

# Carceral spectres: Hyperincarceration and the haunting of Aboriginal life

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## Abstract

Drawing on recent participant observation-based data from the Northern Territory's Victoria River region, I propose that the coercive and custodial arms of the settler state are predominant features of, and constant and permanent forces of rupture in, remote Aboriginal life. I use the term 'carceral spectres' to describe the ways hyperincarceration and hyperpolicing shape, disturb and, in particular, 'haunt' Aboriginal life, people, places and things. This framework has implications for the ways we might think about the multi-faceted impacts of the radical incarceration rates of Indigenous people in Australia, and the experience of life in the context of ongoing colonial occupation and pervasive carcerality.

## KEYWORDS

Aboriginal social life, haunting, hyperincarceration, hyperpolicing, settler-colonialism

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

*We're sitting in the park off the highway in late November: Magnus (70), his son James (38), James' wife Janet (36), Janet's sister Marilyn (28) and myself (28). Magnus has just got off a bus from town, bags of groceries and new clothes leaning on the tree we are using as refuge from the heat as we have our lunch. Sprinklers are clicking and birds are tweeting. James' 'sister' Alice, who's about to jump on the bus heading to town, comes over to say hello, bouncing her infant niece in her arms. She asks who the little girl in Janet's lap is; "my gagung tharran [my paternal classificatory granddaughter]"*

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replies James. “Anyany [cute], says Alice, “where daddy one? [where is her father?]”. “‘im locked up”, replies James with a humourless laugh. “Ah yakkurra [poor thing]” laughs Alice. She says she’s going to town to visit her sister, who is in hospital; “ajban one locked up again! [the husband is also incarcerated]”. “Indit? [is that so?]” comments James, without enquiring any further. The baby Alice is holding is the daughter of her brother, Eugene, who is also in prison.

The scene described here is typical of the saturated experience of incarceration in my field site in a remote part of Australia’s Northern Territory. Not only does the Territory have the highest incarceration rate in Australia (ABS, 2018), but 84% of its prison population is Indigenous (while making up a quarter of the general NT population [ABS, 2016]).<sup>1</sup> As a result, for most Aboriginal families and communities going to prison or having a family member incarcerated is a mundane, normalised fact of life. This article probes the subtleties of this experience. I use the term *carceral spectres* to denote the vestiges, reminders, embodiments and threats of coercive and custodial forces that are recurrent in—which *haunt*—Aboriginal life. My approach is ethnographic rather than remedial; my intention here is to draw attention to the experiential minutiae of the silent and silenced humanitarian emergency that is Australia’s Indigenous incarceration rate. After outlining the context and theoretical framework for this article, I analyse several case studies in which the carceral state emerges spectrally, using three figures: (1) pervasive absence; (2) elusive presence; and (3) quotidian moments of rupture after return from prison. Framing these encounters as *spectral* has helped me to understand what mostly goes unsaid and unseen in the course of everyday life in a remote part of this continent.

The context for this study is Timber Creek, a small remote town located on the Victoria River, 600km south of the Northern Territory’s capital. Between 2018 and 2020 I conducted 12 months of participant-observation-based fieldwork with Victoria River people for my PhD research, which examines the impacts of hyperincarceration in communities and families around Timber Creek. The term *hyperincarceration* refers to the phenomenon of increased and targeted incarceration of particular groups, compared to *mass incarceration*, which implies an elevated but nondiscriminatory rate of imprisonment (Cunneen et al., 2013; Wacquant, 2009, 2010).

The town of Timber Creek occupies Ngaliwurru and Nungali land and is also home to many Ngarinyman and Jaminjung people, members of other language groups, as well as a moderate settler population. Many of the Aboriginal families of Timber Creek reside in small communities clustered around the Victoria Highway and off dirt roads in the Victoria River hinterland. Most of the people I work with identify primarily as Ngaliwurru and Ngarinyman. In these languages Aboriginal people are referred to as *mayi* (Ngaliwurru) and *ngumpin* (Ngarinyman), but for ease of reference I refer to the people I work with as Victoria River people<sup>2</sup> (see also Rose, 1992), reflecting the social and ceremonial associations between the numerous language groups of this region. Timber Creek is the kind of place where ceremonial activities are carried out near-annually, and Aboriginal languages are spoken fluently by members of older generations, while local dialects of Kriol and Aboriginal English are predominantly spoken by younger people.

