Hyperincarceration and Aboriginal life on the Victoria River

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This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

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Abstract

Indigenous people in northern Australia are among the most incarcerated on the planet. I examine the impacts of this regime on the everyday lives of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory's Victoria River region. Based on long-term participant observation informed by the question, "what happens in families and communities when people are locked up all the time?", this thesis contributes empirically grounded material to the growing bodies of global scholarship on settler colonialism and hyperincarceration as projects concerned with the management and elimination of surplus populations.

My ethnography elucidates local convictions that carcerality has little to do with justice and often perpetuates those social harms it purports to correct. A historical analysis grounded in the material and affective conditions of Aboriginal life demonstrates how hyperincarceration is only the latest iteration of strategies of containment and dehumanisation which have always characterised local settler-native relations. I attend to the role of the carceral settler state in structuring the experience of Aboriginal childhood, ways of relating amongst close kin, masculinities and father-son relations, and the impacts of this regime across and between generations, which further compound existing radical inequalities. These outcomes of hyperincarceration advance the state's facilitation of extractive capital by erasing Aboriginal people from, and Aboriginal relations to, ancestral Country.

I demonstrate that the carceral saturation of contemporary Aboriginal life renders the carceral state both pervasive and yet often seemingly not there at all, demonstrative of the haunting implications and the 'unfinished business' of ongoing settler colonial occupation. I propose a theory of carceral genocide, identifying the central role of the carceral settler state in the destruction of a way of life.

Acknowledgements

This thesis is about aspects of Indigenous life under ongoing settler colonial occupation, a reality and a process which this work is both attentive to and complicit in. I respectfully acknowledge that much of it has been carried out on the unceded sovereign Countries of various Aboriginal groups – from Gadigal in the south to Larrakia in the north and many lands in between – without consent and without commensurable reparation.

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Table of Contents

Abstract ***3***

Acknowledgements ***4***

Introduction ***11***

Key points **14**
Carceral genocide 14
Carceral spectres 19
Saturating carcerality 20

Fieldwork and 'the field' **21**
The setting 22
The method 29
Positionality 30
Victoria River people's perspectives on the project 33

Thesis overview **35**
What is *not* in this thesis? 35
What is in this thesis? 37

Chapter 1 – Things people say about prison ***40***

Things people don't say **41**
The routinisation of imprisonment 43

Victoria River perspectives on imprisonment **45**
Prison as 'holiday camp' 45
'Prison is not a home' 48
Gallows humour 50
Prison as deeply sinister 51
'Doing time for nothing': whither justice? 54

"Getting rich from blackfellas": the political economy of hyperincarceration **56**

"Wolf Creek": hyperincarceration and settler-native relations **60**

Conclusion **65**

Chapter 2 – Blame, a social practice ***66***

Land, life, thought and causality **69**

***Blame* and interpersonal relations** **70**
Case study 1 71
Case study 2 71
Blame as intrinsically *peopled* 72
Blame, conspicuous others and intentionality 74
Blame as an expression of relatedness 76
The attribution of *blame* according to relational dynamics 79

***Blame* and inter-group relations** **81**
'Mob' life and 'the given word' 82

***Blame* and incarceration** **85**
Case study 5 86

Conclusion **88**

Chapter 3 – 'They treat us like bullocky': a history ***91***

Prisoners and cattle **93**

Slavery **96**
Racial terror **105**
Organised abandonment **109**
Waiting **112**
Conclusion **115**
Chapter 4 – Childhood in the shadow of saturating carcerality ***117***
Carcerality in infancy and childhood **119**
Children's relations with imprisoned kin **126**
Fear, care and the carceral state **132**
Fear 133
Care 135
Play **136**
Conclusion **142**
Chapter 5 – Hyperincarceration and contemporary Aboriginal masculinities ***144***
An overview of contemporary Victoria River masculinity **144**
Carceral inevitability 146
Prison: a rite of passage? 148
Carceral masculinity **150**
'Traditional' and 'carceral' masculinities 154
Fathers, sons and the perpetuation of intergenerational trauma **157**
Sons in the shadow of paternal incarceration 160
Fathers losing sons 163
Conclusion **166**
Chapter 6 – Transgenerational impacts of hyperincarceration ***168***
A depopulated relational universe **169**
Material impacts of hyperincarceration **172**
Financial impacts of hyperincarceration 172
Impacts of hyperincarceration on health 175
Relational impacts of hyperincarceration **179**
Relatedness: the foundation of Victoria River personhood 179
Un-making relations 180
Nurturance and social reproduction 183
Conclusion **191**
Chapter 7 – Country ***194***
Relations to Country on the Victoria River **195**
Absence from Country **199**
A haunted landscape 200
Amnesiac relations to Country 202
Transgenerational impacts: emptying the landscape of meaning 204
Elimination and extractive capital **209**
Conclusion **214**

Conclusion ***216***
Bibliography ***222***

Introduction

The Australian settler colonial project renders Aboriginal lives expendable and punishes Aboriginal populations through a genocidal regime of hyperincarceration that saturates social life. I detail this basic premise of settler colonial studies through an ethnographic study of everyday life in remote Aboriginal settlements of the Victoria River region on the north-western fringe of the Northern Territory (NT). The study is framed around the broad question: "what happens in families and communities when people go to jail all the time?". My response is informed by long-term, participant-observation-based ethnographic fieldwork, and reinforced with attention to anthropological, settler colonial, abolitionist, feminist and cultural studies scholarship.

Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory are among the most incarcerated on the planet. The NT itself has by far the highest rate of imprisonment of any jurisdiction in Australia: just over 1% per cent of the population is incarcerated at any one time (NTDCS 2016). While a minute fraction (0.167% in 2014-15) of the non-Indigenous adult population is imprisoned, around 3% of the NT's Indigenous adult population is imprisoned. Indigenous people comprise less than a third of the NT's total population and around 80-90% of the adult prison population, and usually 100% of the NT's infamous youth detention system (NTDCS 2016). While Aboriginal men make up the bulk of the imprisoned demographic, Aboriginal women are the fastest growing prisoner demographic nation-wide (Baldry and Cunneen 2014). These trends are examples of hyperincarceration and hyperpolicing, which I understand as projects carried out against social bodies – individuals, communities and racial or ethnic groups – and which reverberate well beyond carceral events and infrastructures.

The most relevant 'statistic' to my study is that every Aboriginal person I met and worked with in the course of this research has had a close family member incarcerated, and every person could name someone known to them who was currently imprisoned. This is what *hyperincarceration* refers to: increased rates of targeted imprisonment among particular groups (Cunneen, et al. 2013). This concept is distinct from *mass imprisonment* which refers

to an indiscriminate and general increase in incarceration rates across a society or jurisdiction (Garland 2001; Wacquant 2009). *Carcerality* is conceptually linked to hyperincarceration but expands beyond spaces of captivity or confinement (Foucault 1995; Moran, et al. 2018). In this thesis, carcerality refers to a force in settler state institutions and organisations which threaten to or actually remove people against their will from home, relations and Country,[1] and includes: prison and imprisonment; police and policing; the legal apparatus; 'child protection services';[2] 'community-based corrections orders' (suspended sentences, parole surveillance and electronic monitoring equipment); as well as other custodial institutions and forces such as court mandated rehabilitation.[3]

Carcerality has been intrinsic to the settler colonial project in Australia. The continent was first settled as an overflow for convict-labourers imprisoned in the imperial centre and remains and a defining feature of settler-native relations. Historian Patrick Wolfe's (2006) well-known assertions are very relevant here: settler colonialism is a structure, not an isolated event. When settlers come they stay for good; the presence of native life becomes an obstacle to settler statehood; the structuring principle of settler colonialism everywhere is the 'logic of elimination' by which settler society replaces native society. I understand hyperincarceration as one outcome of the contradictions between settler statehood and the persistence of Aboriginal life: rendered 'surplus' by the liberal settler state, Aboriginal populations are 'warehoused' (Wacquant 2001) in staggering and increasing numbers by way of the democratic rule of law (Moreton-Robinson 2015). I emphasise the eliminatory aspects of this dynamic not because I have an issue with Indigenous 'agency' or

[1] Briefly, 'Country' entails inherited terrains and bodies of water. Country is imbued with ancestral essence and in this sense is a relational entity. The Aboriginal English term 'countrymen' can refer to Aboriginal people generally, but more specifically refers to known relations or those with whom one shares Country.
[2] Territory Families is the current branding of the NT's child protection services. It is referred to exclusively as 'welfare' by Victoria people and understood as a continuity of Stolen Generations policy.
[3] Beyond the scope of this project, but related to this discussion, is the issue of remote health service delivery. The nearest NT hospital to Timber Creek is in Katherine (280km by road), but for specialist treatment patients must attend Royal Darwin Hospital (600km) or the more equipped hospitals in southern states. There is no dialysis facility in the Victoria River hinterland so people requiring ongoing treatment usually relocate permanently to Darwin or Katherine until they die. Along with mental health facilities such as the infamous Cowdy Ward in Darwin, all of these services are to a degree carceral in the sense that contemporary conditions of sedentariness in settlements situationally distant from regional hubs both make Aboriginal people sick and force them away from their home, relations and Country under penalty of death.

'heterogeneity' (Rowse 2014) but because I understand hyperincarceration as a radically destructive, saturating and intensifying aspect of contemporary Aboriginal life.

Sadly, this project is somewhat timely. It was conceived in the wake of a sensational documentary (Fallon and Neighbour 2016) that sent images of the insufferable conditions in the NT's infamous Don Dale Youth Detention Centre around the globe, and the subsequent Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory which propagated even more depictions of horror in the public sphere. Like the fate of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, which was completed the year I was born in 1991, the recommendations of the 2017 Royal Commission were largely shelved (Anthony, et al. 2021), while the numbers of Indigenous people, and deaths, in custody continue to grow. More recently, in 2019, a young Warlpiri man, Kumanjayi Walker, was shot dead by a police officer in his grandmother's home at Yuendumu in Central Australia. That coronial inquest continues as I write this introduction.

The relationship between Aboriginal people and the carceral settler state is in a constant state of emergency. Despite this, this project is the first ethnographic study of hyperincarceration in Aboriginal Australia. Similar studies have emerged from the United States where hyper- and mass incarceration have featured prominently in anthropological and sociological works (e.g. Balthazar and King 2018; Braman 2002; 2007; Browning, et al. 2018; Comfort 2008; Condry, et al. 2016; Dillon 2018; Hernández 2017; Miller 2018; O'Connor 2018; Tripp 2018; Wacquant 2001; 2009; 2010), and strong abolitionist traditions are a part of public life from Angela Davis (1971; 2003) among others (e.g. Gilmore 2007; James 1996; Wang 2018) through to today's prominent Critical Resistance and BLM movements. In Australia Indigenous scholars, predominantly women, continue to produce extensive bodies of work interrogating settler law, carcerality and their conflict with Aboriginal life (e.g. Moreton-Robinson 2015; Porter 2016; Porter and Cunneen 2020; Watego, et al. 2021; Watson 2007; 2017; Whittaker 2018; 2021a; 2021b). Indigenous incarceration has long been a focus of Australian criminology (Broadhurst 1997; Hogg 1991; Weatherburn 2014; Weatherburn, et al. 2003), while the emergent field of critical criminology (Blagg 2016; Blagg and Anthony 2019; Cunneen 2011; Cunneen, et al. 2013) seeks alternatives to colonial-carceral intervention in Aboriginal life. While the relationships

between police and Aboriginal people have received some anthropological attention (Cowlishaw 2014; Langton 1994; Morris 2001), Australian anthropologists have largely neglected the subject of Aboriginal hyperincarceration. Notable exceptions include the work of Brian McCoy (2008) and a more recent special issue of TAJA that followed the acquittal of all charges for the police officer who killed Kumanjayi Walker (see Musharbash 2022). This thesis provides ethnographic insights into experiential aspects of life under the settler colonial regime of hyperincarceration.

Key points

Carceral genocide

The deaths of Indigenous people in custody are a flashpoint in public and academic discourse. Something of which any family member of someone who has been killed by the carceral state would be painfully aware, and something I also know from presenting research material, is that people always want to know *well why are they incarcerated in the first place?* Official statistics provide a partial answer: a significant proportion of Indigenous prisoners in the NT are incarcerated for 'acts intended to cause injury', including common assault and domestic violence (NTDCS 2016). Indigenous people are radically over-represented in the NT prison system's remand population – those imprisoned without sentencing, often for long periods, including the significant and mostly Aboriginal population of the NT's child prisons. There are also certain categories of offence for which *only* Indigenous people are imprisoned in the NT. These include: driving offences; public order offences; breach of justice orders (NTDCS 2016:26); and more generally the "manifestly unfair" paperless arrest powers retained by NT police (Cavanagh 2015:32; Grealy 2017). One of the outcomes of the NT Emergency Response (hereafter The Intervention) was an increase of 250% for such mundane charges (Blagg 2016).[4] These are offences that the NT

[4] The Intervention was the federal government's response in 2007 to allegations of widespread sexual abuse of children in remote Aboriginal settlements in the NT. The measures required the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act (1975) and included bans on the possession of alcohol and pornography in 'prescribed communities', and the restructure of welfare payments and other service delivery. Police and military personnel were dispatched to these settlements during the five year life of Intervention legislation, which yielded no prosecutions for child sexual abuse. The 'politics of suffering' and The Intervention have been the subject of protracted anthropological debate in Australia (see for example Altman and Hinkson 2010; Cowlishaw 2003; Sutton 2001).

Department of the Attorney-General and Justice claims “can hardly be described as criminal” (Yick 2016:3). I would add that all these categories of offence result from the subsequent impoverishment, abandonment and despair wrought by ongoing settler colonial occupation.

Other factors associated with incarceration are high rates of physical and cognitive disability as well as mental health issues among prisoners locally (Brolan and Harley 2018; Hamilton, et al. 2020; Heffernan, et al. 2014; McCausland and Dowse 2020; Shepherd, et al. 2017) and globally (e.g. Ben-Moshe, et al. 2014). In the Northern Territory foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), hearing problems and psychological disorders are common among imprisoned Aboriginal people, and likely more common than statistics indicate due to the expense and logistics of diagnosis. Remote-living Aboriginal people who live with a disability are more likely to be imprisoned than any other demographic (Baldry, et al. 2015). In this way there is something of a ‘prison pipeline’ from the chronically inadequate and overcrowded housing predominant in remote Indigenous settlements where maintaining hygiene is practically impossible, to infants who may already have FASD who also develop hearing problems by means of poor housing (Hogan, et al. 2014; Su, et al. 2020), who then grow up to experience difficulties communicating while living in a vacuum of social services which might ameliorate mental health issues, substance dependence and other forms of social violence: all these factors lead to an increased likelihood of interactions with police and imprisonment. It is quite common for magistrates and judges to gesture to an Aboriginal defendant’s cognitive or other disabilities, or chronic mental health issues, and remark something to the effect that ‘there is no evidence to suggest these conditions were contributing factors in your criminal acts’ before delivering a substantial prison sentence. As Thalia Anthony and Harry Blagg (2021:72) observe, carcerality “has become the default mechanism for managing Aboriginal people with a range of health, disability, mental health and linked issues”: in the absence of social services which might address complex needs where required, the carceral state simply warehouses Aboriginal populations en masse. Indigeneity itself is rendered a ‘disabling’ condition, and Aboriginal lives as “neither worth living nor saving” (Razack 2015:65; 134).

Public, political and judicial discourses emphasise the chronic issue of gendered, domestic and family violence in contemporary Aboriginal life. While interpersonal violence is not the focus of this thesis, it requires some attention. Some of the men I worked with, or men I knew of but never met because of their lengthy prison sentences, were incarcerated for appalling acts of violence, often against Aboriginal women. Many of the women I worked with were victims of the same. How do I then justify examining the violence of imprisonment in this context? How to examine the hyperincarceration of a colonised demographic without excusing or enabling brutal acts of violence occurring within it?

First, I question whether there is any point in rhetorically or personally condemning those who already spend years in prison and who are routinely the subject of police surveillance and state-sanctioned violence when they are not. More importantly, I follow efforts of carceral abolitionist scholars in Australia and abroad (see for example Kim 2018; Terwiel 2019; Watego, et al. 2021) who condemn the logic and politics of what has been termed *carceral feminism*, which has it that the only way to protect women from any form of violence is to imprison male offenders. Against this orientation, and against the rehabilitative branding of contemporary prisons, Ruth Wilson Gilmore asserts that incarceration is a 'geographical solution' relying on the principle of *incapacitation*: this technique "doesn't pretend to change anything about people except where they are" (Gilmore 2007:14). Further, Jackie Wang makes the compelling case for rejecting altogether the 'politics of innocence' which entail that "empathy can be established only when a person meets the standards of authentic victimhood and moral purity" (2018:262). These scholars recognise that humans can do terrible things to another, but submit that the concentration of interpersonal violence and many other forms of crime in subaltern demographics globally are the result of historical and contemporary forms of socioeconomic stagnation and state abandonment (Gilmore 2015; Gordon 2008b; Wacquant 2001; 2009). The high rates of policing and imprisonment among such populations, from precariat classes anywhere to residents of Black ghettoes in the US, serve only to reproduce conditions of impoverishment and related forms of social suffering like interpersonal violence (Clear 2007; 2008; Clear and Rose 1998; Davis 2003; Gilmore 2007). This thesis demonstrates that the same forces are present in the hyperincarceration of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory. I pay close attention to the conditions of Aboriginal life under ongoing-settler

colonial occupation, which includes varying degrees of interpersonal violence: I acknowledge this as a social fact but set it aside apart from where it is analytically relevant.

