1 February 2007.

52. Clements, above n 9.

53. Newspapers with articles on the wristbands include the *Courier Mail*, *Townsville Bulletin* and *Cairns Post*. Each article is archived on the QPU website at http://www.qpu.asn.au/unionnews.php#_2007.

54. The QPU did not give copyright permission for the photo described to be reproduced in this article. It can however be accessed online at page 12 of the February 2007 union journal. See <http://www.qpu.asn.au/journal07.php>.

55. Irene Watson 'Aboriginal Women's Law and Lives: How Might We Keep Growing the Law?' (2007) 26 *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 95 at 99.

56. Michael McKenna, 'Up in arms over thin blue line' *The Australian* (Sydney), 26 May 2007.

Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC).⁵¹ These claims are both vague and contradictory — the RCIADIC did not recommend increased police numbers. There was video monitoring in Mulrunji's cell — it showed Mulrunji dying and a junior police officer later kicking his body to see whether he was conscious.⁵²

Yet while the message of the QPU's 'silent protest' was not clearly expressed, it was loudly broadcast — as well as a front page spread on the *Gold Coast Bulletin*, articles about the wristbands appeared in newspapers across Queensland.⁵³ The tactics, tone and imagery of the campaign expressed a strong set of emotions — an indignant outrage, angry, threatening, and self-righteous. The image of the young white woman⁵⁴ holding up her bent arm to display her blue wristband resonates strongly with imperial representations of the nation's woman fighter, who stands in solidarity with her male colleagues but also needs protection from the racialised and sexualised other. White colonising cultures are deeply misogynistic, and as Irene Watson has argued, those cultures administer and police themselves entirely within a patriarchal horizon.⁵⁵ The use of a young woman as the central image of the QPU campaign denies the patriarchal aspect of colonial violence. Using a male police officer for the publicity would not have achieved this effect — the image of a policeman holding up his bent arm and glaring militantly at the camera would have displayed the patriarchal violence that the use of the woman denied, and would not have had the same affective connotations of the woman as representative of nation. This highly emotive assertion of white nationalism in the context of a white police officer being charged with the assault and manslaughter of an indigenous man intimated the deeper and more unspeakable message that Mulrunji's death was not a crime, but a necessary part of the maintenance of the nation. The wristband campaign asserted that Hurley was so innocent that it was an outrageous injustice that he should even go to trial; what he was doing that

morning was not just innocent, it was a necessary part of the ongoing process that is Australia today.

Although a formal complaint was entered with the Queensland police force when police prosecutors wore the blue wristbands to an opening ceremony of an indigenous court,⁵⁶ the wristband campaign was not met with widespread condemnations of white nationalism or fascism. Of course, not every non-indigenous Australian bought a blue wristband and no doubt many would have been critical of Mulrunji's death and the QPU's response. But the fact that there was very little popular outcry suggests that the difference in attitude towards white-indigenous relations in Australia today between those buying the wristbands and those who were indifferent or even quietly critical of the wristband campaign is in practice not as wide as those who celebrate Australian post-coloniality might like to think. The banal liberalism promulgated by postcolonial legal reforms has successfully encouraged most non-indigenous Australians to believe that the mistreatment of indigenous people today is not their responsibility. Against the landscape of severely impoverished indigenous communities and the relatively prosperous white majority, the attitude that indigenous oppression is 'not my responsibility' is not that far from the attitude that that oppression is necessary.

The blue wristbands denied the ongoing occurrence of colonial violence (by insisting on Hurley's innocence) at the same time as they implicitly asserted the need for such violence in the maintenance of the nation. Such contradictory and hypocritical politics are consistent with a broader view of Australian history that sees Australia as postcolonial, while actively reproducing colonial power relations. Unlike either the 'black armband' view of history or its opponent, which unreservedly celebrated colonisation, this 'blue wristband' view of history acknowledges the harm done to indigenous Australians in the past but insists that postcolonial justice is now on its way to being achieved. The blue wristband view of history is dangerous because it creates the illusion that Australia has addressed or is in the process of addressing the wrongs of the past and is now building an anti-racist, socially just postcolonial nation. That illusion is what allows the prime minister to argue that the nation can now safely draw a truce in the history wars, and is part of what prevents the emergence of a resistance movement that is willing to challenge the fundamental racist underpinnings of the Australian state. As the Doomadgee family continue battling the legal system, and indigenous communities around the country continue to live in poverty, the blue wristband view of history not only provides the context in which the Australian landscape of colonial violence and severe inequality continues to occur, but is part of what enables that violence and inequality to continue.

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