The town is more or less representative of the Northern Territory’s Indigenous incarceration rate. Like any other remote town or community in the Territory it is a place where the everyday thrum of social life is punctuated by coercive absence and disappearance—the entanglement of key people within the multifarious carceral and custodial threads of the legal system. Timber Creek was permanently settled by *mangurn* (‘white people’, Ngaliwurru) as a police outpost at the turn of the 20th century to service the burgeoning pastoral industry (Lewis, 2012; McWilliam, 2005) that continues to occupy much of the Victoria River hinterland. Police activity during that era was dedicated to eradicating, imprisoning, exploiting and otherwise controlling—‘quietening’—the Aboriginal population so that the pastoral industry could proceed without the inconvenience of a hostile native presence (Rose, 1991). Critical criminologist Harry Blagg (2016, p. 1) asserts that ‘the fundamental nature of



the relationship' between Aboriginal people and the criminal legal system remains 'unchanged since invasion when the system was employed as a tool of dispossession'. Today, while the old police station in Timber Creek has become an historic attraction for tourists on their way to or from the Kimberley region, and punitive pastoral stations are no longer able to operate on a vigilante basis, Victoria River people are incarcerated in prisons and work camps across the nation: the carceral diaspora sits in cells in a number of states and territories. The present formation of punitive and custodial interventions in Aboriginal Australia remains inextricably linked with the colonial project (Watson, 2017) which, as Patrick Wolfe (2006) reminds us, is a structure rather than an event, and a process that remains ongoing and incomplete in the Australian context.

## 2 | HAUNTING

The pervasive nature of hyperincarceration has a dormant omnipotence in Victoria River sociality. I approach this through Avery Gordon's notion of hauntology,<sup>3</sup> which is explored at length in her book *Ghostly Matters* (2008, first published in 1997). The work is an extended discussion of the sociology of haunting, and a call to examine things and forces that are sensed or felt but hard to see. Seizing the spectral as an analytical paradigm, Gordon's aim is to articulate 'what it feels like to be the object of a social totality vexed by the phantoms of modernity's violence' (2008, p. 19). Haunting, for Gordon, is,

one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied ... it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known (2008, p. xvi).

In other words, ghosts—the spectres of power—linger and haunt because of 'unfinished business'. In this article the *spectral* is a paradigm for describing the perpetual incompleteness of life 'in the shadow of the prison' (Comfort, 2008), the not-there-but-always-there aspect of coercive carceral absence ('disappearance'), and the invisible forces that work to contain, control and suppress both bodily life and ways of life that persist despite ongoing colonial occupation. For the most part, I am concerned here with the unresolved, self-perpetuating cycle of hyperincarceration and the ways this social formation emerges in mundane, novel and terrifying apparitions in the everyday lives of Victoria River people.

In settler-colonial contexts, it seems settlers are often haunted by the absence of those they replace (Araluen, 2019; Bergland, 2015), and Indigenous presence can arouse a sense of fear or threat in the settler psyche (Razack, 2020). I suggest that when it comes to carcerality, the feeling is mutual. Incarceration 'disappears human beings' (Davis, 1998, p. 1), and 'disappearance is a state-sponsored method for producing ghosts' (Gordon, 2008, pp. 125–126). Following Gordon, I understand ghosts as shadows or spectral manifestations of power and state violence whose 'haunting effects trace the borders of a society's unconscious' (2008, p. 126). Inherent to the spectral encounter is what Gordon calls a 'moment of affective recognition' (Gordon, 2008, p. 102), meaning by this the notion of the *unheimlich* which for German speakers means 'unhomely' and for Gordon, following Sigmund Freud, denotes the 'uncanny'. For Freud, *das Unheimliche* is all about what is repressed, unconscious, resurfacing to the level of consciousness. As much as the feeling is associated with dread and terror, so too

an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality (Freud, 1919, p. 244).

In the case studies that follow there is a sense that things are out of sorts, not as they should be, coming undone. This is the uncanny ‘structure of feeling’ that Gordon seeks to illuminate. From Fanon (2008) we know that colonialism works on the psyche as much as it does land and bodies. I want to suggest that there is a deeply psychological element to carcerality, and that this phenomenon can be most concretely elucidated in terms of the spectral. In contemporary Aboriginal life there is an ever-present prospect of imprisonment, surveillance, policing and encounters with courts and lawyers, which haunts not only individuals who face imprisonment, but also the people they love and who love them.