I argue in this thesis for the abandonment of those ostensible rationales for policing and imprisonment, and of carcerality more broadly, of 'denunciation', 'deterrence' and 'community safety'. This is not a particularly radical position. Over recent years, senior members of the NT's judiciary have publicly lamented with increasing frequency that policing and imprisonment have very limited impacts on the safety of Aboriginal victims of violence, proclaiming that: the criminal legal system is unfit for its ostensible purposes (Cavanagh 2016); police themselves repeatedly 'do nothing to help' Aboriginal women experiencing crises of domestic violence (Armitage 2022); and the judicial apparatus can do "pretty much nothing" to remediate the situation (Kelly 2022:3). These arguments also point to the staggeringly high recidivism rate of 80% among Aboriginal people in Northern Territory carceral facilities (NTDCS 2016). Although lawyers, magistrates, judges, police and legislators are fully aware of the futility of these mechanisms, they continue to send Aboriginal people to "grossly" overcrowded prisons the conditions of which "border on unlawful" (John Lawrence SC cited in Walls 2022). All of these legal professionals persevere under such "difficulties" (Kelly 2022:10) because their jobs and the law require it.

This brings me to what I consider one of the most critical aspects of Aboriginal hyperincarceration: carceral genocide. Here I follow recent efforts (Altman 2018; Woolford and Gacek 2016) to return to Raphael Lemkin's original definition of genocide which is plainly summarised as "the destruction of a nation or of an ethnic group" (1944:79).[5] Jon Altman (2018) compellingly demonstrates that the trajectory of the Aboriginal homelands movement, from its inception to its coordinated failure, should be considered a component of state-sanctioned cultural genocide. Andrew Woolford and James Gacek (2016) describe the 'genocidal carcerality' of residential schools for Aboriginal children in Canada – sites where cultural, linguistic and relational ways of being were deliberately terminated. Among

[5] Raphael Lemkin 'wrote the book' on genocide (1944) in the wake of the Ottoman empire's decimation of the Armenian people. Lemkin's expansive definition of genocide was narrowed and ratified during the 1948 United Nations Genocide Convention, a decision largely influenced by powerful nations which would likely have been rendered guilty of the crime under the original definition. Australia is among the 41 national signatories to the ratified Convention (UN 1948).

many other examples these authors closely attend to Lemkin's assertion that *genocide does not require killing*. Rather, it consists of:

> a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at *the destruction of essential foundations of the life* of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves. The objectives of such a plan would be disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of individuals belonging to such groups. Genocide is directed against the *national group as an entity*, and *the actions involved are directed against individuals*, not in their individual capacity, but as members of the national group (1944:79, my emphases).

Imagine a hypothetical justice of the Northern Territory Supreme Court who in the same breath proclaims: a) that there is a terrible scourge of interpersonal violence in Aboriginal communities; that b) that policing and imprisonment do nothing at all to help past/present/future victims, nor do they rehabilitate offenders, and that a prison sentence is futile; and yet c) sentences the Aboriginal wrongdoer to imprisonment anyway, because that is what their job requires them to do. Imagine, further, several thousand police officers, prison guards, prosecutors, legislators, policymakers and other bureaucrats who go about their daily tasks according to the same logic. Such cognitive dissonance must be confounding. One is compelled to ask: what other functions might these processes serve?

The contents of this thesis demonstrate how readily Lemkin's definition of genocide can be applied to the context of Aboriginal hyperincarceration in the Northern Territory. I do not allege some covert or sinister conspiracy, but rather gesture to the destructive forces (the 'invisible hands') that historically and presently give shape to Aboriginal life and death on this continent. In her extended body of work on these forces Beth Povinelli (1993b; 2002; 2008; 2011; 2016; 2019) offers the succinct term 'settler late liberalism' to describe the way power, wielded by the settler state and informed by the market economy, differentiates between categories of (human) life that matter and those that do not. In the present context Aboriginal life falls firmly in the latter category, articulated by the various forms of 'killing' and 'letting die' which the state perpetrates, facilitates, permits and denies its hand in (Povinelli 2008). Identifying this process as a *carceral genocide* recognises the central role

of the carceral settler state in the destruction of a way of life. As I demonstrate through my ethnography the carceral state is pervasive, all-encompassing, and yet often seemingly distant or not there at all.

Carceral spectres

This project was originally conceived as something like a social impact assessment: I was intrigued by questions around 'material' and 'cultural' impacts of hyperincarceration, and how this regime might influence notions of interest to the applied anthropologist, particularly the transmission of 'cultural knowledge'. There is something more elusive about the experience of living under this regime, however – something I claim no full comprehension of, but which I have found a language for in the notion of *haunting*.

In *Ghostly Matters* (2008a), Avery Gordon explores the sociology of haunting – hauntology – a call to examine things and forces that are sensed or felt but hard to see. Using *the spectral* as an analytic 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" (2008a:19). For Gordon, haunting 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 (2008a:xvi)

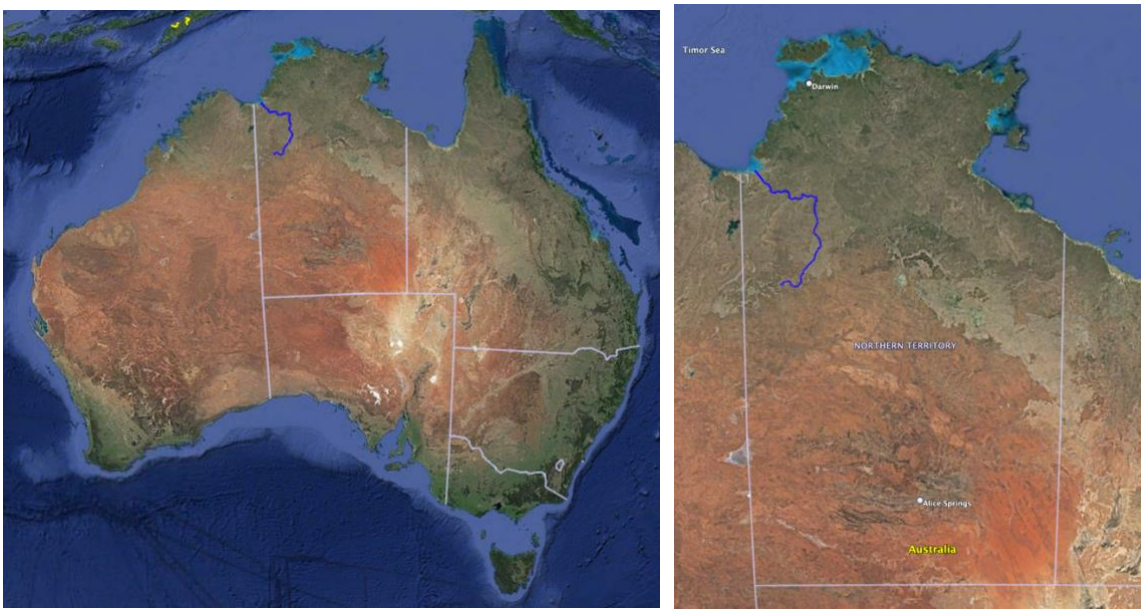
In other words, ghosts – hints, remnants, spectres of power – linger and haunt because of 'unfinished business'. In settler colonial contexts, it seems settlers are often haunted by the absence of those they replace (Araluen 2019; Bergland 2015), and Indigenous presence can arouse a sense of fear, threat or disgust in the settler psyche (Razack 2020; Vincent 2018). I suggest that when it comes to carcerality, the feeling is mutual. The business that remains unfinished in this case is the eliminatory logic (Wolfe 2006) underpinning settler colonial occupation and the liberal governance of Aboriginal populations. As Deborah Bird Rose observes, "to get in the way, all the native has to do is stay at home" (1991:46). That Aboriginal people are *still here* means there is work yet to be done.

Approaching settler colonial carcerality as *spectral* has helped me understand how the world is experienced when a pervasive, destructive yet often invisible force perpetually tears at the fabric of life while this tearing is denied. Incarceration “disappears human beings” (Davis 1998:1), and “disappearance is a state-sponsored method for producing ghosts” (Gordon 2008a:125–126). Here I understand ghosts as shadows or spectral manifestations of power and state violence whose “haunting effects trace the borders of a society's unconscious” (Gordon 2008a:126). From Fanon (2008b) 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, welfare and encounters with courts, parole officers and lawyers. This produces an experience of carceral saturation.

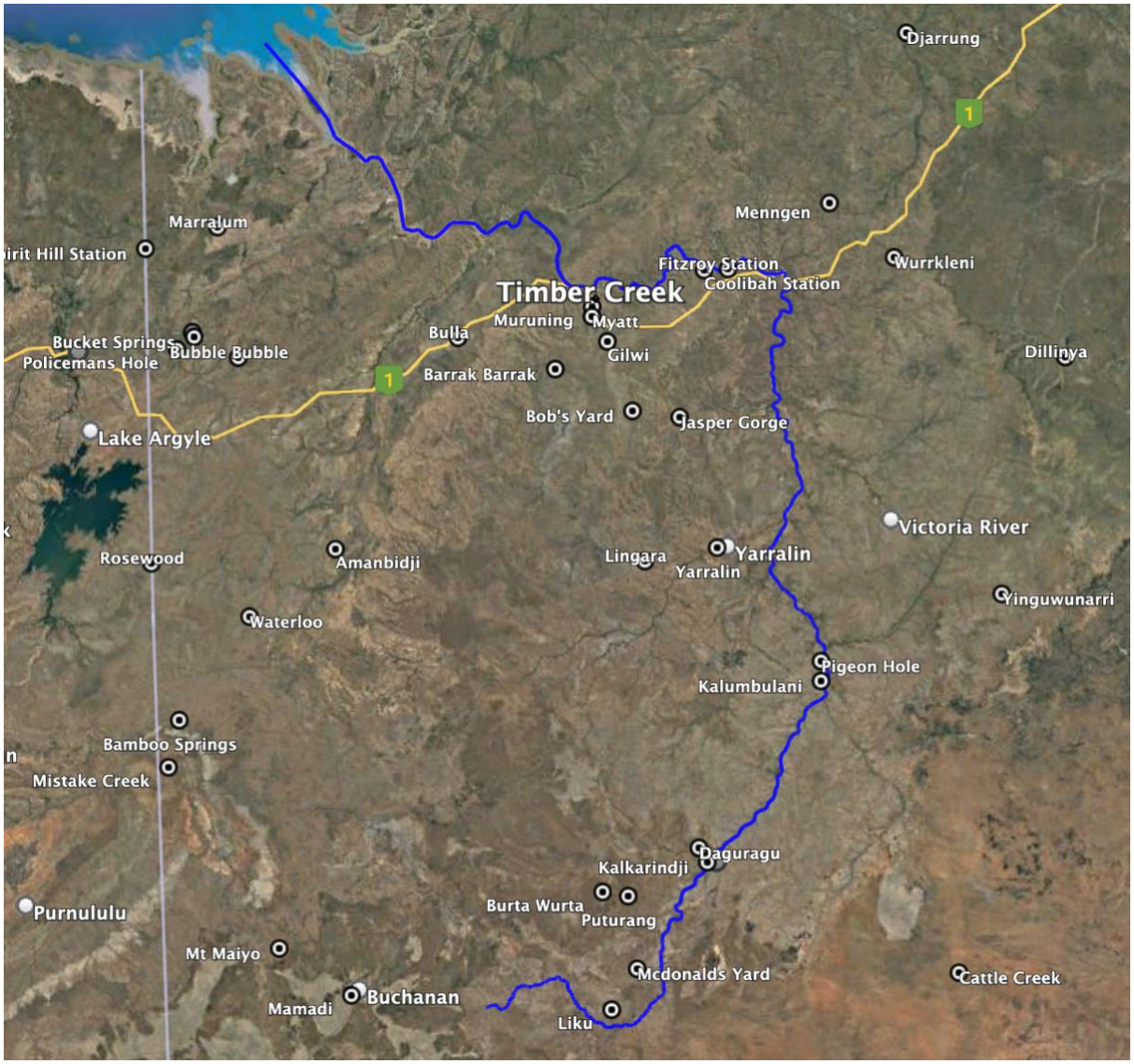
Saturating carcerality

Elsewhere (Horton 2022) I demonstrate how carcerality looms in every corner of Victoria River life. Although my field site is 600km away from the nearest prison, and police intervention is not an actual, *every* day encounter, I suggest that Victoria River people are nevertheless constantly reminded of the disappearing power of the carceral state in their everyday: it lurks in forgotten photographs and abandoned possessions; it is present when a vehicle throws a dust cloud onto the horizon; and when broken things don’t get fixed (ibid.). Eve Tuck and C. Ree (2013:642)observe that “settler colonialism … is an ongoing horror made invisible by its persistence”, and haunting is the “relentless remembering and reminding” of its violent manifestations. Throughout this thesis a pervasive, saturating carcerality is made ethnographically evident as it leaks into and mutates relationships, knowledge systems, ways of being and living. Although this is not always obvious, in my fieldsites, the carceral state is always there, everywhere, all the time.

Fieldwork and ‘the field’



The Victoria River (Google 2022)



Victoria River settlements (Google 2022)

The setting

The Victoria River reaches some 700km from its headwaters in the desert-fringed Gurindji Country, through the plains of Bilinarra and Karangpuru people neighboured by that of the Mudburra, winding north then west through the limestone escarpment of (southern) Ngarinyman, Wardaman, Ngaliwurru and Nungali territory. The tidal reaches of the river are flanked by (northern) Ngarinyman Country on one side and Jaminjung on the other, and the river meets the sea at Gadjerrabeng land, neighboured by the Mirriwung whose Country lies towards the Western Australian border.[6] All of these groups have Country shaped by the

[6] There are numerous terminologies used to describe and categorise Aboriginal groups. Beyond local dialect terminologies Victoria River people predominantly use the term 'tribe' to differentiate between all of these categories, and the more politically-loaded term 'nation' does not hold currency in this context. I use the terms

Victoria River and creeks which drain into it. While particular sections of the River (freshwater and saltwater sections, seasonal waterholes, hunting and fishing grounds) have different names in respective languages and dialects, those with which I am most familiar refer to the River itself with variations of *lama-lama*, meaning 'big water' or 'big river'. Different dialects have different terms for 'people' or for 'Aboriginal people': for example, *mayi* in Ngaliwurru and *ngumpin* in Ngarinyman. I worked with Aboriginal people from most of these language groups in the course of my fieldwork, but predominantly those based in settlements in the lower (northern) reaches of the river's catchment.

The Aboriginal populations of the Victoria River region represent something of a cultural bloc. Some languages are almost identical while others are mutually unintelligible. Groups are differentiated by language, dialect and clan estate, and also by the geo-cultural characteristics of their ancestral terrain: there are sandstone people, limestone people, plains people, freshwater people, saltwater people and so on. There are countless other forms of differentiation but there many similarities perhaps most emphatically expressed in relational proximity, shared Dreamings and ceremonial responsibility.

I use the term *Victoria River people* to refer to this broadly categorised ethnic group of Aboriginal people whose countries are oriented towards this water course which was named in honour of the monarch overseeing the expanding colonial regime during an exploratory mission in 1839. I remain committed to this explicitly settler colonial nomenclature partly for ease of reference, partly as a reflection of the social and ceremonial associations between these groups prior to and persisting in the face of ongoing settler colonial occupation, and partly based on precedent: Deborah Bird Rose (1991; 1992; 2004) was the first anthropologist to focus sustained ethnographic attention on the region and she also used this terminology.

The Victoria River region is home to several dozen Aboriginal settlements, from small outstations and town camps with populations in the 20s to larger communities of several

commonly accepted in the domain of applied anthropology in Australia: 'language group' to identify the languages and dialects associated with broader tracts of land and 'clan' in reference to smaller family groups holding particular estates of land and water.

hundred people. I stayed at or was resident in half a dozen of these settlements during the course of my fieldwork and visited many others. I make no claims to represent the experiences or perspectives of the thousand or so people who make up the Aboriginal population of the region.

