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Rottnest Island as Black Prison and White Playground

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Collaborative effort led by Len Collard (Chair, Australian Indigenous Studies) and Glen Stasiuk (Director, Kulbardi Aboriginal Centre)

Len is a traditional owner of the Beeliar Boodjar — Rottnest Island (Wadjemup) is part of the traditional lands of the Nyungar people.

Glen is a Nyungar film maker and his directly relevant body work includes *Weewar* (2006) and *Noongar of the Beeliar* (2005/2006).

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My role



I am a social psychologist and my research covers group-based emotions and social change.

Director of the Centre for Social and Community Research

Centre has a number of social justice priorities where we are seeking to build the evidence base to promote social change. Yvonne Haigh has developed the political analysis of this situation (which I present in a condensed form here).



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Social justice priorities include:

Fostering progress towards
Reconciliation between Indigenous and
Non-Indigenous Australians and in
particular promote awareness of the
need for a culturally appropriate
commemoration of the deaths that
occurred in the Rottnest Island
Aboriginal Prison.

Coordinator: [Mr. Len Collard](#)

Towards political change



The possibility of a political transformation in relation to Rottnest Island.

The nature of that political transformation must be determined by the Nyungar people but there are potential positive benefits for all Australians.

Our collaboration is a research program intended to contribute to the evidence base for this change.

Wadjemup - a complex place

- Rottnest Island or Wadjemup is famous as a seaside retreat for locals and visitors.
- Less well known as the former site of Australia's most substantial Aboriginal prison (prisoners drawn from all over Western Australia).
- Hundreds of Aboriginal men and boys died while sentenced to hard labour in the period up to 1931.
- It is Australia's most substantial deaths in custody site.
- Wadjemup is culturally significant as a spirit place.

- Road network used by 21st Century holiday makers was built by Aboriginal prison labour.
- Few economic benefits from the Island's tourism flow to Indigenous people.
- Despite active campaigns by the Rottneest Island Deaths Group and negotiated agreements there has been no culturally appropriate commemoration of the harm that was done to Aboriginal people or appropriate protection of the grave sites.

- 76 years after the Rottnest Island Aboriginal Prison was closed, Aboriginal people still constitute 43% of the inmates of Western Australia's prisons but only 3.5% of the total population.
- Harm done on Rottnest Island continues to have powerful impacts on Aboriginal people to this day.

- Should contemporary non-Indigenous Australians feel angry, ashamed, apologetic or indifferent to past events and continuing failures on Rottnest Island?
- Should a line be drawn around what happened in the past so that we can all focus on the present day?
- Imagine the broad community response if they were told to “forget Kokoda, Long Tan, Port Arthur or the Bali bombings”.



Rottnest Island captures broader themes in Australia.
colonial dispossession, exploitation and gross harm

Then...

direct action campaign by Indigenous activists to seek
some restitution

Then ...

a recognition by many non-Indigenous stakeholders of
the need for an agreed plan of action

Then ...

the emergence of political blockages at a point where
the resolution is in sight.

- Like Uluru Wedjemup is a beautiful and culturally and spiritually significance place.
- But Rottnest is a site where gross harm took place and where many Aboriginal people lie buried in unmarked graves on sites that are now used for recreational purposes.
- Paradoxically, unrepaired harm may provide an opportunity for progress towards Reconciliation (as observed in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission process).



Rottnest Island symbolises a lack of respect, inequality and the alienation from land and place all of which have detrimental effects for Indigenous Australians.

Alienation from land and place reinforces the marginal status of many Indigenous Australians which in turn compounds these inequalities and further marks Indigenous Australians as “other”.



Is it possible to move beyond shame and guilt?

One possibility is that with appropriate efforts to address the harm done to Indigenous people that Rottneest Island could become a symbol of reconciliation between a colonially dispossessed people and the occupying force.

Currently, there is no geographical location for Reconciliation in Australia, and Wadjemup could fit that bill.

- A transformed Wadjemup could be a symbol of pride (rather than guilt) for contemporary Australia in a global context.
- It is not fanciful to imagine Rottnest Island as a World Heritage site in the same way that Robben Island is.



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