As projects carried out against social bodies—individuals, communities and racial or ethnic groups rather than sources of inequality or ‘crime’—hyperpolicing and hyperincarceration have effects that reverberate well beyond paddy wagons and prison cells. My focus here is on the more abstract effects produced under these conditions. In the cases that follow it will become clear that susceptibility to carceral spectres hinges on a particular subjectivity, and that this subjectivity is, in part, a produced by being perpetually ‘haunted’.

### 3 | ABSENCE

*In the camp there's a bag of old clothes, one of those jumbo blue-red-and-white-checked plastic carry-alls. Leonard (38), the owner of the contents, has been in prison for more than a year, and it's still unclear when he is coming out. At some point someone has packed his stuff into the bag and shifted it to the veranda outside, where it now sits slumped against the wall beneath an air-conditioner dripping condensation. Slow and steady droplets have gradually filled the bag. The clothes are long gone now, claimed by mildew and rot. // Pushed neatly against a wall is a kid's quad bike. It's lime green and looks like it could go pretty fast, but the paint is faded and dirty, the undercarriage cobwebbed and the tyres flat; it's been broken down for months. Every now and then its owner, an 11 year-old boy named Eric, will demand that somebody fix it, but he's reminded that only Dad knows how: “he'll fix it when he come out”. // On the floor is a discarded photograph of Molly (65), taken maybe 10 years ago. It's faded and crumpled, and on the back, scrawled in her son's writing, is the sentence “and mum I miss you bad”. I pick it up and ask where it's from. Ruby, Molly's granddaughter, says quietly “that's from dad James, he bin send it back from prison, he reckon that photo make him too sorry”.<sup>4</sup> I put the photo on a shelf but a couple days later it's back on the floor. The wind eventually collects it.*

When I talk to Victoria River people about their feelings around having family incarcerated, they often struggle. There is a sense that ‘that person *warung*’, is missing, gone (*warduj* in Ngarinyman). The Ngaliwurru term *burru-marring* is the most common referent. It translates as ‘*binji* (stomach) no good [feeling]’. In local philosophy and idiom, thoughts and intellect are located in the ears or the eyes, but emotions are based in the place where a child is nurtured: in the *binji*, stomach. But how does one articulate what it feels like to have loved ones sitting in a prison cell on the other side of the country, and to encounter their absence on a daily basis? Are there words in any language that have the power to articulate the sense of loss, detachment, out-of-place-ness and gradual numbing that hyperincarceration perpetuates? The inadequacy of language to articulate grief, pain and loss has been the subject of some anthropological attention (see, for example, Das, 2007; Kidron, 2009; Six-Hohenbalken & Weiss, 2011)—what Veena Das has labelled ‘the failure of grammar’ (2007, p. 8). Hauntology, ‘knowing the things behind things’ (Morrison B 37, cited in Gordon, 2008, p. 164), offers some insight into the structure of these feelings.

‘When ghosts haunt’, asserts Gordon, ‘the haunting is material’ (Gordon, 2008, p. 184). The objects I described—the bag, the bike, the photograph—are decoupled from the person who gives



them meaning: their presence serves to remind those left behind of their owner's absence, a testament to the disappearing power of the carceral state. My fieldnotes are filled with objects like these: an old hat, a stack of unopened letters, broken-down cars, empty rooms, empty houses. Fanon identifies 'tinctures of decay' in the social remnants of imperial power (1963 p. 249), while Allison Formanack asserts that ruins in the wake of displacement yield a potent and 'tangible force' (2018, p. 295). Decay is the theme in my case studies too, not moral or emotive but material and relational. Mildew, rust and cobwebs are material indexes of the time and space between dis-embodied relations. At the time we discussed the photo, two of Molly's grown sons were in prison. The bag of clothes belonged to her oldest son, Leonard, who spent 2 years in prison, came out and was reincarcerated barely a month later. The photo was sent back by James, her second-oldest, approximately 2 years into his 4-year sentence. These two sons are also two fathers, two husbands, two brothers, two uncles, two grandfathers. For the duration of their sentences an entire network of relations is annexed, maintained for the most part through timed and monitored phone calls, occasional cash transfers and very infrequent visits. Memories and relationships, like objects, fade and weather with time. The pain of losing a son, husband, grandson, father or brother to the prison system gradually hardens, grows numb.