My fieldwork was based out of the remote township of Timber Creek.[7] Victoria River people and residents of the town's hinterland are no more or less overrepresented in the judicial and criminal legal systems than any other remote-living Aboriginal demographics in the NT. Recent Census data indicates Timber Creek is populated by 278 people of whom 154 identified as Indigenous, although the population fluctuates greatly according to season and other factors (ABS 2021). The town functions as a service hub for surrounding Aboriginal settlements, which include town camps, homelands and larger communities, as well as for the small, mostly settler populations resident of the enormous tracts of land occupied by pastoral leases. Timber Creek itself consists of a pub-shop-caravan park-hotel complex which also functions as the town's post office; an Aboriginal-owned supermarket with adjoining motel and caravan park; and a small seasonal tourist venture offering trinkets and tours, open only during the dry season to attract (settler) holidaymakers travelling to and from the Kimberley region.[8] Just down the highway is the local sports hall and adjoining Shire office; the CDP headquarters which adjoins a parole office;[9] a ranger base for NT Parks and Wildlife; and a block for accommodation and equipment of the Bradshaw Construction Co., a modest but successful contracting company owned, managed and staffed by local Aboriginal people. Further along the highway is the Timber Creek Police Station and the adjoining courthouse, as well as the police housing compounds; adjacent is the historical police station and residence built in the early 1900s and now functioning as a tourist attraction. Just off the highway lies the township proper, where the school, health clinic,

[7] Timber Creek is widely known as the subject of a native title compensation case of ground-breaking legal precedent in which $1.3m was awarded to claimants for 'cultural loss' arising from the extinguishment of native title at the township. Anyone reading this thesis for commentary or insights on that matter should look elsewhere.

[8] Victoria River people identify a number of seasons cyclically associated with weather patterns, flora and fauna availability and ceremonial activity. Top End settler societies tend to recognise two main 'seasons': the wet season (approx. November – February), associated with high heat and humidity and torrential rain; and the dry season (April – August), associated with cooler, arid weather patterns.

[9] CDP, or the Community Development Program, is a punitive 'work for the dole' welfare regime targeting residents of remote Aboriginal settlements.

land council office and resource centre are located as well as the bulk of the housing for the settler-majority staff and service providers. These locations are shrouded by stunning, ragged sections of escarpment intersected by Timber Creek itself, a freshwater tributary to the Victoria River named by early settler-pioneers who sourced timber from its banks (Lewis 2012).

Scores of local Aboriginal names annotate Dreaming sites and named places – water- and rock-holes, springs, escarpment sections, particular trees and ceremonial areas – located throughout the settled sections of the town. All of these places, as is the case throughout the region and the rest of occupied Australia, have stories from which their names are derived, mythic narratives celebrated in ceremonial activity. Most of these narrative songs predate settlement and are complimented by more contemporary compositions. Some of these names and stories are public, some expressly 'secret'; some are held and sung only by women, others only by men. Glossed as "Dreaming" narratives or 'songlines', these mythologies are central to the ontological, spiritual and existential grounding of people in place. Beth Povinelli's (1993a:509) observation about Aboriginal ontologies, in which "all matter (human and animal bodies, objects, and environments) is conceived of as the congealed labor of ancestral Dreaming beings", applies to the Victoria River context. I do not elaborate any further here (see Rose 1992; 1996; 2000) but from the Victoria River perspective the ancestral has always been immediate and 'close up'. This way of being in the world was radically disrupted from the advent of settlement.

Following early scouting missions and subsequent pastoral settlements in the mid- and late-1800s, a police station was established at Timber Creek at the end of the century (Lewis 2012). The public demands and explicit rationale for this permanent police presence focussed on the protection of the property and interests – principally land and cattle – of pastoral settlers whose presence, encroachment and violence prompted hostile responses from Aboriginal groups during the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Lewis 2012). This period was characterised by intense genocidal violence that saw the elimination of an unknown number of Aboriginal people and groups. For some clans this genocide was successfully

concluded while others were decimated but persist to this day.[10] These dynamics continue to characterise settler-Indigenous relations in the region, albeit in more subtle and muted forms. Following the rearrangement of Aboriginal rights towards wages and land emergent from the 1960s, including the mass expulsion of Aboriginal people from engagement in the pastoral economy and the emergent homelands movement (Altman 2018), Victoria River people established a number of town camps, outstations and larger settlements throughout the region.[11] Many Victoria River people now call Timber Creek their home, both those Ngaliwurru and Nungali clan groups who are traditional owners, and individuals and families from other language groups including Ngarinyman and Jaminjung.

On the other side of the Victoria River from Timber Creek is the Bradshaw Field Training Area, an enormous tract of country now exclusively occupied by a military base. Every year thousands of Australian, US and other foreign military personnel inundate Bradshaw, as well as Timber Creek, to conduct field, firing range, air and live missile training. The Training Area is among the largest domestic military occupations in Australia and one of the largest training airspaces in the world; its state-of-the-art military technologies can be seen (fighter jets, cargo planes, armoured vehicles, mysterious lights in the night sky) and heard (bomb blasts, jets breaking sound barrier, etc.) throughout the hinterland while training is in session. Bradshaw was formerly a pastoral lease with a celebrated and somewhat romanticised history (Lewis 2012; Ogden 1989), and many older Victoria River people were born, lived, worked, died and remain buried on the station. Since the 1990s, when the Australian Defence Force assumed the lease, Aboriginal access to and use of this land has been modulated by the construction of a bridge which traverses the Victoria River, an impenetrable padlocked gate, complex bureaucratic permit procedures and ominous signs alerting visitors: DANGER – MILITARY TARGET AREA – DO NOT ENTER UNLESS AUTHORISED – DO NOT TOUCH ANYTHING IT MAY EXPLODE AND KILL YOU. While some Victoria River people travel on the base with relative ease and frequency, particularly employees of Bradshaw Contracting Co. as well as participants of annual 'culture camps', many others are

[10] Deborah Bird Rose (1991) and Andrew McWilliam (2005) provide local Aboriginal perspectives on these processes.

[11] Town camps, homelands and outstations, community living areas (CLAs) and 'communities' are terms for different categories of settlements designated for Aboriginal residence and the complex arrangements of tenure and governance which underpin them (see Grealy and Howey 2020; Howey 2014).

functionally excluded (see however McWilliam 2005). The military occupation of and Aboriginal exclusion from this land represents a distinct and very local feature of the ever-increasing militarisation of the Northern Territory and its strategic utility in the global imperial process (Lea 2020b). While untold millions are expended on servicing, upgrading, transporting, feeding, fuelling and accommodating military infrastructure and personnel at Bradshaw, across the River people in Aboriginal settlements live in radically inadequate conditions.

Many Victoria River people live in varying degrees of material impoverishment, which is common for most remote Aboriginal settlements in the NT (Markham and Biddle 2016). Most families depend predominantly on income from Centrelink, although some families and individuals are relatively well off by virtue of the handful of jobs locally available to Aboriginal people. All families subsist on, and enjoy the practice and fruits of, hunting and fishing to supplement low incomes and often grossly overpriced groceries offered at local shops (Markham and Kerins 2020). Housing for the most part is inadequate: most houses and camps are shared by extended families; some two-room houses accommodate a dozen or more people with no dedicated kitchen, bathroom or toilet, while newer-build houses offer more amenities but are reliably crowded. There are degrees of substance use and dependence, almost exclusively *grog* (alcohol) and *ganja* (cannabis) which are very expensive commodities in remote locations and take food off the tables and out of mouths. Smoking and chewing tobacco is very common. Gambling in the form of card games (enormous social gatherings) redistributes wealth and passes the time, although it is not an everyday affair. Fluctuating rates of domestic and family violence, as well as captivating and organised 'fair-go' fights between individuals and groups, occasionally punctuate and disrupt days and nights. All of these factors, as well what David Harvey (2006) and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) describe as a state regime of 'organised abandonment', contribute to a general state of poor health among Victoria River people. This is reflected in high mortality rates, large and ever-growing cemeteries, frequent premature deaths, and funerals which are a significant part of social life (Musharbash 2016b). I offer these snapshots (not to wallow in suffering but) to illustrate a generalised state of 'everyday violence' (Scheper-Hughes 1993) within which hyperincarceration emerges as a mundane fact of life.

In Victoria River camps older generations speak multiple Aboriginal languages fluently, younger generations primary speak regional Kriol dialects, and people of all ages speak Standard English to varying degrees. The Victoria River is the kind of place where participation in young men's initiation ceremonies is near-annual, and men and women travel enormous distances to participate in larger ceremonial and mortuary rites across the Top End.[12] Hunting and fishing are primary leisure activities, the object of which are various native fauna species as well as cattle. The latter are shot and skinned either on Aboriginal Land or country occupied by national parks, or purchased (or stolen) from nearby pastoral stations. Native species are sourced freely from anywhere that native title rights have been declared, although access to pastoral land is hindered by the racial politics of settler occupation which are quite prominently expressed in the relationships between pastoralists and traditional owners. In broad brushstrokes, at this frontier region Aboriginal life and presence is an obstacle and threat to the accumulation of capital.

There was a relative lack of historical missionary influence on the Victoria River. Although some Christian values were offered to or imposed on Aboriginal people living and toiling on cattle stations during the 1900s, overt (primary Pentecostal) evangelism did not occur in the region until the late 1970s. I mention this because, as Maggie Brady (1992) observed, epidemics of petrol sniffing in remote Aboriginal settlements are most commonly found among demographics previously subject to a missionary regime. The Victoria River is one of those contexts where the pastoral industry afforded ongoing connections to Country and ceremonial engagement which persisted after the collapse of the Aboriginal pastoral economy. Petrol sniffing is therefore a negligible issue in most Victoria River settlements.[13] While almost all Victoria River people today identify strongly as Christian – bibles and crucifixes adorn houses, vehicles and graves – evening church services held by local Aboriginal ministers are semi-frequent and often sparsely attended (a handful of settlements are the exception). Some Victoria River people see no contradiction between

[12] The 'Top End' is Australian vernacular for the northern reaches of the continent. Northern and central parts of Western Australian, the Northern Territory and Queensland are 'Top End' regions, aligning approximately with the Tropic of Capricorn.

[13] Although it fringes the Kimberley region in Western Australia the Victoria River also remains less affected by the suicide epidemic which is particularly chronic among young people of Kimberley settlements. There are tragic exceptions.

'traditional' ceremonial practices and orientations and their Christian beliefs, while others expressly refute Aboriginal ceremonial life as 'devil worship'. Overt expressions of faith emerge most prevalently during events of poor health, death, incarceration and other crises.

Although my fieldwork was based out of Timber Creek, I lived and worked with Victoria River people located across the Northern Territory and beyond. This includes: residents of the town camps and homelands in the immediate vicinity of Timber Creek; families resident at settlements one or two hours from the town; residents of Katherine (NT) and Kununurra (WA), regional towns about two hours east and west of the Timber Creek respectively; other settlements and tracts of country beyond the immediate Victoria River catchment; and Victoria River people staying, living or imprisoned in Darwin. My research was also informed by broader dynamics of settler colonialism in other Australian as well as global settings. So although my 'field site' was ostensibly the town of Timber Creek, and I attend very closely to the dynamics of everyday Victoria River social life, I nevertheless understand this project as an investigation into the experiential realities of a liberal settler colonial regime at a particular time and place (Povinelli 2016).

The method

The research data for this project is based on 12 months of participant observation-based ethnographic fieldwork with Victoria River people between the middle of 2018 and the start of 2020. For the most part this comprised the foundational methodologies of 'hanging out' and 'writing everything down'. This entailed assuming residence at and being 'adopted into' a handful of camps whose families were happy to host me, and participating in everyday life at those camps: hunting; fishing; cooking; cleaning; sleeping; driving people around; abiding, refusing and making my own demands in the local moral economy; visiting extended family in settlements nearby and in distant regions; attending funerals; baby sitting; bickering; steering clear of and becoming entangled in disputes; helping to repair vehicles and changing tyres; and perhaps more than some, visiting relations in prisons. I abandoned more than half a decade of vegetarianism and made efforts towards proficiency in local dialects of Kriol. A typical day in 'the field' consisted of waking up, making coffee, writing

down everything that had happened the day before (sometimes taking up to two hours) and then doing whatever it was the rest of the day required. I documented as much as possible about social events I observed, participated in and spoke about, and things I thought and felt. However, there were events which I either made the decision or was asked to leave out of my notebooks, in particular matters of ceremonial significance and similarly private matters. There were also some individuals who made it clear they wanted nothing to do with this project: those people and their affairs were excluded from my fieldnotes and this thesis.

For personal reasons I decided to undertake four three-month stints rather than the 'standard' 12, 18 or 24 month long block (see Günel, et al. 2020). I found this approach productive: as well as staving off an inevitable 'burn out', returning to my home and life in Sydney for a couple of months at a time permitted me to read further, write a little, and digest themes and events from the field at a distance. It also permitted me to transition between different approaches to fieldwork: I lived mainly at one camp for the first period and another set of camps for the second and third, but by the end of the third stint there were a number of broad research questions I felt I had insufficient space to address from the intimate domain of everyday life. For this and other reasons I decided the fourth and final fieldwork period would be more dedicated to more formalised conversational interviews. I arranged my own accommodation in Timber Creek with the intention of conducting as many interviews as possible, and although I still found myself very much swept up in the business of everyday life I was nevertheless free to pursue more self-directed research interests. This 'distancing' also permitted me to engage with families and individuals who did not associate with those with whom I was most familiar, thus broadening the demographic scope of my inquiry. All in all I conducted a dozen conversational interviews, and many more less formal conversations, with individual men and women of all ages, older married couples and small groups of young people.

Positionality

Why me, here, now? I am a settler from a southern metropole and like my ancestors who departed the historical imperial centre and settled across Australasia (places now known as

Auckland, Perth and Sydney) I am wholly complicit in the settler colonial project from which all non-Indigenous life and wealth on this continent benefits. For some time, anthropologists have debated critiques of their discipline, its role in the expansion of empire and in understanding, controlling, exploiting and exterminating Indigenous people in colonies. Is the continuation of the anthropological project justified? Is this one in particular justified? Perhaps.

This project was conceived during my employment as an applied anthropologist in the NT, where I worked at an independent statutory body of the Northern Territory Government charged with protecting and registering Aboriginal sacred sites under the *Northern Territory Aboriginal Sacred Sites Act (1989)*. During this three-year period much of my work was focussed on the Victoria River region, and I formed ongoing personal and professional relationships with senior custodians of sacred sites in the region and their families. Among these was an older Victoria River man, a 'law man' (ceremonial authority) renowned throughout the region. As I got to know him and his family I observed, and felt conflicted about, the fact that although he was a senior law figure in the Aboriginal domain his adult sons were perpetually incarcerated. As my contract drew to a close and my partner moved back down south, I was drawn to the notion of further study which might permit me to maintain my relationships in the NT, further prompted by conversations with my doctoral supervisor. I considered the relationship between the Victoria River law man and his imprisoned sons, searched library databases for relevant studies and found none, and went from there.

Recent decades have seen academic endeavours become more inflected with the discourse of 'decolonisation': decolonising institutions, curriculums, citation practices, research methodologies, modes of thought, and so on (e.g. Blagg 2016; Kennedy, et al. 2022; Porter 2016; Prehn and Ezzy 2020; Prior 2007; Rowe, et al. 2015; Sherwood and Edwards 2005). In this vein Australian research practices have recently emphasised the need to attend to and serve the research demands and interests of Indigenous participants, the rationale being that if settlers are to continue to do research which meddles with Indigenous lives and worlds the process should ostensibly be instigated by the latter, and Indigenous people should also receive some tangible benefit. This project was not conceived or designed at the

request of Victoria River people but is the product of my protracted engagement with them. These relationships are the basis of the ethnographic content of the thesis. Although there were particular benefits to those I worked with, from the outset I made it clear (first to myself and then) to the people I worked with that I did not anticipate any immediate material improvements to develop in terms of the project's subject matter. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) observe, decolonisation can readily be co-opted and reduced to a buzz word, undermining meaningful decolonial orientation and praxis. It is quite simple to slap a 'decolonising' label on a project or a methodology to satisfy an ethics committee or conference audience. To be clear, I do not think there is anything inherently 'decolonising' about this project. This is a study of settler colonialism and carceral genocide. While it may offer insights that other disciplinary dispositions may not, even the potential to change the way some might think about Aboriginal hyperincarceration, I am not delivering anyone's land back, freeing captives, amending power structures or righting the wrongs of the past which persist in the present and continue to shape the future. Settler colonialism, (neo)liberal governance and their manifestation in overlapping and destructive disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal people, including hyperincarceration, require urgent structural action. This work does not accomplish that.

This is a protracted study of life under a regime which renders life disposable. As such, I dwell on systematic oppression, human suffering, forms of individual and collective disempowerment, the destruction of (ways of) life. It therefore might be received as fodder for the 'suffering subject' (Robbins 2013) or 'damage narrative' (Tuck 2009) tropes, or even what should have been subject to 'ethnographic refusal' (Simpson 2007; Tuck 2009). Pertinent here is Don Kulick's (2006) additional suggestions that the 'libidinal structure' of the anthropological endeavour may be a masochistic urge to grapple with and publish material on human suffering to absolve the self, and David Harvey's condemnation of what he terms "moral masturbation" (2009:144), the detailing of grotesque injustices which accomplishes nothing beyond the (self-)gratification encapsulated within the self-referential act itself. Rather than a pornographic celebration of suffering, I like to imagine this project as a novel case of 'salvage anthropology' (Clifford 2008), researched and written during a period before the carceral settler state as it is documented here receded. While I agree with Eve Tuck and C. Ree that "listing terrors is not a form of social justice" (2013:647), the

ghosts that haunt contemporary Aboriginal life remain alive and well. The carceral violence I observe and document in this thesis are intrinsic to the Australian settler colonial project and its particular forms of liberal governance – as it stands.

Victoria River people's perspectives on the project

There were many divergent responses to this study amongst the people I worked with, ranging from positive, negative, ambivalent and sardonic. Some of the people I worked with, both men and women, were eager to participate; others simply shrugged and said "that's good". One man with whom I lived closely for an extended period articulated the reason for my presence at the home of extended family as "he likes stickin his nose in blackfella business". Another man responded to my description of the project: "well that's good for you, but doin' fuck all for those blokes there living in hell [in prison]". When I presented my research proposal to a local Aboriginal organisation most of the Board offered either enthusiastic or indifferent approval, but one older man afterwards took me aside and asked pointedly: "do you like this place, do you like the people here?", to which I replied affirmatively. Similarly, during a meeting with white 'welfare' (child protection) officers at which I was incidentally and unwillingly present, an officer asked me what my research was about and before I could begin my 'sister' nudged me and said quietly: "don't talk about that". I took these last two instances as an expression of the sentiment that the content and implications of the project might reflect poorly on local Aboriginal people. I hope and trust that this is not the case.

Throughout my fieldwork I struggled to adequately define the project, which changed conceptually throughout its life. Further, it remains somewhat intangible to some people with limited literacy, who have never set foot in a university, and who know anthropologists only as people who "help blackfellas" through the auspices of various benevolent Acts and statutory bodies. Indeed in explaining to visiting kin why there was a whitefella in their camp, Victoria River people described me as "helping", "looking after" or "working for" their family. From an Aboriginal perspective 'working for' entails ongoing moral and relational obligation (Austin-Broos 2006), and this rings true in an immediately material sense. My fieldwork largely consisted of 'doing things for' those who had taken me in, and my

presence in these camps meant among other things a cash injection and therefore a relative increase in food, fuel and other commodities. Perhaps of most material significance, my residence entailed access to and use of a robust and roadworthy four-wheel drive vehicle (which is still alive and well in one camp), an invaluable asset for hunting, fishing and everyday mobility. I covered something like 90,000km during my fieldwork, mostly by hunting, fishing, camping out, visiting kin, otherwise driving people around, buying and paying for things and performing mundane tasks – in addition to prison visits, taking people to and attending court, helping collect children from welfare custody, and so on.

I perceived that my project was quite irrelevant to, or abstract from, the wants and needs of most people I worked with. Several people expressed their contempt for the very notion of anthropology, anthropologists and the systems of knowledge and power we circulate while at the same time welcoming me into their family homes ("no offence!"). I was often asked to undertake endeavours completely unrelated to my project, requests I obliged when possible but steered clear of when not: cultural mapping (which is frequently conducted by applied anthropologists but very difficult for custodians or traditional owners to access for multiple reasons); documenting genealogies and family oral histories; resolving (or complicating) disputes about land ownership and royalty distribution; and so on. One man suggested I focus on something 'more important', which for him was the inadequate housing situation at his settlement. Indeed a significant proportion of my fieldwork days and nights were spent facilitating people's attendance to the varied but always urgent matters which are often the daily focus of contemporary Aboriginal life (Lea 2020a).

Incarceration is something that not all Victoria River people were eager to speak publicly about. In part this is because for many *prison* is practically synonymous with *violence*: one woman repeatedly told her relations I was at her camp to 'study' domestic violence, no matter how often I reiterated the blurb of my project. This too is associated with the fact that although incarceration is an everyday event and experience, the scrutiny of a settler outsider casts it in a different light: it becomes a (or yet another) measure by which Aboriginal people feel their subordinate status to settlers, and subordination is not a pleasant feeling. Sometimes men would approach me, drunk, swaggering and confident, declaring they would tell me all about prison, really tell me about it. I would reply that I

didn't want to interview inebriated people, and so we would arrange to meet at a later date. Almost always those same men would shy away from the conversation in the sober light of day.

When I described what the final outcome of the project would look like, something like a book (this thesis), one older man asserted "that book only gonna sit there do nothing" and that it therefore amounted to "bullshit". Perhaps his comments were intended to be humorous, but there is truth in jest. More and more research, consultations, reports, coronial inquests, royal commissions and other papers accumulate and circulate. Some recommendations are nominally implemented and many others are shelved entirely. Often these recommendations simply call for more intensified carceral powers and more busy work for carceral bureaucrats. Again I consider the lethal indifference (Razack 2015) of police and prison guards, the expressly 'pretty much nothing we can do' sentiment of the judicial class: the too hard basket is overflowing. I hope, but have little faith, that this project does not "sit there do nothing", that it is not in that regard utter "bullshit". And particularly, I hope that it doesn't make Victoria River people 'look bad'. I also hope, urgently, for the seismic structural and material shifts in the fabric of Australian society and the mechanisms of power which would be required for an end to the kinds of Aboriginal disadvantage I document here, and that there is some point in producing this work other than my own accreditation as expert.

Thesis overview

What is *not* in this thesis?

I make no pretence of knowing 'all the solutions' to the 'problem' which Aboriginal hyperincarceration represents. As I have suggested, the nature of the 'problem' depends, critically, on the beholder. As such I offer no concrete recommendations that might be abstracted, co-opted or watered down: there are enough Aboriginal people 'dying from improvement' (Razack 2015) at the hands of the carceral settler state without another table of recommendations to panic over before shelving and moving onto the next emergency

(Lea 2012).[14] A challenge I offer to what might be termed the 'coronial inquest and royal commission industrial complex' of Australian democracy and governance is: how to offer recommendations on something that pervasively both structures and destroys the foundations of life? In short there is no 'recommendations' component to this project, apart from occasional gestures towards

> global call[s] for the disarming, dismantling and defunding of the police and [the prison industrial complex] in favour of community-led public safety measures as the only viable pathway for ending the systematic class and racial violence upon which capitalism is founded. (Redmond 2022:14)

An urgent example of these calls recently came from Victoria River women who brought their demands for proactive harm reduction infrastructure to the national stage (Thompson 2022), escalating decades of requests to fund a women's shelter in Timber Creek to service women and families in the region escaping domestic and family violence. Equally urgent was the *karrinjarla muwajarri* statement recently issued by Warlpiri people (2022) calling for police ceasefire, the defunding of the NT Police and the reinstitution of local Aboriginal governance and authority.

Something lacking in my ethnography is a detailed focus on the perspectives, experiences and work of Aboriginal women. Although these are evident throughout the thesis, there is no chapter dedicated specifically to this subject which is of critical importance due to both the escalating rates of imprisonment among Aboriginal women nationally and more immediately the high and gendered rates of domestic and family violence in the NT. Many of the women I know and worked with were victims of such violence before, during and following my fieldwork; while some spoke openly about it others were understandably reticent to participate in interviews or the broader scope of my fieldwork. To put it one way, for a white male to speak to Aboriginal women about their incarcerated husbands or partners, and implicitly or expressly the violence perpetrated by them, may not necessarily

[14] As I complete this thesis an historical "Aboriginal Justice Agreement" has been finalised by the Northern Territory Government, funded (privately) and is soon to be implemented. After much 'yarning' we now have recommendations for more 'culturally appropriate' prisons where Aboriginal people can be incarcerated 'on country', whatever that means; and the construction of a newer, larger-capacity, purpose-built child prison to replace the older model is currently underway in Darwin. Urgent demands for basic social supports and services go largely unattended while carceral budgets and powers intensify ever more.

be in those women's personal interests. Still there are matters which I wanted to include but found no place for in the overall chapter structure. For example, my 'sister' who maintained a mnemonic device to recall her husband's release date by way of her phone's keypad password; who felt a twitch in her upper thigh the same day he was released early – an instance of "fluttering" at the site of literal "embodiment of kin relatedness" (Redmond 2001:98-99); teenage mothers entangled in complex romances mitigated and mediated by the carceral state; women of all ages who post mournfully and relentlessly on social media about missing their partners, fathers, sons and other close relations; the often violent arrests of older and younger women. These are the kind of quotidian events of deep analytic significance but which are largely and regrettably left unattended in this thesis. Among other emergent works the recent podcast project BIRDS EYE VIEW (Bell 2020) led by women imprisoned at Holtze Correctional Facility offers compelling insights into one aspect of the carceral regime from women's perspectives.

Finally, I do not attend to overt narratives of 'resilience' or 'resistance' here. It is evident throughout the thesis that carcerality represents a relentless assault on the fabric and foundation of Aboriginal life, and there are ways that Victoria River people disclose, obscure and oppose these effects. In the face of such an onslaught families become closer, bonds become tighter, children are held closer – but disruptions also occur. These disruptions, which I consider components of a genocidal regime of carcerality, are the true focus of this thesis.

What is in this thesis?

The thesis begins with a discussion of "things people say about prison", an exploration of Victoria River people's diverse perspectives on carcerality. Throughout the chapter several overlapping themes emerge: imprisonment is futile in its purported aim of enhancing public and community safety, rehabilitation and delivering 'justice'; just as carcerality saturates everyday life it fades into the background as a normalised, routinised experience; and the banally sinister nature and experience of imprisonment is perceived and condemned as a hierarchical, immoral and racist component of the settler state and the economy it facilitates. In the second chapter I offer an extended analysis of a social practice and a

significant aspect of Victoria River discourse about imprisonment: *blame.* When someone goes to jail (or, when people go to jail all the time), who gets blamed for what and why? This chapter attends to a particular social logic to which Victoria River people are wholly if implicitly committed, and which often runs against the logic and demands of the settler legal apparatus. I offer an understanding of why, for instance, when someone is subject to the thorough forensic and criminological investigation of the carceral state's judicial process, entirely different understandings of causality and culpability emerge in camps and conversations closer to home.

The third chapter provides an affective and material history of Aboriginal life on the Victoria River. Rather than a 'straight' chronological history I approach an understanding of the present through three themes or strategies of governance which have remained features of Victoria River life since the advent of settlement: slavery, racial terror and organised abandonment. The chapter hinges on a potent local metaphor equating prisoners with 'bullocky' (cattle), and could be read as a counter-narrative to more popular readings of Australian history and criminology which have it that colonisation has nothing to do with Aboriginal (hyper)incarceration.

The fourth, fifth and sixth chapters more closely resemble the original aims of this project, examining the 'impacts' of Aboriginal hyperincarceration on particular demographics of Victoria River society. Chapter 4 explores carcerality as a pervasive, structuring force in the lives and worlds of children: the carceral state emerges in the ways relations are expressed and maintained, the ways children are cared for, and the games that they play. Chapter 5 addresses a problematic of contemporary Aboriginal masculinity: what does it mean to be a man in a context of hyperincarceration? Chapter 6 addresses the impacts of this regime on an intergenerational scale. I suggest that hyperincarceration, particularly that of middle-generation Aboriginal men, contributes to the collapse of social and relational infrastructure and diminishes the capacity of Victoria River society to reproduce itself.

In the final chapter I consider how these intersecting dynamics influence, impact and inhibit Victoria River people's capacities to relate to and care for Country. I describe how being on and travelling through Country can yield anguish in spectral, placed-based reminders of

absent, incarcerated kin; I attend to the concrete erasure of knowledge systems by the carceral state; and articulate the more subtle intergenerational effects of this process which functionally alter orientations to Country, from a nourishing, lifegiving terrain to an anonymous, meaningless landscape – in other words, the localised expression of (cultural) genocide (Altman 2018). Finally I gesture to the connections between these processes, which I emphasise are occurring in real time, to the carceral settler state and its vested interests in extractive capitalism.

Throughout these chapters the 'unfinished business' of the settler colonial state emerges in the often invisible yet utterly pervasive spectre of carcerality. Further evident is a demonstration of how the 'national pattern', in Lemkin's terms (1944), of Victoria River life is being destroyed by the carceral settler state. I conclude with a local and in another way spectral counter-narrative to such eliminatory logic and an articulation of the complexities of life in a 'post'-colonial world saturated by all-pervasive carcerality.

Chapter 1 – Things people say about prison

*We're sitting in the park 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're 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 back 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; "*gagung tharran *[my paternal classificatory granddaughter]" 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.*

Scenes like this are nothing out of the ordinary on the Victoria River, where carcerality saturates the fabric of everyday life. While throughout this thesis I frame hyperincarceration as generalised assault on Aboriginal (ways of) life, this interaction demonstrates how from a quotidian perspective, news of a relative's imprisonment can pass without remark. Every person in the scene was subject to the incarceration of a close relative, and yet the whole conversation was a non-event: there is no sense of shock, grief, nor a question or substantial comment in response to these thoroughly everyday affairs.

In this chapter I analyse the things people say, and do not say, about prison and imprisonment to approach an understanding of the carceral domination of Aboriginal life. This chapter probes things which are said and left unsaid about prisons, those captured within them, and carceral systems more broadly. Through an analysis of everyday discourse and conversational interviews I consider how carcerality is a presence in Victoria River life that is both devastating and mundane. I begin by exploring the lack of perceivable response or affect when somebody goes to jail, which I analyse through a localised expression of the 'routinisation' (Green 1995) of imprisonment. This dynamic characterises and contextualises

much of the chapter's subsequent content: I go on to explore different ways Victoria River people understand, or present their understandings of, incarceration, which despite degrees of ambiguity nevertheless centre the destructive, amoral and sinister conditions to which imprisoned countrymen are subjected as a matter of course. I follow by describing a Victoria River perspective of racial capitalism and carceral economies in which *gardiya* (white people, settlers) are understood to profiteer from various forms of Aboriginal dispossession. These locally held convictions, combined with my subsequent analysis of an item of Victoria River prison lore, reveal a web of convictions which subvert dominant narratives about prisons and prisoners. Evident throughout this chapter is a radical incommensurability (Povinelli 2001) between the ostensible politico-juridical rationales to police and incarcerate and the grounded perspectives of a hyperincarcerated demographic.

Things people don't say

We are pulled up on a dirt road by the beeping and flashing headlights of brand new station wagon coming from the opposite direction. It's Gregor (36), who has just arrived from interstate: he's coming to stay for a while with his wife, their newborn son and Gregor's oldest son. There is an excited rush to meet the new baby and to exchange greetings, tobacco and gossip. Gregor leans over into our car and asks Molly (65, his classificatory mother) "where Leonard?", his classificatory brother. "'Im locked up", says Molly, busy fawning over the baby boy. "Uh? I thought imin kamat [I thought he had been released]" asks Leonard, and Molly responds "'imin kamat, and imin go straight back in again [he was released and then he went straight back into prison again]". "Mmm", grunts Gregor, and he pauses a moment before shifting and moving on.

One of the most consistent responses to news of imprisonment I have noticed among Victoria River people is the non-reply. A case in point is in the opening vignette to this chapter, and James' response – "indit?" – when he found out that his (classificatory) brother-in-law was in jail. *Indit* is a Kriol term which equates to what functional grammar scholars would label a 'mood tag' – that is, an utterance which carries no meaningful content other than its emotive declaration. Murmuring *indit* (lit. 'isn't it?') is how Kriol speakers acknowledge that something has been said without agreeing, disagreeing, or

requesting clarification – which is to say, communicating comprehension without commitment. A standard English equivalent might be “is that so?”, or even “uh huh”. What was clear when Alice and James exchanged news was that the current concentration of imprisonment in their extended family barely demanded comment. Similarly, Gregor hasn’t seen Leonard in several years between their respective prison stints and living far apart. Before his departure Gregor had heard that Leonard had been released from prison and was hoping he would be coming this way: Gregor had a newborn son to introduce and a new car to show off. In between the time Gregor hit the road and arrived here his brother was back in prison again. His “mmm” in response to this news conceals a complex arrangement of emotions: he was unaware of Leonard’s incarceration but not surprised to find out; he is disappointed, but not particularly upset. In the decades he has been alive he has encountered this same instance hundreds of times.

Also absent from the dialogues between James and Alice or Gregor and Molly was any question about the new instances of imprisonment. Not where, not for how long, and least of all why. At risk of an ethnocentric appeal, if I were told that somebody in my family or friend network had been imprisoned, I would probably be shocked, worried, would certainly want to know where and for how long, and would probably be more than a little curious as to why. Away from the field my family and social life is largely unmarked by manifestations of state violence like policing and prisons, but on the Victoria River life is constantly punctuated and perforated by punitive intervention. Such pervasive consistency is the reason the “why?” so often comes as an afterthought, if at all. At a certain point ‘reasons’ really don’t matter: when people “go locked up” on an everyday basis, ‘why?’ is simply not worth asking.

I emphasise the significance of these interactions because they evoke not just the prevalence but also the depth of the psychodynamic grasp that hyperincarceration has in Aboriginal social life. Incarceration is one of the most extreme measures that a state can take on an individual (or population) level, and yet so often on the Victoria River news of imprisonment does not register as cause for alarm or upset: it is simply a run-of-the-mill event. This is not indicative of a widespread moral decay or social perversion in Aboriginal

society. Rather, over generations of intensifying hyperincarceration, this state of emergency has become the status quo: the severity of imprisonment has become effaced.