There is a forcefulness to carceral absence, and there is an emotive quality to encounters with these objects. 'The not there is a seething presence', asserts Gordon, and disappearance gives rise to objects that are 'charged with the occluded' (2008, p. 195). These encounters gesture to the unfilled potential and un-lived life of the person for whom life is almost entirely suspended; they are objects left in decay precisely because of the absence, the disappearance, the suspension of meaning in time which structures their neglect. The objects themselves are not haunted, but vessels for haunting—channeling the encounter with the uncanny. This creeping feeling is what motivates Molly to bark at her husband 1 day to chuck the bag into the rubbish dump, sick of looking at and detouring around it with every trip to the shower block. The not-there is what propels Eric into a tantrum one afternoon because his quad bike is still out of action. There is no overt sense of grief or abject loss like that which compels mourners to destroy or confer the possessions of deceased kin. Rather than agents of grief or distress, these haunting objects in their residual, ruined presence gesture to someone who is not there. Objects are left where they stand, shifted somewhere out of the way, because the person who gives the objects meaning has disappeared for a month, a season, a year, years on end. This is one way that haunting takes place, not as a bump in the night but in the light of day.

Here I have attempted to demonstrate the lingering character of carceral absence—absence that is saturating in its presence if you know where to look. The following section is concerned with covert, ambiguous threats manifest in everyday encounters.

## 4 | PRESENCE

*We've come into town for the day to pick up family and do a grocery run—me, one of my "mothers", Gloria (66), and her three grandkids (aged nine, 11 and 17). After we have stocked up at the supermarket we head back out to the car park, shopping trolleys and giggling kids in tow. As we come outside, Gloria's tone and pace change immediately from relaxed and nonchalant to stern and slightly panicked. "There look, [police],<sup>5</sup> hurry up, hurry up", she whispers, urging her grandkids across the carpark, turning to look back at an empty police car parked nearby.*

*A week later, back at camp one afternoon, there's a rumbling coming from the road. Molly gasps "Ah! Motika [vehicle] comin'", and Oscar (12) and Eric (11) peer around the veranda to see who it is: "plijamen! [policeman]" Oscar announces, and Magnus barks "well getaway he might look you there!" Magnus & Molly lurch into damage control, barking at Eric to bring the toddler playing in*

the yard, “he’ll come dijay if he look you there!” [the police will come this way if they see you there]. The police car pulls up at a house on the other side of the community, and an officer gets out to see if anyone’s home. The kids peer round the corner of the house to see what he’s up to, providing a running commentary: “nothing, nobody there”; “he drivin round top camp na”. Magnus mutters “might be lookin for my boys ay?” —his boys are a group of teenage grandsons who have been in town for a week or so. When Oscar declares “he comin back dijay! [this way]” everybody pulls back out of view, waiting and listening carefully to determine whether the car will turn into our camp or keep going. Magnus mutters “I don’t wanna talk ta him I don’t wanna fuckin talk ta him”, sounding exasperated, worn out. The police car takes the turn back out of the community and the panic in the air eventually dissipates.

Sitting in camp at any time of the day or night, Victoria River people are attentive to vehicles coming and going. In this camp, where scrub obscures the view of the road to the community, camp members are particularly attentive to the tone and pitch of approaching vehicles. One learns to discern between the sonic rumbles of all manner of familiar cars—this one is the spare tyre in the tray of the ute from second house at Top Camp, the one with the knocking is mum’s little beast with the busted shock absorber, that one’s the school bus. When the distinct tone of a new Toyota model is approaching somebody will announce ‘might be plijamen ay?’ and the camp becomes alert. The arrival of a police car is not a daily event, the arrival of ‘welfare’ (‘child protection’) or parole officers even less so, but the result is always the same; a mild sense of panic erupts and vigilance tightens.

These are not merely cases of jumping at shadows. During my time with Victoria River people I have encountered this same *singular yet repetitive instance* (Gordon, 2008) a thousand times. The people present in these vignettes are all wholly innocent, not guilty of any crime; in the language of the courts, they are all living a ‘blameless life’ (for a re-framing of this concept, however, see Wang, 2012). So why the panic? The decades of dealing with police, welfare officers, housing authorities and other ‘service providers’ plays no small part. All of these individuals, kids included, know first-hand that when authorities of the settler state arrive they come with the capacity to arrest, fine, take into custody, evict and otherwise punitively, if not radically, disrupt the current order of things (for perspectives on the significance and implications of authorities’ vehicles in other Aboriginal contexts see Karrabing Film Collective’s [2020] *Day in the Life*; Musharbash, 2010). I want to suggest here, however, that the impulsive fearful response is the sign and symptom of haunting—the haunting of a specific population, whose old people grew up under the oppressive punitive racial hierarchies of cattle stations, learning first-hand the brutality and terror associated with the white manager, the police officer and the welfare authority; whose young people know that just as that paddy wagon took away a father, cousin, uncle or brother there’s a chance it will come for you next; whose children can discern from 100m the difference between the clinic Toyota and the ‘welfare’ Toyota, and know from lived experience the particular pain, loss and unfreedom of living in a ‘welfare *gardia* [white people]’ house a long way from home; a population who know that when countrymen are taken into custody there is a chance they will never come home.