The routinisation of imprisonment

Persistence through impossible conditions defines the lives of populations which have been rendered superfluous (Bauman 2004). Pierre Bourdieu (1992:171) introduced the notion of 'symbolic violence' to characterise the everyday practices and underlying conditions of oppression which become "so deeply grounded" that domination "imposes itself as self-evident" to the extent that is becomes "taken for granted" and experienced as "natural". Nancy Scheper-Hughes demonstrates how particular social conditions yield the possibility of 'death without weeping' among impoverished families in rural Brazil (1993). She describes an "ontological insecurity" (1993:220), produced by extreme poverty and reinforced by consequently relentless infant deaths, which conditions and reconfigures a society's approach to death: pervasive consistency renders recurrent tragedy natural and acceptable. The same affective stance underpins what Victoria River people demonstrate when a relative is arrested, again, or imprisoned, again. The lack of question, comment or emotion that Alice, James and Gregor exhibited is a conditioned response to the permanent, invisible crisis that hyperincarceration represents.

What happens when permanent crisis underpins the conditions of life – when emergency becomes a "state of being" (Stevenson 2014)? The normalisation of everyday violence has been well-established as an aspect of subaltern societies globally (Bourgois 2009; Das 2007; Farmer 2004; 2009; Leifsen 2011; Margold 1999; Weiss and Six-Hohenbalken 2012). In her ethnography on military-occupied Guatemala, Linda Green (Green 1994; 1995; 1999) describes how terror becomes "inscribed in individual bodies and the collective imagination through a constant sense of threat" (Green 1994:227). What she calls 'the routinization of fear' "wears down one's sensibility" (1994:230) to terrifying circumstances:

> Such routinization allows people to live in a state of chronic fear with a façade of normalcy, while that terror, at the same time, permeates and shreds the social fabric… one cannot live in a constant state of alertness, and so the chaos one feels becomes infused throughout the body (1995:231)

Routinization, for Green, is essentially an unconscious, embodied mechanism to make unliveable circumstances endurable. It renders life possible, traumatic events normal and violence invisible, while the accumulation of tragedy permeates bodily, wearing away at the very foundations of life. Routinization structures a 'façade of normalcy' ('indit?') around radical events like a close relation's imprisonment ('mmm'). It conceals recurring violence ('imin kamat, and imin go straight back in again') by making its cumulative impressions undetectable.

The two scenes I have described so far demonstrate how incarceration has become an everyday aspect of Victoria River life. When people are locked up frequently and as a matter of course, carcerality bleeds into the fabric of sociality, becomes a *taken for granted* feature, part of the furniture. Framing hyperincarceration as a *routinized* aspect of Aboriginal life makes sense of the lack of perceivable disruption that I often observed in the wake of events of arrest or imprisonment. That imprisonment represents something terrible and something normal at the same time can be explained by the fact that existential threats are absorbed bodily so that everyday life can continue. This articulates the nature of carcerality in contemporary Aboriginal social life: everywhere, unquestioned, unremarkable. This is not to say that Victoria River people do not care about incarcerated relations, but to demonstrate how a society has become numbed to a saturating carceral regime. This is where symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) comes into the picture. The 'insidious effects' of routinisation are most profoundly visible in the generalised acceptance of imprisonment.

Things left unsaid occasionally erupt. In Aboriginal sociality alcohol resembles as a substance which may permit the user to do and say things which would otherwise be reprehensible (Brady 1992; Sansom 1980), and in this context the truism *in vino veritas* has particular salience. One evening a woman in her late 30s, my sister, commenced a drunken rampage which continued for most of the night. At one point, once she had destroyed most of the belongings in her house, she staggered outside and howled into the night sky: "I MISS MY BIG BROTHER, I MISS BY LITTLE BROTHER, I MISS MY HUSBAND". At this time all of these men, usually residents of this same camp, had been incarcerated for some time. This climactic outburst was the expression of cumulative social wounds left unexpressed,

internalised and embodied, fuelled and intensified by the high level of alcohol in her bloodstream. It revealed the silent truth underpinning this aspect of contemporary Aboriginal life: profound loss, protracted sorrow and abstracted grief.

Victoria River perspectives on imprisonment

This section offers an overview of various and at times contradictory perspectives that Victoria River people hold about prisons, imprisonment, and prisoners. I give an overall impression of how Victoria River people perceive and experience prison, both directly as captive and vicariously as loved ones of captives. Although some individuals exhibit indifference towards or even endorse incarceration under some circumstances (one woman remarked casually that her very close relation 'got what he deserved', for instance) others condemn incarceration as an egregious social harm. Some Victoria River people suggest that prison is 'not so bad' or 'like a holiday camp', others emphasise the unsettling, sinister and inherently unjust aspects of incarceration. As a general comment, people who *have not* directly experienced incarceration tend to adopt 'common sense' or ambivalent understandings of prison, while those who *have* exhibit more nuanced yet emphatically negative perspectives.

Prison as 'holiday camp'

Jan is in her late 40s. Although she has never been incarcerated, over the course of her lifetime she has seen countless men and women in her life go through the prison system: her father, brothers, uncles, sons and nephews, and a sister. She says that in recent decades a trope has emerged in which "young men these days don't even care if they go to jail. He might reckon 'oh, I'm a jailbird me, I can go back any time'… It's more like a holiday camp, not even punishment really".

A common theme during my conversations with Victoria River people about hyperincarceration, and in everyday discourse, was the notion that prison is 'not that bad'. Jan's position was one that many other Victoria River people expressed, and one offered by people who have been imprisoned, by those who have pursued charges against countrymen, and by people with very close relations in prison. This is by no means the only

opinion that Victoria River people express about prison, but it was nevertheless a common refrain. One woman in her late 20s joked that she reckons her father "must like it in there", otherwise "why he wanna go back there all the time?". This, paired with Jan's comments, underpins how routinisation transforms an extreme measure into something mundane, as non-threatening, as 'not that bad'.

There are several aspects of Aboriginal hyperincarceration in particular which make prison seem relatively harmless. The first is that over the last few decades rates of Aboriginal incarceration in the NT have skyrocketed, so normalisation is plotted on an intergenerational scale. Another is a popular trope about imprisonment internationally, contained in the old adage that prison offers 'three hot meals a day, TV and a bed to sleep in', denoting particular creature comforts of carceral institutions. This certainly rings true for many remote-living Aboriginal demographics, where material impoverishment means the guarantee of regular meals, one's own bed and access to television are considerable luxuries. The 'holiday camp' notion is reinforced when men and women who return from prison tend to have put on weight, a result of the calorically dense prison diet. A common refrain is that incarceration offers a respite from overconsumption of or dependence on tobacco, alcohol and other drugs – however, by all reports these and other substances are readily available in NT prisons.

General 'improvements' in Northern Territory carceral infrastructure also contribute to a sense that imprisonment today is not as bad as it used to be. Many of those I interviewed suggested that conditions had improved since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (see Anthony, et al. 2021). This may well be the case for adults incarcerated in Darwin Correctional Centre, constructed in 2014 to replace the "forbidding" and "repressive" conditions of the now defunct Berrimah Prison (Robinson 2009). Part of the reason for the new build was to resolve the constant issue of overcrowding at Berrimah, but as the rate of imprisonment in the Northern Territory continues its upward trajectory the same problems persist. While "old Berrimah" was subsequently converted into the globally infamous Don Dale Youth Detention Centre, the new Holtze prison offers a relatively refreshing change to anyone who has experienced its precedent, or the Alice Springs Correctional Centre, or any of the older prisons in Western Australia's Kimberley region. All

of these institutions, the new Darwin one included, are sites of suffering, where captivity, distress and deteriorative 'carceral weathers' (Maynard 2020) are the order of the day, and radical overcrowding forces captives to sleep in hallways or on the floor. The horrors at Don Dale meanwhile continue to intensify: amendments to youth bail laws among other factors mean the NT's youth detention population is now triple what it was when the Royal Commission was triggered, and instances of interpersonal violence, self-harm and suicide attempts are escalating (Bhole and Brancatisano 2022).

Another aspect of the 'holiday camp' trope is the fact that when Victoria River people are incarcerated they are reunited with close family and other countrymen. Both men and women described in positive terms the experience of arriving in prison to the calls of their close relations from adjacent cell blocks and across the yard. I am also told there are entire cell blocks dedicated to particular Aboriginal ethnic groups in Darwin prison. One outcome of Aboriginal hyperincarceration in the Northern Territory is the oddly pleasant sensation when a close relative appears, and the sense of camaraderie developed by doing time together. This represents a carceral manifestation of the 'expanding domain' (Peterson 2000) of contemporary Aboriginal socialities (see also McCoy 2008).

Such camaraderie enables the perception that incarceration can function as a way to abandon or escape complex family situations and demands. Brian McCoy (2008) suggests that Puntu men of the Western Desert embrace the notion of a custodial sentence when it permits them to suspend or exit toxic domestic relationships, or to 'punish' family members who have wronged them. Although I did not observe such dynamics during fieldwork, the inverse notion was present: not long after one young man was imprisoned, where he joined his close cousin-brother and a maternal uncle, he received news that his classificatory mother had been killed by her partner. Compounding his grief, a short while later he and his kinsmen found themselves sharing a cell block with the man who killed her. While from the outside prison might seem like a 'holiday camp', events and circumstances inside can be categorised by overlapping shades of boredom, camaraderie, regret, brutality, dread and terror. As incarceration becomes more normalised at the societal and individual level, relational ties are uprooted, rearranged and destroyed.

‘Prison is not a home’

“This here not his home, really”, says Freyja (34) about her family’s camp and her brother, the “jailbird”. “That’s his home there la Berrimah [prison], he only come back here for holiday now and then. He might come back, look [visit] mum and dad, his kids, hang round coupla month, then he gotta go back home again”.

Freyja speaks with a resigned ambivalence about her brother, who she expects will spend the rest of his life in limbo between prison and freedom. She describes him as a ‘jailbird’, a term Victoria River people use to refer to men whose lives and lifestyles are heavily inflected by imprisonment. The term conjures the image of a cage which prevents escape but also insulates from the outside: a bird who spends its life in a cage can’t survive beyond it. Men in their 20s and 30s who embrace the ‘jailbird’ trope as part of their identity quite often refer to prison as their ‘home’.

I suggest here that rather than innate criminality, the route to calling the carceral facility ‘home’ lies in the collapse of social structure synthesised by hyperincarceration. Although Victoria River people are almost always incarcerated alongside kin, the prison experience offers an absolute inverse of the powerful emphasis on values of mobility and personal autonomy prevalent in many Aboriginal societies (Eickelkamp 2017; Martin 1993; Memmott, et al. 2006; Myers 1979; Myers 1991; Peterson 2000). This perhaps goes without saying but imprisonment is an experience structured by deprivation, including freedom of movement and of sociality. From an Aboriginal perspective this amounts to the collapse of relationality: there is no way to relate to kin outside the prison apart from visits, which by tyranny of distance and logistical difficulties can be remarkably infrequent, and expensive, timed and monitored phone calls. One of the most conspicuous expressions of Aboriginal relatedness, ‘demand sharing’ (see Peterson 1993; 2013), is radically recast under the prison regime: demands can be made over the phone or in person, but cash deposits and fund transfers are facilitated and maintained by the Department of Correctional Services, often subject to bureaucratic delays and mismanagement (Gibson 2020), accessed within the prison by means of iris scan technology and valid for the purchase at the prison commissary only.

The assertion that 'prison is not a home' was most prevalent in conversations I had with older men and women who had endured long periods of imprisonment, a message they also emphatically communicate to their own children and younger generations. Belinda (mid 40s) told me that her young son visited her throughout her long-term imprisonment, but she asked her sister to stop bringing him altogether after he begged them to let him stay there with his mother at the end of one visit. Belinda refused, emphasising to him that "prison is not a home". Jerome (46) told me that when he was imprisoned his wife struggled to feed their children, so his teenage sons started breaking into shops and private properties. They saw themselves as doing the right thing by stealing food and other commodities to provide for their family; if they got caught it would mean fewer mouths for their mother to feed, and they would be able to see their dad again. Jerome told me that whenever he spoke to his sons on the phone during this period he pleaded with them to stop, to understand that "prison is not a home".

When I asked what they meant by this assertion, Belinda and Jerome both responded in with reference to Country and relations. Jerome said that "everything you got here [in community]: tree, grass, hunting, fishing, seeing family, he got nothing there [in prison]: only wall, fence, concrete": in other words, the values of relationality, mobility and autonomy and their opposites. The same notion was evoked by a 17-year-old man who had recently returned from a several-month-long stint in Don Dale. He sang a song he had composed during his time there, centring on the name of his family outstation and the line "[camp], that's my home". He would sing this song every night, and by the time he got out all the other young men there knew it too. While incarceration can mean being reunited with countrymen and forming new social bonds in prison, it is also a profoundly destabilising life event which entails being removed and alienated from everything one holds dear.

Gallows humour

Blaise (19) has just been arrested and is being held in the back of a paddy wagon.[15] *His grandfather, Peter (72) pleads with the cops to let him go; he is worried his grandson, who suffers from complex health problems, will have a seizure in the hot cage. The police disregard Peter's concerns and drive off, while Blaise howls at the indifferent officers, proclaiming them racist dogs among other things. Peter is visibly distressed. A short while later a group of his granddaughters arrive – they saw the paddy wagon leave and want to know what happened. "That youngfella locked up" Peter tells them, and the girls break into laughter – "What!?;, "Oh my god!". Peter laughs along with them as he describes what happened, and about Blaise's accusations of racism. A little while later Peter's classificatory brother arrives on scene. He and Peter laugh some more as they discuss what occurred.*

In everyday life, Victoria River people respond to matters of arrest and imprisonment with dark humour, smiles and laughter. My fieldnotes contain dozens of these instances: an older man laughing when he suggests his son, soon returning from a decade in prison, will not recognise him; a mother teasing her infant son by laughing and telling him "you locked up, like your daddy", gesturing to the bars of the his cot; a young man who finds out his close cousin-brother has been arrested laughing with a dark smile – "that's it, Donnies [Don Dale], probly coupla years"; young men waiting outside court smiling, laughing and joking about their prospects of imprisonment. Certainly one aspect of these scenes is the routinisation of imprisonment – a society so numbed to carcerality that it can be simply 'laughed off'.

I suggest that these smiles and laughter reveal what is most truthful about imprisonment: despite its normalisation, at its heart it is dreadful. Since Stanner (1982) Aboriginal humour has been known to emphasise the darker side of life. Pearl Duncan (2014) asserts that Aboriginal humour is a subversive mechanism for cultural survival in the face of ongoing oppression. Gillian Cowlishaw observes how laughter for Rembarrnga people "is regularly wrung from the vagaries of everyday life, even in otherwise painful circumstances" (2012:399). In the Warlpiri context Yasmine Musharbash (2008a) suggests that laughter

[15] 'Paddy wagon' is a vernacular term for police vehicles fitted with cages for containing arrestees on the rear. The term is rooted in colonial, anti-Irish racism at the former imperial centre.

relates to humour but is also associated with pain, weakness and fear. She asserts that in Yuendumu "the 'darker side' of laughter is hypercognised"; that Warlpiri people "have an elaborate conscious understanding" of negative connotations and consequences of laughter" (2008a:276). In his discussion of an Aboriginal theatre performance about Captain Cook and the treatment of Nyinin people during the settlement era, Anthony Redmond (2008) explores the interplay of humour, caricature and laughter with historical and ongoing colonisation, and racial tensions and hierarchies. Following Freud he argues that laughter both expresses and relieves anxiety, but that it also has a 'revelatory' quality: in laughter is the power to expose, unmask and disarm the menacing. Megan McCullough suggests that laughter serves to convey otherwise "inexpressible tensions" (2008:284).

These positions help explain why Victoria River people 'laugh in the face of' imprisonment. I suggest that smiling does not necessarily convey positive emotions, particularly in the context of hyperincarceration. In the same way that people more broadly can be said to 'smile sadly' or 'laugh in the face of danger', Victoria River people tend to laugh and smile in response to the familiar, discomforting and terrifying aspects of imprisonment. These scenes demonstrate that just as incarceration and other interactions with the criminal justice system are ordinary, everyday aspects of life for Victoria River people, they are still cause for grief, discomfort and distress. The most common response – a joke, laugh or smile – might serve to both mask and signify the event's sinister implications.

Prison as deeply sinister

Victoria River perceptions of prison and imprisonment often dwell on the macabre. While in mainstream Australia Aboriginal imprisonment is practically synonymous with the term 'deaths in custody', I find this notion inadequate to address the sinister aspects and implications of carcerality. Indeed, Victoria River men who have endured long sentences tend to recount, and reflect on, suicides and other deaths of countrymen which occurred or which they witnessed during their imprisonment, and anyone with even fleeting prison experience returns knowing the physical and sexual violence of the sort inherent to carceral facilities. These deeply sinister notions form a backdrop to Victoria River life, where everybody knows somebody who has been, or currently is, incarcerated. Here I discuss

particular local convictions which reframe and explain these tropes according to Victoria River understandings of the world.

Black magic and sorcerers are ubiquitously feared on the Victoria River. People take day-to-day precautions against witchcraft, such as ensuring toenail clippings and hair trimmings are kept or properly disposed of so they can't be appropriated for nefarious purposes. Victoria River people visiting particular regions pay close attention to those in their presence; a common concern is that sorcerers or 'kidney fat men' will approach travelling parties and 'put a curse', undertaking discrete actions (leaving a hand print on a vehicle, or a pebble or twig in a travel bag) to ensure their target will have a car accident or fall sick. Even sitting and camping orientations can be potentially dangerous: sorcerers can utter quiet songs which carry down-wind to make victims incurably sick or weak.