Gordon asserts that the disappearing power of the state ‘creates an identity that remains to haunt those marked by its hand and all the others to whom that hand is extended’ (Gordon, 2008, p. 127). In these case studies we get a sense of what living in proximity to that ‘hand’ is like. Looming in the background of consciousness, the recurring state of threat becomes background noise in Victoria River sociality; the presence of a(n empty) police car is not merely an abstract cause for alarm or a vague possibility but a personalised and imminent threat. The responses seen in these case studies equate both to what Carol Kidron (2009, p. 3) has labelled ‘silent practices’ of ‘tacit knowing’ and Linda Green (1995, p. 106) as ‘the routinization of fear’. In the same way that ‘haunting effects trace the borders of a society’s unconscious’ (Gordon, 2008, p. 126), the dormant omniscient terror of living



under the imminence of potential state violence becomes ‘deeply inscribed in individuals and in the collective imagination through a constant sense of threat’ (Green, 1995, p. 109). The instant and collective panic among children and old people when an embodiment of the carceral state shows itself is a symptom of that inscription. This is close to what has been identified by Louis Althusser (2014) and refined by Judith Butler (1997) as ‘interpellation’, although it has more in common with the internal, visceral and damaging connotations of Fanon’s ‘Look, a Negro!’ (2008, pp. 82–108) than Althusser’s ‘Hey, you there!’ (2014). This notion is similar also to a characteristic of contemporary Aboriginal identity, described in Victoria Burbank’s (2011) health-oriented research based in Numbulwar, where the internalised effects of subordination and denigration can be socially and physically harmful and, eventually, fatal.

The repetitive occurrence of an ambiguous, visceral threat yields a haunting effect that re-emerges every time a distinct rumbling is discerned or the blue-and-white checks on a nearby vehicle are registered. The ambiguity of the carceral spectre in these cases—both involving an eruption of panic that may or may not be ungrounded—is indicative of the deep sense of *unheimlich* that haunting prompts: those ‘singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar ... when what’s in your blind spot comes into view’ (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi). Here I am trying to describe the kind of subjectivity produced in contexts of hyperincarceration and hyperpolicing, where regardless of guilt, innocence or proximity to crime the carceral possibility is always suddenly imminent. The following section addresses case studies of men who are perpetually haunted by the possibility of incarceration.

## 5 | RETURN/RUPTURE

*It’s Christmas Day. The heat is stifling but everyone is crowding round the tables groaning with food under a sprawling shady tree. After everyone’s plated up and sitting down Leonard (38) finally gets to the table. He’s driven interstate all night and all day with his wife and infant daughter in time for a funeral and to spend Christmas with his family. He gives an impromptu speech as he finishes serving—“well, merry Christmas family! I’m happy to be here with you mob, then I gotta go back [interstate] ... might be dijan when I go back!”, making the crossed-forearms hand-sign that means interchangeably “locked up”, “prison” and “police”. There are a few muffled, mirthless laughs and he sits back down to eat.*

*One afternoon we are driving down the dirt road to a small community to visit family, pick up James and Janet’s young daughter, and do some hunting on the way. Driving with the windows down, warm air flows through the car as we make jokes and tell stories over the noise of the engine and the wind. The rifle, borrowed from James’s mother, sits propped up, the muzzle sticking out the passenger door window, ready to be loaded and aimed the moment a kangaroo or turkey is spotted. A dust cloud appears on the horizon, which means a vehicle is approaching. There’s sudden panic in our car as Janet, James’s wife, urges “[police, police, police]”—she’s terrified. She tells me if they pull us over and see James in the car with a weapon he’s going “straight in”; he’s still on parole and has very strict conditions. He quickly disarms and hides the rifle and we keep driving in nervous anticipation. The very real sense of terror in the air intensifies as the cloud gets closer, but when its source approaches it turns out to be a car full of countrymen heading into town.*