Top End prisons (in the NT as well as Queensland and WA) contain "all different-different blackfella" – that is, Aboriginal people from all over the jurisdiction's catchment. Victoria River people are wary of Aboriginal people from particular regions where the practice of black magic is said to be far more prevalent than their home communities. Speaking about his middle-aged son's imprisonment, Peter (72) says that his primary concerns are about the prevalence of 'witchcraft': "too many people from [particular desert region], too many from [particular riverine region], make me worry too much". Men share stories about witch doctors who use their supernatural capacities to fly ('like a bat') by cover of night from remote desert locations to the prison in Darwin, seen passing through fences and cell walls to exact revenge. One young man mentioned to me that his close relation had "come back different" after his sentence, and that many were convinced he had been cursed or possessed – by a witch doctor or something worse – while he was imprisoned.

These anxieties are well-grounded in a society afflicted by chronically poor health and the constant turmoil of high and young mortality rates, particularly from car accidents and complex (preventable) medical conditions. That they are especially concentrated in the prison environment is a testament to the brutality of these facilities and their conditions. These fears are compounded by the carceral integration of 'different-different blackfellas', the enforced and protracted sharing of space with Aboriginal people from across the Top

End. While Victoria River people acknowledge the sense of camaraderie developed with other prisoners, the diversity of Aboriginal ethnicities, particularly from regions known to foment sorcerers, remains a source of concern to prisoners and their relations. The conditions of imprisonment – cells, blocks, cell-mates, a lack of elder relations with protective capacity – make it impossible to take measures to intercept black magic, and the issue of close confinement opens prisoners up to 'misfire' – sorcery intended for one person inadvertently afflicting another (see also Sansom 1980).

These everyday torments are stirred by occasional eruptions of physical and sexual violence in prison. Members of the political and legal apparatus routinely condemn Aboriginal communities as anarchic milieus of depravity and violence, and yet in the societal vacuum of the prison where the carceral state is most proximate, violence is the order of the day (here I draw on Lea 2012). Given the intense, inescapable and overlapping forms of violence intrinsic to carceral regimes globally (Michalski 2017) it is little wonder that a popular conviction among Victoria River people is that many of those who are remanded or imprisoned, regardless of alleged offence, "come back even more mad". This is to say they return from prison exhibiting violent tendencies and hints of psychological deterioration. Everybody, particularly those of hyperincarcerated demographics, knows that once a prison career has been initiated it tends to persist and intensify.

On the matter of carceral sexual violence, a notion that is whispered but rarely discussed is that Darwin's Holtze Correctional Facility was built on a women's sacred site.[16] This, some maintain, is the reason why "alla men there goin mad, bakimbat mijel [all the men incarcerated there are going mad and fucking each other]". Homosexual relations among both men and women appear to be a near-universal feature of carceral facilities globally – although in this context the insinuation is implicitly underpinned by settler colonialism and its infrastructure. This notion bears similarity to the prolific 'built on an Indian burial ground' trope of US popular culture: within colonial ruins taps and walls run with blood, (settler) victims are wrought with terror and unspeakable things occur. Yet rather than settler

[16] My own understanding is that there is at least one and possibly two women's sacred sites within a few kilometres of the prison.

colonial occupiers, this item of Aboriginal prison lore renders the *native* the object of recourse. Aboriginal (male) prisoners are thus doubly punished: contained in an inherently depraved custodial facility, and subjected to whims of the land and the embedded ancestral forces the prison occupies.

When reflecting on the prison environment men sometimes describe it bluntly as "like living in hell". Some state outright that the Devil lives somewhere in the depths of Darwin's prison: "night time you can hear him there, laughin all night, I bin hear him myself". Two men (in their 30s and 70s respectively), neither of whom have been imprisoned, asserted that in prison "it's only hellfire and sufferin". These men formulated a compelling analogy: they rendered magistrates as "that judge at the pearly gates [of heaven]", legislative material as the Bible, "that book of life", and public defence lawyers as saviour: "that Legal Aid like a Jesus for we mob indit?". In both this analogy and in quotidian discourse, prison is firmly associated with hell: "it's all slaves down there in hell, but no slave in heaven, no boss". These intersecting convictions are cited to explain the prevalence of death, physical and sexual violence, suicide and more prominently suicide attempts, degraded mental health and pervasive, invisible suffering inherent to the prison environment.

'Doing time for nothing': whither justice?

Across the Top End, Aboriginal people assert that even after someone returns from prison for a serious crime, they are often required to present for 'payback' or some other form of recompense. "Blackfella way", I am told, entails that when you kill or grievously harm another person "you still branded" even after enduring a prison stint. "We know he done his time in prison, but we still wanna see blood come outta his head", Mariana (in her 40s) told me: "our law we give im hiding, then that family satisfy, that's his payment. *They doing time in prison for nothing*" (my emphasis). Accompanying 'payback' practices, well-documented in Aboriginal societies (Finnane 2001; Moisseeff 2013), is the more subtle mode of conflict modulation of dispersal – individual or collective packing up and moving elsewhere during times of strife. Mariana's assertions reinforce a notion also emphasised by abolitionist scholars: even if someone commits a serious crime, their temporary incapacitation rarely brings a veritable sense of justice to affected parties. This is not to disregard the very

legitimate concerns of victims for whom the only possibility of personal and existential security is now vested in imprisonment, but a gesture towards local expressions of what other forms justice and conflict resolution can look like.

'Doin time for nothing' is a succinct summary of Victoria River perspectives on the futility of imprisonment. Mariana's brother (also in his 40s), who had endured a single but substantial period of imprisonment, similarly summarised his view "prison gets you nowhere". This observation was made in reference both to his own experience and to the prison system more broadly. These siblings' perspectives recall Ruth Wilson Gilmore's (2007:10) description of incapacitation as a "do-nothing" solution to the social harms which prisons ostensibly remediate. In the language of the courts, the logic of punitive sentencing is based on the principles of the *denunciation* of, *punishment* for and general *deterrence* among the public for whatever category of offense has been prosecuted, and for the general betterment of *community safety*. Criminologist and political scientist Michael J. Coyle (2018) asserts this logic is 'mired in utopia', and Victoria River people offer analogous critiques. Beyond postures toward (or failures of) 'justice', however, there are other local understandings of the (f)utility of incarceration.

An inversion of the 'doing time for nothing' sentiment is demonstrated by Freyja's description of her husband's incarceration: "he's doin my time". Although he had beaten her terribly Freyja's comment was not a verdict about the deliverance of justice (she didn't want him to go to jail, again) but made in reference to the NT's Victims of Crime compensation scheme. This process requires victims to report offenses in a timely matter and to assist police in their investigation and prosecution; if the latter is successful the victim is compensated for harms and losses suffered. Because her injuries were already the subject of a police investigation prompted by a mandatory report by health staff, and because he was therefore going to jail (again) anyway, Freyja had quite an ambivalent perspective on her involvement. She submitted that "I only get that money if he do all his time". From Freyja's perspective her *complicity* was to be compensated rather than her victimhood – although two years later she had abandoned her attempts to collect the promised compensation citing obscure bureaucratic procedures and indifference. Another financial 'benefit' of incarceration is the capacity to pay off fines. Section 89 of the NT's

Fines and Penalties (Recovery) Act (2001) permits fine defaulters to serve prison sentences instead of monetary remuneration to satisfy outstanding penalties. For those who live in poverty and who are going to jail anyway, doing time circumvents the more protracted punishment of paying off exorbitant fines at a rate that would be impossible for an unemployed, remote-living Aboriginal person (see also McCoy 2008). In these instances one may not necessarily be 'doing time for nothing', even if the consolatory 'something' is simply the temporarily alleviation or staving off of impoverishment. Again absent here is any empirical trace of the principles ritually recited in the juridical apparatus during sentencing remarks.

These varied positions reflect a broad consensus among Victoria River people that incarceration has very little to do with justice. It does not reform or rehabilitate people accused of crimes, but rather exposes people to a range of depravities which corrode, destabilise and kill. Prisons are thus understood to be sites of deviance – but Victoria River understandings render the *situational* rather than the individual as deviant. This is to say that, despite its utter normalisation, incarceration is still considered inherently dreadful, especially by those who have endured it. Crucially, this is not the case because of the people in there, but because of the deteriorative characteristics of prison: it is built where it shouldn't be, the devil lives there, it is rife with black magic, and it enforces upon Victoria River prisoners proximity to the wrong people – not *bad* people necessarily, but 'different-different' people of the wrong sort. These conditions produce situational violence and make the people who endure them much worse off. Situations like Freyja's ("he's doin my time") point to complex, deeply personal transactional entanglements between the moral economy of intimate relations and the market economy facilitated by the carceral state.

"Getting rich from blackfellas": the political economy of hyperincarceration

"That policeman gettin rich, that lawyer gettin rich, that judge getting rich, everybody gettin rich from lockin up blackfellas. They don't give a fuck".

James (38) here expresses a common perception among Victoria River people that, in carceral economies and in a general sense, "gardiya just getting rich from blackfellas". This holds true in a context of settler colonialism and capitalism, where all non-Indigenous wealth is the product of 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey 2004). Pamela McGrath (2016) demonstrates how the largely non-Indigenous professionals engaged in native title claims reap significant salaries – and, I would add, social capital – for their work, while Aboriginal native title claimants receive little tangible return on their protracted efforts. Tess Lea (2008a; 2012) demonstrates how to a significant extent the entire Northern Territory economy depends on the perpetual failure of service delivery and the maintenance of a constant state of Aboriginal inequalities. More broadly, the notions of the prison-industrial complex (Davis 2003) and carceral capital(ism) (Clear and Rose 1998; Wang 2018) emphasise the material and other forms of wealth gained from carceral dispossession on an international scale. Here I describe a Victoria River understanding of settler colonial political economy with an emphasis on carcerality (see also Redmond 2022).

James identifies how the prison and other custodial institutions commodify Aboriginal bodies and Aboriginal life, and how the beneficiaries are the almost exclusively white and settler individuals who comprise the human cogs of the criminal justice machine. Informing this position is a Victoria River perspective on the predominant values of white Australia, which are oppositional to those of Aboriginal societies – a radical cultural difference which is sometimes the subject of Victoria River conversation. Peter (72), who has worked with many different *gardiya* in his life, asserts emphatically that "*gardiya, im different*" ("white man, he is/they are different").[17] One of the things that differentiates settlers and Aboriginal people, he observes, is orientation to kin: the dual assertions that "gardiya don't worry bat family" (white people don't care about family) and that "gardiya only worry bat work, money" are at the crux of this difference. Victoria River life is primarily arranged around relationships with kin: having relations, socialising with relations and being a good relation are often the fundamental goals of Aboriginal socialities (Liberman 1985; Myers 1991).[18]

[17] Similar observations are precedented and common in Aboriginal Australia (see for example Muta, quoted in Stanner 1979:23-24).

[18] While money is often a source for conflict in Victoria River families and groups, t through the institution of 'demand sharing' money can come to represent a material expression of relationality, a pecuniary

Gardiya, on the other hand, seem to spend their lives in ruthless pursuit of material wealth: individual accrual for individual pleasure and gain. This is a position widely held among Victoria River and other Aboriginal people in the Top End, where a steady flux of temporary, majority-white, settler workers make up most of the service provision workforce – people who often leave their families for work in distant locations. Travelling long distances is not alien to Victoria River people, but the idea of migrating long distances, without kin, and for commercial rather than relational motivations can be baffling.[19] Such is the affective distance between *gardiya* kin that Peter formed the opinion that: "I know what kind *gardiya*, even if family member *finish* [die] he can't cry" – so powerful is the intrinsic desire for wealth and accumulation that notions of family and relatedness do not resonate: *gardiya* do not even cry for their dead.

This is not to say that Victoria River people do not, or do not understand, work. Rather, Aboriginal perspectives on economic engagement can be characterised by what Dianne Austin-Broos (2006) calls 'working-for relationships': personalised, relational obligations amongst Aboriginal people, and between Aboriginal people and settler individuals and institutions (governments, workplaces, various non-government and government-adjacent bodies). Economic relationships are thus situated within a broader moral economy, rather than a commercial economy, a distinction which emphasises relationships between people, on one hand, and a relationship between things on the other. In the former, labour is an obligation arising from personal relationships which are hierarchical and economical – for example, the kinds of relationships typical of those between Aboriginal workers and cattle station managers or local government administrators. This perspective emphasises moral obligations within sustained, personalised working relationships: I have worked on so-and-so station for so many years, so that manager *owes me* in ways for which pecuniary remuneration can only partly account (see Redmond 2005). The underlying logic is that 'working for' an entity (individual, organisation, company, state) engenders relationships of moral reciprocity, particularly from the 'worked-for' (employer) to the 'working-for'

representation of social worth. Demanders can assert that in refusing to share funds the refuser considers the demander "rubbish" or "nothing".

[19] Victoria River people do indeed migrate domestically to other regions. These migrations are often temporary or impermanent, often for training or education, or relocating with a spouse, carers or other kin. Relevant to this broader discussion are Melinda Hinkson's (2018; 2019) recent studies of *exile* among Warlpiri people.

(employee). This form of relational and economic engagement has elsewhere been described variously as 'intimate dependenc[y]' (Redmond 2005) or 'nurturant hierarchy' (Peterson 2013). Such Aboriginal economic engagements emphasise a morality grounded in relatedness, while dominant pursuits – those of settler market society – are for the most part oriented towards currency, commodity and value. To an extent this accounts for a common conviction among Victoria River people that police, prison guards, judges and lawyers retain bonuses for the fines, convictions and prison sentences they conspire to deliver and maintain at Aboriginal expense.[20]

When James condemns the entire legal apparatus and its practitioners as "getting rich from blackfellas", emphasising that "they don't give a fuck", he refers to the amoral, relationally devoid orientation of the settler-market-carceral economy, drawing on data readily available to Victoria River observers: that police, prison staff, the judicial class and other 'service providers' are nearly always white or non-Indigenous; they are well-paid, and have nice things to show for it; and they tend not engage in demand sharing relationships with the Aboriginal people they police and administer. In this sense, officers policing remote Aboriginal communities really do materially 'get rich from blackfellas'. This conviction also holds for broader carceral and custodial economies in which wealth is extracted from the dispossession of Aboriginal people, a local reckoning of global processes radiating from the United States (Davis 1998; Gilmore 2007; Green 2011; Wang 2018). Jackie Wang (2018) uses the term 'looting' to describe the carceral expropriation and dispossession of impoverished and racialized demographics in the United States. Framing such practices as *unrestrained* and *villainous* fits comfortably with Victoria River people's moral condemnation of predatory policing and of carceral industries more broadly, as the following demonstrates.

[20] A case in point is the periodic establishment of roadblocks on Victoria River arterial roads targeting driving offences during the holiday season. One Christmas, for example, local police intercepted several vehicles whose drivers were charged with multiple overlapping offences: drive unregistered vehicle, drive unroadworthy vehicle, drive with passengers not wearing seatbelt, drink with blood alcohol reading above legal limit. Once word of the roadblock got around, traffic to the local shops quietened to a trickle: everybody was worried they would be charged with what is known locally and internationally as 'driving while black'. While police usually flag such operations as an attempt at silly season damage control, Victoria River people asserted that the police were collecting "bonus money for their Christmas". The conviction that bonuses are accrued for arrests and prosecutions may not be evidenced by police or judicial policy, but it is underpinned by the moral imperatives I have outlined.

Hugo (18) spent around a year of his childhood 'la welfare' – that is, in the custody of foster families. Any young Victoria River person will likely be able to recount the approximate figures of remuneration that foster "carers" earn from "welfare": as Hugo sardonically put it, "alla gardiya there getting rich from takin alla black kid". Carers receive anywhere between $239.12 and $1025.99 per week for hosting foster children, depending on the child's age, their level of "need", and the location of the carer's home (NTG 2022a). From his own and his relations' experience 'la welfare' Hugo formed the view that welfare carers tend to host as many "welfare kids" as they can, many of them Aboriginal, while expending as little money on them as possible. Other young Victoria River people expressed similar views, lamenting the 'rubbish food', 'rubbish clothes' and rubbish lifestyle of living in with 'welfare gardiya'.

This method of 'getting rich' reinforces the perspective of settlers as driven solely by the motive of profit extraction, and as therefore morally corrupt. For some, like James and Hugo, this same conviction applies to all those individuals and institutions which reap parasitic reward from the dispossession of Aboriginal people: from work-for-the-dole facilitators and Centrelink personnel, to welfare workers and foster carers, to the entire carceral-legal apparatus and probably anthropologists and other do-gooders too. In all of these relationships gardiya *take* but they do not *care,* and the Aboriginal people from whom they extract profit are rendered product or object rather than subject. Victoria River people condemn the amoral, relationally-devoid orientations of this economic activity, which also happens to be the foundation of Australian society.

"Wolf Creek": hyperincarceration and settler-native relations

One afternoon we are filling up fuel at a remote roadhouse when a battered old ute slowly creeps past, its cabin and tray cluttered with knick-knacks and mechanical junk. The driver is an equally battered old white man wearing faded clothes and a cowboy hat, staring straight ahead. When Hugo (18) notices the man he freezes, peering cautiously through the window and following the ute's course in the rear-view mirror. When we are out of the car's line of vision he whispers to me: "Ol' Wolf Creek 'imself there look".

Here I examine an item of Aboriginal prison lore in the Northern Territory which reveals particular local convictions about incarceration, morality and settler-native relations. In the scene above Hugo was instantly paralysed with caution or fear by what he took as an encounter with a figure which preoccupies the imagination of young Victoria River people. The figure, 'Old Wolf Creek', is derived from the Australian horror film *Wolf Creek* (McLean 2005), which portrays the antics of a serial killer, Mick Taylor, and the grizzly fate of his victims, a trio of British and Australian backpackers touring the remote Kimberley region which the Victoria River is adjacent to. The film is fictional, but its themes and contents are loosely based on the deeds of two infamous murderers associated with the Australian outback: Ivan Milat and Bradley Murdoch (Blackwood 2007). While the former is now deceased, Murdoch has been imprisoned in Darwin since 2003.

Many Victoria River men who have been incarcerated have done time with Bradley Murdoch. Some know him well, while others have encountered him only briefly – but mythologies about the man and his life have filtered through to the ears and mouths of Victoria River teenagers as well as older people and children. I use the term 'mythology' because these narratives have developed orally and over time, the nature of their contents are somewhat legendary, and there is an implicit moral conviction underpinning their narration.

In everyday life Victoria River people refer to this figure as Wolf Creek.[21] The real-life Bradley Murdoch, presently incarcerated in Holtze Correctional Facility, is a white Australian who was sentenced to life imprisonment in early 2000 for the murder of a British backpacker and the attempted murder of the victim's girlfriend. Murdoch has never disclosed the location of the man's body, despite ongoing efforts by police, media and the man's family. As a convicted, cold-blooded, and apparently unapologetic killer Murdoch represents something close to archetypal evil in the (settler-)national imagination. And yet any Victoria River person, young or old, can tell you that in prison he presents as warm and unassuming, and that he "makes really good cake" – apparently when he is on prison

[21] Much of what follows blends documented facts with items of the local oral transmission. For clarity, when I use the unitalicised Wolf Creek I refer to the figure which preoccupies the imagination of Victoria River people, while my references to Bradley Murdoch entail issues of documented fact.

kitchen duty the desserts are superb. Many men who have done longer stints in prison know him personally, “like a mate”. It is unanimously reported that he is “real nice to blackfellas”, which I am told is atypical in terms of the broader race relations within the Darwin prison.

One outcome of Aboriginal hyperincarceration in the Northern Territory is this casual exposure to one of Australia’s most infamous criminals. Not just prisoners – anyone visiting relations can encounter him too, as I found while sitting with Blaise (19) in the prison visitation hall. As the room bubbled with reuniting families, we found ourselves sitting at a table right next to Murdoch. Blaise stiffened up when he realised who was next to us. His eyes popped open wide, and without turning his head whispered to me: “ay you look there one side: ol’ Wolf Creek indit?”, his eyes darting in the man’s direction. Blaise was utterly spooked: although a several of his own family members have met the man, his reputation was obviously intimidating for this first-time prisoner. We giggled nervously between ourselves and our conversation moved on. This goes to show that Murdoch’s reputation as a convicted murderer is still deeply relevant to people serving sentences alongside him.

Narratives about the life of Wolf Creek are common knowledge in Victoria River households. Some suggest that he is a reformed racist: he is said to have a faded tattoo on his arm depicting “one blackfella just hangin” – an Aboriginal person strung up by a noose – but he now expresses compassion and generosity towards the Indigenous people imprisoned with him. These notions of a past life of racism conflict with an over-arching narrative about the ‘true nature’ of the actions that led to his imprisonment, which from a Victoria River perspective adds complexity to the moral dimension of his character. This is where the mythology comes in.

Victoria River people have it that Wolf Creek grew up on remote pastoral stations in the Kimberley region. An orphan, he travelled through the region as a young man, living at the ‘blackfella camps’ rather than the residential blocks for white station workers. Wolf Creek was raised from a young age by Aboriginal people in these camps, who nurtured him, taught him about stock work, and fostered in him an understanding of Aboriginal ways of life. As a result, and demonstrative of the kind of morally- and relationally-oriented economic engagement highly valued within Aboriginal sociality, he developed a “lotta love for

blackfellas", but he also "really hates alla gardiya [all those white people]" for their brutal, degrading treatment of Aboriginal pastoral workers. Hugo described a common understanding of the rationale for the murder(s) that led to Wolf Creek's life sentence:

> He seen how they bin treatin alla blackfella la station, them workers, gardiya, and *how they still treatin us* – that's why he went all round Australia killin alla gardiya. Only one time be bin get caught, now he's locked up for life look [my emphasis]

Rather than a cold-blooded killing spree, Wolf Creek's deeds are rendered a rampage of retribution for the historical and contemporary treatment of Aboriginal people at the hands of (white) settlers in Australia's remote north. In the same way that frontier pastoralists brutalised, murdered and enslaved Aboriginal populations en masse, Wolf Creek indiscriminately wrought terror on tourists exploring a landscape haunted by the same settler colonial violence. Adding to this mythological complexity is the notion that although everybody knows he is currently imprisoned in Darwin, Wolf Creek somehow also roams remote highways, or is imagined to do so to the extent that young Victoria River people encounter him and fear his apparition.[22]

Victoria River mythology about Wolf Creek is loaded with mystique and moral ambiguity. It also shares parallels with another non-Indigenous icon who is celebrated by Victoria River people as well as anti-establishment settler demographics more broadly.[23] Ned Kelly was an outlaw (in)famous for his death in a police shoot-out on the frontier of settlement-era Victoria. In an article titled 'Ned Kelly Died For Our Sins' (1994), Deborah Bird Rose examines a short series of Victoria River oral histories and mythologies about the colonisation of the Australian continent. Her informants' described Captain Cook's (mythological) travels from Sydney, [24] north through Central Australia, to the mouth of the Victoria River. These narratives remain in currency among Victoria River people today. While Captain Cook is renowned as the embodiment of a murderous, rampaging and persistent colonialism, Ned Kelly is celebrated by Victoria River people for his violent antagonism of colonial authorities.

[22] There is a roadside rest area on the sparsely populated Victoria Highway which I have been expressly told never to stop at: "always got Wolf Creek hangin round there".
[23] Victoria River also remember and celebrate Aboriginal fugitive-heroes: Nemarluk is a widely-known regional example (Bundock, et al. 2019) as well as direct ancestors to people I work with, not named here, who are remembered as militant resistors to frontier colonial presence in the region.
[24] Captain James Cook led the 'first fleet' which eventually settled in Sydney's Botany Bay.

In Rose's and in contemporary Victoria River versions of history, Kelly is said to have followed Cook's trail through Central Australia, shooting police and destructive colonisers along the way. Victoria River people's figuring of Kelly as an anti-colonial figure of such mythical proportions, Rose argues, is evidence of an Aboriginal accommodation of an unambiguously moral force: while both Cook and Kelly were white male settlers associated with the frontier, from an Aboriginal perspective their ethical positions could not be more different. The celebration of Ned Kelly and condemnation of Captain Cook represent two sides of an overarching narrative of dispossession and resistance.

I suggest that contemporary Wolf Creek mythology reveals several intersecting convictions about prison and imprisonment. The first, and perhaps the most significant, is the appropriation of a settler fugitive's motivations and deeds to the world view of a colonised people. Like Ned Kelly before him, Wolf Creek represents a violent, murderous outlaw whose deeds nevertheless warrant a degree of moral credibility. Though their actions were certainly extreme, they are rendered conditionally justifiable given the equally extreme circumstances of ongoing settler colonial occupation. There are echoes here of Frantz Fanon's advocation of a 'violent praxis' of decolonisation at the opening of *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963:1-2): "the 'thing' colonised becomes a man through the very process of liberation", which is "always a violent event". Yet rather than a humanising, liberating violence of the colonised against the coloniser, the Victoria River imperative is vested in the deeds of (imagined) *settlers* who operate outside settler law and engage morally and pragmatically with Aboriginal people. A second and related conviction is the notion that those contained in prisons are not necessarily or inherently bad people. Indeed, Wolf Creek's solidarity with Aboriginal prisoners makes him more relatable, perhaps more *human*, than the police, prison guards and members of the politico-juridical apparatus who condemn Aboriginal people to sites of suffering and grow wealthy in the process. This is significant considering the widespread institutional racism and mistreatment Aboriginal people experience whether imprisoned or not, and the market orientation of the so-called "care" economy.

Conclusion

There is a fundamental disparity between the ways the judicial apparatus of the carceral settler state represents itself and the ways Victoria River people experience the brunt of its power. Unsurprisingly, members of a demographic so over-exposed to the mechanisms of 'justice' exhibit radically divergent perspectives to the stated aims of those who police and imprison. This is in part associated with the incommensurability (Povinelli 2001) between local Aboriginal approaches to life, morality, economic and social action, and the orientations imposed by the carceral settler state. Belinda, who emphasised the notion that *prison is not a home*, encapsulated this incommensurability concisely:

> *Gardiya* got law too, but different from us mob law. That *gardiya* law putting im [prisoners] in there, they doing white man punishment in jail.

White man punishment as outlined in this chapter consists of a futile logic manifest in material deprivation and alienation from kin and Country at deeply sinister sites which serve no function beyond the carceral economy.

Chapter 2 – Blame, a social practice

One afternoon, while passing through Darwin, Franklin and I visit Blaise at Holtze Correctional Facility. Franklin (21 years old) and Blaise (19) are very close cousin-brothers, and although Blaise has been locked up for a couple of months they haven't spoken since he was arrested. We spend most of the allocated hour joking and laughing in the crowded visiting room and exchanging updates about life inside and outside prison. Towards the end of our time Blaise announces that there is unfinished business to be resolved after his release. He leans in, whispering about his and Franklin's cousin-brother, Alexander (18), who Blaise holds responsible for his current predicament. "Im na [him now], that's the one really bin start everything". He explains in some detail how Alexander 'really' set the wheels in motion for his imprisonment. Franklin and I eventually leave Blaise in his bright orange prison garb and return to their uncle's camp, where everybody wants to know how he's doing. One of the first things Franklin mentions is that "He [Blaise is] blamin Alexander for that thing na" [i.e. for the events culminating in Blaise' imprisonment], before solemnly recounting Blaise's assertions in close detail.

This short case study illustrates a particular social practice evident on the Victoria River which is glossed in the local vernacular as *blame* or *blamin*. In this chapter I frame *blame* as a form of discourse and social action which saturates Victoria River life, and as a component of a particular cultural logic in which relations are a primary referent. I suggest that the Victoria River view of causality is densely *peopled,* which is to say that in everyday life, bad things always happen for a reason, and the categorical underpinning of causal explanation is almost without exception found to be other people. *Blame* can further be understood in terms of relational dynamics: I centre the state of relations between people as a primary factor in determining the ways causality and culpability are figured. From this perspective intentionality and the moral quality of acts themselves are not always relevant. In principle I suggest the logic of *blame* entails that bad relations yield poor (social) outcomes, and that poor (social) outcomes are tied causally to bad relations. Ultimately, when bad things happen people look for a 'socially relevant cause' (Evans-Pritchard 1937), and often what is most socially relevant in Aboriginal contexts is the network of relations which constitutes

individual and group identity (see for example Musharbash 2008b; Myers 1991; Sansom 1980).

The prison emerges as a critical domain for the discourse and social action of *blame*. During my fieldwork, almost every single instance of arrest or incarceration I documented was described by the captive and more prominently their close kin as 'really' the fault of another person. A woman whose husband was locked up asserted that his extended family, her in-laws, were to blame; the teenage children of an incarcerated man held his wife responsible; the husband of a woman who was arrested said his wife's sister was the one who 'bin really start all that trouble'. This disposition is not unique to the Victoria River context: assertions like that of Blaise above resemble what Basil Sansom described as "an item of Aboriginal prison culture" in which a significant proportion of incarcerated people are considered innocent and "'doing another man's time'" (2002:176). While this trope persists (prolifically), and while such Aboriginal *blamin* practices are broadly acknowledged and lamented by the judiciary, they have been scarcely (or adequately) analysed in the anthropological sphere, with the notable exception of Bree Blakeman's (2013) study of Yolngu emotion and morality.

For my purposes here 'blame' refers to the social distribution of responsibility or culpability for circumstances or events between people and groups. In standard English and mainstream society the term carries inherently negative connotations (Blackburn 2016); implicit in blaming is a lack of responsibility, transparency or fairness. Blame avoidance is a central pursuit of bureaucrats and public officials (Hood 2010) and signals recklessness, immaturity or unrestrained power. Ghassan Hage and Robyn Eckerlsey (2012) observe that discourses of blame and responsibility are tied to colonial and patriarchal notions of gender and race: the failure or incapacity to take responsibility is indicative of (feminine) immaturity and a (Black or colonised) lack of humanity. This notion is particularly pertinent in a settler colonial context governed by principles of liberalism with its cultural and political emphasis on the individual and individual responsibility (Povinelli 2008).

Victoria River style *blame* is categorically distinct from mainstream or normative understandings of causality and culpability, and this is particularly apparent in perspectives

emerging from the judicial apparatus.[25] In a televised interview widely accepted to have precipitated the 2007 Intervention, a former crown prosecutor asserted that "Aboriginal people choose not to take responsibility for their own actions", and that *victims* rather than *perpetrators* are often blamed or face consequences when someone is arrested or imprisoned (Rogers 2006). Forensic psychologist Malcolm Frost describes a tendency in Central Australian Aboriginal societies whereby a "(non-driving) survivor of a motor vehicle accident" or "someone who is merely in the presence of someone who dies" can be blamed for death or misadventure, pathologizing this dysfunctional 'guilt by association' trope as a response rooted in complex trauma (2014:91-92). More recently a Northern Territory supreme court judge lamented during a bail hearing that "anyone with any passing familiarity with Aboriginal custom … would understand that the attribution of blame … extends well beyond the direct perpetrator" (Mackay 2021). While I acknowledge these positions, approaching an understanding of *blame* requires the suspension of a normative (and proscriptive) perspective which renders the 'failure to take responsibility' (or to 'properly' ascribe causality) as infantile, pathological or subhuman. My aim here is not to excuse or justify a social practice or reconcile it to the requirements and demands of normative carceral rationality, but rather to pursue a basic anthropological objective of interpreting and analysing social phenomena from a particular place in time.

In this chapter I analyse *blame* as an intrinsic aspect of the cultural logic informing Victoria River life and social action. I emphasise that charges of *blame* are laid constantly in everyday life, so to facilitate a sustained analysis I attend closely to a handful of case study vignettes. I begin by briefly describing some fundamental aspects of local social logic and ontology, then describe an inherently *peopled* view of causality in which *all* events are interpreted categorically as having happened because of (related) others. I go on to demonstrate how the state of relations between individuals and groups informs how causality is interpreted and how *blame* is cast. I conclude by returning to the issue of Aboriginal hyperincarceration in the Northern Territory and reflect on the implications of *blame* in this context.

[25] I use terminology in this chapter referring to causality, culpability, liability and responsibility, as well as the broader concepts of rationality and ontology. While I acknowledge that these terms are semantically and politically loaded, I deploy them here as part of a conceptual matrix encapsulating my understanding of the social practice I seek to describe.

Land, life, thought and causality

We pull up at a remote stretch of the Victoria River, spill out of the car – myself, a handful of older women, a young man and two young kids – and amble down the steep bank. As we approach the river brandishing fishing lines everybody starts 'singin out' in Ngaliwurru and Kriol. The women first, then the kids and the young man, call out to address named and unnamed ancestors: "come on old people [ancestors], gimme big fat barramundi"; "jaju [maternal grandmother]! all your family here hungry, send us lotta fish".

'Singin out' is practiced explicitly to garner and consolidate good relations with ancestors, which will hopefully in turn yield good outcomes during a fishing trip. Events like this are fundamental to and ubiquitous in Victoria River life, where recently- and long-deceased ancestral and mythical entities are a quotidian, omnipresent fact of life. Ancestors observe, communicate and intervene in ways that are open to discursive interpretation (Povinelli 1993c), and any outcome – positive or negative – during and on return from trips 'out bush' can be attributed to the mood and motivations of "old people" (ancestors) or other relevant criteria. Victoria River people explain the rationale of 'singin out' in the following terms:

> So that old people know you, [you know?]. Might be they hear you comin, smell your sweat, if you never come here for long time he might reckon 'hey, who this person?'. Then they hear you singin out [with] language, they reckon 'oh that's my countryman, family!'. He gonna look after us then.