Outside of wet season months (December to March) the vast plains that cover much of the Victoria River hinterland are dry and dusty. Thousands of cattle roam in herds, treading on and crushing vegetation, leaving soil bare, so the moment a gust collects it a dust cloud forms. A dust cloud can mean any number of things, and Victoria River people can identify the cause from a distance, differentiating between the clouds of a galloping herd of cattle, a helicopter muster or an approaching

vehicle on a dirt road, long before the source of the cloud comes into sight on the horizon. If the dust cloud indicates a herd of cattle, countrymen will alert an inexperienced driver to slow down and be careful; ‘might be cattle la road’. Sitting in camp during cold weather time (the dry season between May and August) Victoria River people might be thrown into action as a *burruwip* (known colloquially as a ‘whirly whirly’) suddenly materialises, threatening to disrupt bedding, food stores or throw about burning coals from the campfire. Old people might even utter a quick song to ‘huntimaway [dispel] that whirly whirly’. In the instance above, however, the appearance (apparition) of a cloud on the horizon threw our party into instant panic. The carefree atmosphere was breached by the dusty apparition of a vehicle travelling at speed, and the mood immediately ruptured by terror of imminent apprehension by the carceral state. There was an instant categorical association between the cloud and carcerality—a leap in thought and a lurch in bodily sensation, from normal, relaxed everyday life to the thing that is always around the corner, literally in this case—imminent carcerality.

Crucially, this interpretation of the cloud hinges on a particular subjectivity. Or, more simply put, I do not know any non-Aboriginal people who would make the association between a dust cloud on the horizon and the thought that somebody they love is about to go to jail. This association is produced by a permanent state of haunting, by spectres lingering on the edge of lives with whom the carceral state is never quite finished. Stephen Dillon (2018) has labelled this phenomenon ‘possession’, whereby ‘the regulations of a burgeoning neoliberal carceral state possess life in ways that render the free world an extension of the prison’ (2018, pp. 84–85). To be possessed is to live in awareness of, and despite, ‘the deathly grip of the dominant’ (2018, p. 89). On the Victoria River ‘the dominant’ is the carceral settler state, and it haunts by pervading and structuring the conditions of everyday life. Spectres can loom in shadows and on the fringes, but they can also take hold.

The scene at Christmas lunch was an intimate and joyful occasion, and for this family the only event in about 5 years when every single person was present and nobody was imprisoned (as it happens, Leonard and James are the same men whose absence was marked by the quad bike and the photograph). As we can see from these case studies, however, living on the other end of absence—release, return to ‘free’ society—is a complex thing. It means constant check-ups from parole and police officers, which can, in turn, yield more carceral possibilities. It means getting back on track with relatives and states of relations with months or years in between; coming back to infant children who do not recognise you and may refuse to sit on your lap until perhaps weeks after your return; trying to find work in a society where nobody wants to hire someone who has been to jail. Many of those who have spent long periods in prison come home with the ingrained habits and practices embodied over years in prison and seem unable to stop thinking or talking about it. Through this vicarious exposure even young children can become well-oriented with the everyday conditions, routines and terrible spectacles that take place inside; one effect of this is the ‘prisonisation’ (Clemmer, 1958) of families and communities as well as (formerly) incarcerated individuals. As we see in these cases, it also means living with the dormant anxiety that ‘you might go locked up any time’, and this becomes reproduced as a social fact.

Even when it is ‘not there’, the carceral settler state lingers in the fringes of Victoria River social life, tainting even the most personal, intimate and innocent moments. Its spectre is present whenever families sitting in shade bow their heads or look away over-casually when police walk by; when young men duck and hide behind car seats and doors as a paddy wagon passes, wraith-like, on a highway; when photographs are collected by the wind or when dust clouds are thrown against the horizon. This is what it means to live ‘to live under the mantle of the omnipresent dread [of] disappearance ... in the gray shades of an everyday life charged with a phantom reality’ (Gordon, 2008, p. 124). Despite the distance and ‘remoteness’, these men and their families occupy a conceptual space in the immediate vicinity of the prison, and this proximity is both silent and deafening.



## 6 | UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Gordon concludes her exploration of hauntology by asserting that 'there is more to social life than haunting' (2008, p. 206). On the Victoria River it should be said that there is much more to haunting than what I have described here—Victoria River people are very much used to living with ghosts. Spirits of ancestors, active and responsive Dreaming figures, sentient and communicative fauna, 'devils' (malicious, monstrous entities) and 'wild bush blackfellas' are just a handful of the presences that haunt, and play significant roles in, Victoria River life. Rather than lingering due to unresolved violence, these figures are very much part of an ontology rooted in a landscape and a way of life in which *the ancestral* features live and large. In Victoria River life ghosts and monsters are encountered, acknowledged and dispelled or avoided with a particular honed sensibility that keeps threatening forces at bay and for the most part in the backdrop to more pressing quotidian concerns. What I have labelled here as carceral spectres, however, linger permanently in the lives of those with whom the carceral state is never quite finished. These apparitions are less tangible than ancestors or monsters. As manifestations of state power they are less readily driven away.

In a coronial inquest following the tragic deaths of two Aboriginal women in Central Australia, coroner Justice Cavanagh commented that 'policing and punitive sentences' and the present formation of the criminal legal system are 'not fit for purpose'.<sup>6</sup> This is to say that despite the overwhelming (spectral) prevalence of the carceral state in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, which have increased dramatically in recent decades (Blagg & Anthony, 2019, p. 301), these efforts are not delivering their nominal aims. This is certainly the experience for many of the Victoria River people individuals and families with whom I have discussed this matter: in one woman's words, 'the whole system is fucked'. Abolitionist activists and scholars have asserted for decades that prisons and policing disappear, harm and kill people while perpetuating and obscuring the conditions that criminalise entire populations (see, for example, Davis, 1971; Gilmore, 2007). What is at stake when the system persistently 'gets it wrong' are an ever-increasing Aboriginal incarceration rate, more deaths in custody, more children in welfare, and more victims who continue to refuse to call for help because they know the only response is more police and more prisons. This is something that everybody working in legal and custodial industries either knows or refuses to acknowledge. One wonders: what is the point?

Earlier I stated that spectres linger and haunt due to 'unfinished business'. This is the case for those who live perpetually between states of disappearance. It is also true for the unresolved tensions of settler-colonial nationhood and governance. 'The role that colonialism has assigned to Indigenous people', asserts Wolfe, 'is to disappear' (2015, p. 2), and the present regime of hyperincarceration in Australia goes some way to make this a concrete reality. From Taussig (1984) we know too that racial terror (of the sort perceptible in the scenes described here) is a central component of life under colonialism, and Razack (2011) describes forcefully the 'killing indifference' that makes such terror possible, necessary and lethal in contemporary settler-colonial contexts. As one reviewer of this article noted, 'the point' of carceral colonialism is to diminish and annihilate. Haunting, I suggest, is a medium that projects this violence beyond the formal anatomy of the carceral state, making lives and ways of living that persist despite eliminatory ends impossible.

The pressing, unresolved matters that structure what I call carceral spectres loom at the interface between a settler state and a native population that is still here; 'unfinished business' is also a frame of reference for the incomplete colonial project of eradication. From this perspective, the entire formation of liberal, settler-colonial governance is characterised by removal, displacement, punishment, neglect and disappearance: an invisible carceral genocide. Knowing and naming the spectres that

haunt Indigenous life is not the same as eliminating them, especially when they are revealed in every corner. That would require upsetting the as-yet-unfinished business altogether.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The Northern Territory has the highest imprisonment rate of any jurisdiction in Australia, with nearly 1% of its population incarcerated at any one time (ABS, 2020). These rates continue to rise.
- <sup>2</sup> Almost all of the people I work with come from country where creeks and watercourses drain into the Victoria River.
- <sup>3</sup> 'Hauntology' is a term coined by Jacques Derrida, embracing Marx's assertion that 'a spectre is haunting Europe' and applying it to the political, intellectual and ontological crises at the end of the 20th century.
- <sup>4</sup> In Aboriginal English, regional dialects of Kriol and this context, the term 'sorry' refers to a state of upset or grief rather than apology.
- <sup>5</sup> Terms in Victoria River languages for police, not included here, are derived from words meaning 'rope', 'chain' or 'to tie up'.
- <sup>6</sup> Inquest into the deaths of Wendy Murphy and Natalie McCormack [2016] NTLC 024. Available at: [https://justice.nt.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/373207/A00172015-Natalie-McCormack.pdf](https://justice.nt.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/373207/A00172015-Natalie-McCormack.pdf)

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