Aboriginal societies in Northern Australia often emphasise the significance of language and sweat, which infuse with Country and in doing so dramatically influence the disposition of personal and totemic ancestors (Povinelli 1993c). These entities are prodigiously responsive: when pleased they provide for their kin, but they are also subject to volatile mood swings, and when jealous or incensed their responses can assume epic proportions (Sansom 2002).[26] 'Singin out' is a way of fostering benevolent sentiments with ancestors who ensure

[26] For example, there is a particular gap in escarpment on the Victoria River which is said to "jam shut" (like a garbage compactor) immediately, fatally and without warning if those passing through it speak in anything other than the specific local dialect. Further, an entire film *Wutharr: Saltwater Dreams* (2016) by the Karrabing Film Collective whose Countries are located to the north of the Victoria River, explores a series interpretations of a 'bad event' including jealous ancestral rage.

providence and protein in the form of fish, turtle, goanna, kangaroo, bush turkeys, etc., and ensure safe passage. Fundamentally, and this is the implicit logic for all cases of blame I discuss in this chapter, the underlying logic is that 'good relations = positive outcome/event', and the inverse, 'bad relations = negative outcome/event'.

This approach to life and land is grounded in what David Brooks (2011) has labelled the '*tjukurrpa*-thinking' of Ngaanyatjarra speakers in the Western Desert. He suggests that "much of their *habitual thinking* about the world does take place through the lens of the *tjukurrpa* [Dreaming or Dreamtime]" (2011:200, my emphasis). Brooks uses this formula to explain how "many ideas and events that might seem random or baseless to an outsider are actually part of a *systematic perspective on the world*" (ibid., my emphasis). This is to say that contemporary Aboriginal ways of thinking and interpreting everyday phenomena often appeal to the time or process that shaped and gave, and continues to give, meaning to the landscape that supports Aboriginal (ways of) life. To be clear, I do not describe an impulsive appeal to the 'everywhen' (Stanner 1972) or claim that Victoria River people understand all events that occur as 'coming out of' the Dreaming. Rather, with Brooks I emphasise a *habitual* (way of) *thinking* that appeals to implicit and pervasive processes and dynamics which, although not readily apparent to an eternal observer, shape (understandings of) the world. As a *systematic perspective* this way of thinking is evident across all aspects of Victoria River social life including *blame*.

Blame and interpersonal relations

A great deal of what goes on socially in Aboriginal Australian contexts can be understood through the paradigm of what is most socially relevant in that context, namely the states and dynamics of relations between individuals and groups (Musharbash 2008b). *Blame* is no different. In this section I approach this social practice from a perspective grounded in the mundane interactions of everyday life. I have four aims: to demonstrate how Victoria River determinations of *blame* are intrinsically *peopled*, or how all (bad) events are figured as the outcomes of other people's doings; to illustrate how *intentionality* has less to do with causality and culpability than (perceived) *proximity* to an event; to conceptually align the relational dynamics evident in the discharge and reception of *blame* with the moral logic

and social practice popularised as 'demand sharing'; and to demonstrate how the direction of *blame* often conforms to the state of relations between individuals and groups. Throughout I emphasise that a *systemic perspective* or *habitual* (way of) *thinking* is evident. I begin with two simple case studies.

Case study 1

One afternoon Molly (65) arrives back in camp after spending the morning doing CDP activities. She is exhausted and takes a seat on the veranda. I pour her some black tea then move to the bench to get the milk powder. As I approach Molly with it in hand, she holds the cup out for me to put in a couple spoons. Then the hand holding the tea starts to shake, and she cries out, 'hurry up Jangari!' – but it was too late. The joints in her hand and wrist, weak, inflamed and painful from arthritis, give way, and the hot tea spills onto the concrete beside her. "Oh look, Devil bin work" she mutters under her breath, and then at me, louder, "that's cos you never bring that milk quick enough!".

Case study 2

We're heading into town to get supplies for the birthday party of a three-year-old boy. Callum (29), the child's father, has 'hired' me for the trip, and on the morning of our departure tells me to pick up his brother and nephew before collecting him from his house. I pick them up from the other end of the settlement and arrive back at Callum's place, where he sits casually eating breakfast. Impatient, Callum's brother tells me to "blow horn", while he and his son yell out the window for Callum to hurry up. Callum takes his eggs to go and we hit the road. Then, twenty minutes down the highway, Callum makes an ominous declaration: "ahhhh, you know what". "What wrong" – "my wallet back there la camp", he sighs, "my key card there, everything". Without his wallet to fund our expedition the trip would be pointless. I slow down and make a u-turn as Callum adds "you mob bin hurry me up too much see", in reference to our beeping and calling out during his morning meal. I curl my lip but the others are unbothered as we double back.

Blame as intrinsically *peopled*

When bad things happen, Victoria River people are quick to identify a reason, and that reason is nearly always determined to be another individual or group. Case studies 1 and 2 demonstrate how habitually *blame* is evoked in everyday life, and how readily others are pulled into the causal dynamics of an event, however mundane. Somebody was blamed for these events the very moment the poor outcome was realised – in the first instance I was causally associated with Molly's spilled tea, and in the second instance it was the rest of us who made Callum forget his wallet. As my notations suggest, even when empirical observations suggest other causal elements may be at play (Blakeman 2013), *blame* is evoked to redistribute culpability.

This underlines a densely and intrinsically *peopled* view of causality and of *blame*, which I suggest is an aspect of the *systematic perspective* on the (social) world described by Brooks (2011). Documenting *blame* and its social distribution became something of an obsession during my fieldwork. I recorded only a handful of 'bad events' in my fieldnotes for which nobody was to blame, or for which somebody voluntarily identified themselves as liable. In all others, including everything from vehicle malfunctions to missing items, weather events to housing evictions, arrests to illnesses, accidents and deaths, blame was readily ascribed. This was the case even when other causal explanations were readily apparent. The implication is that, from the Victoria River perspective, all events are caused by the doings of others. In a context of universal kinship classification, others are nearly always relations.

Victoria River people place high emphasis on shared experience as a foundational aspect of relatedness, and this is a perspective associated with the notion of cosubstantiation. This is a concept prevalent in Aboriginal societies (Povinelli 2008; 2011; also termed 'consubstantiation' in Tamisari 1998) where land and kin share the same essence and are mutually constituted. The mutual constitution of self, space and relatedness through shared essence is made explicit in attention to sweat. For example, by living at Victoria River households, sharing intimate space and life, I was told my sweat became 'mixed up' with that emitted by those in my camp, producing a set of shared understandings and mutual obligations which can be termed 'relatedness'. I want to make the case here that

consubstantiation is fundamental not only to the mutual constitution of Country and kin, but also the dynamics of *blame*. This notion of shared identity is the reason charges of *blame* are so readily issued and accepted among close kin.

This peopled view of causality also applies to relatively abstract phenomena and events. During a particularly hot wet season afternoon the approach of a looming, black cloud was eagerly anticipated, but when it diverted from its proper course over our camp everybody complained and sought an explanation: "must be that old fella [at a nearby settlement]", somebody suggested. This old fella's wife is well-known for her perilous fear of thunder and lightning, and it was agreed that he "bin huntimaway that cloud" at her request. Another case in point, when you are struck by a bout of sneezing Victoria River people inevitably identify the reason as "someone callin' your name". This someone can variably be a lover who misses you, relations somewhere recounting a story in which you feature, or (more maliciously) somebody "talkin' shit la you".

In the same way that the outcome of a fishing trip is vested in the work of (ancestral) relations, when Victoria River people look for a causal explanation it is nearly always found in the doings of kin. From this perspective, nothing 'simply happens'. Just who or what is to blame is context-specific, and such determinations are the product of interpretive work (Blakeman 2013) which accounts for a good deal of quotidian discourse concerning social events. Particularly relevant here is the fact that the Ngarinyman term for 'to blame' is *gurrwara*, while the term for 'clever man' (witch doctor, healer, sorcerer) is its derivative, *gurrwararan* (Balwanjer, et al. 2019). If a clever person is one who consults and analyses particular criteria to divine an explanation or a cure, in more profane circumstances a 'blamer' is one who interprets or comprehends before pointing the finger.

Peopled blame and blamed objects: an exception?

Sometimes when bad things happen Victoria River people blame, or taken action against, objects rather than people. For example, in the midst of excessive demands for cash from kin a woman might exclaim "I'm gonna bust this keycard true god!", and during or following a particularly dramatic argument over the phone it is not uncommon to (threaten to) 'bust' or destroy the phone in response. Superficially these dynamics may pose an exemption to

the peopled 'rule' of *blame*. In a social context where relations are a primary referent, however, objects are mediums for the expression of relatedness.

Bree Blakeman describes this notion in her study of Yolngu emotion and morality (2013). In that context, the prospects for an object which 'comes between' kin are dire (2013:191-193). Action must be taken to restore the state of relations within a social unit, and if an object causes the disruption, the most expedient resolution is to destroy it. While objects in this context suffer the physical consequences, Blakeman also observes that it is the one judged to have *allowed* the object to 'come between' kin who receives blame. It is not always the case that a blamed person's possession is damaged or destroyed. Keycards, phones and tablets, televisions, vehicles and other commodities are all liable to suffer this fate if they are seen to disrupt the relationships between people who value them. Gary Robinson (1995:334) describes how such "dramatic gesture[s] of appeal" on the Tiwi Islands draw attention to and seek resolution of relational turmoil.

Another 'object' frequently subject to *blame*, and a prominent issue in Aboriginal discourse about hyperincarceration, is the matter of grog (alcohol). Alcohol is neither a person nor an object, but a powerful substance (Brady 1992), particularly in matters of conflict between individuals and groups. Grog is often a feature of unsanctioned fights, 'jealousing' and events of domestic and family violence, and when it features it is usually the object of *blame* for such bad events. Victoria River people frequently lament the influence of grog in these domains, and both rationalise and condemn such conflict as "just grog talking". When men return from lengthy, grog-induced prison sentences, their loved ones often assert that "you gotta leave that grog now". Again this renders grog as something which 'comes between' relations, demonstrating that even when people are not directly identified or blamed, it is relations between them which are the primary concern.

Blame, conspicuous others and intentionality

If one accepts that all events are caused by people, understanding *blame* becomes a matter of determining *who* is liable for an event. Molly and Callum's almost reflexive assertions of blame fell immediately upon the close company who were present during the event,

demonstrating how *conspicuous others* can be held liable by virtue of proximity. I think that if Molly's husband or grandchild, or Callum's wife and kids, or indeed any other relations, were party to those events rather than myself, they would have been blamed in my stead. Merely being present during an event, even as mundane as those I describe, can render one culpable for the outcome. This is elsewhere termed 'guilt by association'. I consider this issue in terms of a broader set of Aboriginal values concerning collective identity and shared responsibility.

In 'mob' life, Basil Sansom emphasises that a sense of "collective liability" characterises the unfolding and interpretation of social events (1980:62). The implication is that bearing witness to, or being in the vicinity of (say within earshot), an occurrence implies consenting to it and being held responsible for the outcome (1980:96-99). Case studies 1 and 2 demonstrate this notion in the way that Molly's assertion fell immediately upon myself, and in the way my company accepted Callum's charge about making him forget his wallet without question. In this context the notion of individual responsibility is subsumed by that of the aggregate, a tendency which is also evident in other Aboriginal societies. For the Pintupi, Fred Myers suggests that "an individual's internal states" are conceived "as extensively connected with a 'web' of significant others … that European observers would describe as external to the self" (1979:350), while Gary Robinson (1995:330-335; 1997:311) describes similar dynamics in Tiwi families and social conflict. In the Melanesian context Marilyn Strathern (2021:32) notes that "an agent or doer of an activity is often separated from the person (or happening) who compels the action", which Anthony Redmond (2005:235) observes in Aboriginal societies of the Kimberley region. Such appeals to a relational aggregate further comprise the *habitual thinking* informing the social logic of *blame*.

From this perspective, and accepting that everything happens for a *peopled* reason, it follows that conspicuous parties to or witnesses of an event can be associated causally with the outcome. Molly's tea couldn't have just spilled by itself, and she certainly didn't just happen to spill it. Callum didn't simply forget his wallet. The logic of Victoria River-style *blame* entails that conspicuous proximity can be associated, implicitly or explicitly, with causality.

Crucially, when proximity implies causality, a blamed individual's intentionality is beside the point. In the case studies I have described and the formations of *blame* that were delivered, my and others' best intentions were rendered immaterial. What is material in matters of *blame* is who was where and doing what – and, as I elaborate below, what the states of relations were between those involved. The notion of the innocent bystander has little currency in this context. For example, during particularly dramatic circumstances, such as unsanctioned fights or instances of domestic violence, some in proximity might comment "I don't wanna be witness for this" and excuse themselves while others mediate or intervene. The subtext of such an action is that, regardless of intent, the self-excusing bystander knows they may be implicated in the case of a 'bad event'; to refuse to bear witness is to take measures to avoid receiving *blame*.

Instances of *blame* via proximity imply personal moral failure, however small, and regardless of intent. Molly and Callum's imputations suggest that the conspicuous actions evident reveal underlying defects in motive and social action: laziness in the former and impatience in the latter. These affective allegations were tied causally to the poor outcomes which eventuated. Blakeman (2013:190) observes the same dynamics in an Arnhem Land context: "people are not concerned with the morality or possible consequences of any particular individual's particular or discrete actions" as much as they are with feelings which have been hurt or relations which have been disrupted. On the Victoria River the latter – matters of relations – are always the most socially relevant criteria.

Blame as an expression of relatedness

Being part of a 'mob' (social unit) means circulating in that group's particular moral economy, and in the Victoria River context this inevitably entails receiving, redirecting, and dishing out *blame*. This being the case, and although *blame* pervades everyday life, there is a particular set of context-appropriate responses which Victoria River people draw on in these interactions. Here I suggest that these dynamics conform to a particular genre of Aboriginal moral logic and social interaction concerned with the distribution of resources among kin.

When I first became aware of *blame* I was overcome by how pervasive it was in everyday discourse and sociality, and by the predominantly composed temperament with which Victoria River people responded to imputation. This was the case for both dramatic events like arrest, imprisonment, injury or death, and for more mundane events like those described in case studies 1 and 2. When the rest of our party was blamed for Callum forgetting his wallet, everybody else simply accepted the charge non-verbally. When Molly's tea spilled I too accepted the blame without comment, even though the charge didn't align with the facts as I saw them. I know from experience that directly disputing even a mundane charge is an act of impudence. Once, following a disagreement which arose when I vehemently denied a charge of *blame* for a trivial 'bad event', I later asked a companion what one is supposed to do when gratuitously blamed for something. He seemed bewildered, as if the answer were obvious, and replied, "just take it!". Accepting a 'false charge' (in low-stakes circumstances) is more socially pragmatic than outright denial. Further, there is a general standard of 'etiquette' concerning *blame* which I briefly describe.

Paying close attention to these dynamics, I found that just as often as blame can be graciously (nonverbally) accepted, it can also be deflected and redistributed. Rather than "where is my hat?" Victoria River people demand to know "who bin take my hat?" (a *peopled* interrogation), and leaving a charge open – "I don't know" – is much less common than diligent, pointed deflection – "I don't know where you bin leave that hat". A recipient of *blame* might respond "*you na!*" (Kriol, lit. "you now", functionally translating as "[not me, but] rather yourself!"), expediently bouncing imputation back to the original blamer. That being said someone facing a particularly egregious instance of blame might retort "hey, don't *blame-bat* me!", or retrospectively assert their innocence by commenting "that mob bin just *blame* me". Another common and appropriate response is to deflect blame further afield. If my mother blamed my brother for having eaten all the food in the house, for instance, he might reply instantaneously that "that other mob la Top Camp, must be" in reference to his younger brother and nephews. In this way mundane charges of blame can be bounced around like a proverbial hot potato, until culpability is no longer relevant or emotions have been sufficiently defused.

The implication is that charges of *blame* are delivered and apprehended according to particular criteria. I propose approaching an understanding of these dynamics through the admittedly well-trodden paradigm of 'demand sharing'. Demand sharing is a social practice rooted firmly in (precolonial) Aboriginal hunter-gatherer sociality, and persistent contemporarily, whereby relatedness between kin is expressed in the demand for and distribution of resources (Peterson 1993; 2013). Previously such resources included meat, vegetable foods and manufactured commodities; presently the predominant medium is cash while meat, other foods, grog and tobacco as well as abstract resources such as care, intelligence and space are also vectors for relatedness (Mullins 2007; Sansom 1980). The logic of demand sharing has it that social relations are maintained and reproduced through "continuous micro-social interaction" (Peterson 2013:172): individuals constantly 'test' the state of their relations with kin via requests for whatever resource. One is theoretically entitled to a share of resources held by one's kin if one asks for it; if the demand is obliged, relations are good, and if it is refused, relations are bad. The moral logic underpinning this practice places value primarily on 'responding positively' to demands (Peterson 2013), and outright rejection is an offense (Austin-Broos 2003; Mullins 2007; Peterson 1993). Patrick Mullins demonstrates that sharing along these lines is "the key organising principle of the Aboriginal domain" (2007:39), and that this way of relating, or doing relatedness, is "fundamental to mob life" (2007:33). More broadly Kenneth Liberman observes in a central Australian society that "congenial fellowship" – agreeable, balanced relations amongst kin – is the "always the primary concern of Aboriginal social life" (1985:13). What I have learned from Victoria River people is that *blamin* operates much the same way. When one is charged with blame for an event or outcome, it is one thing to accept or deflect the charge with practiced skill, and another to deny the charge outright.

I propose understanding *blame* as an intangible social resource which can be distributed according to relational dynamics. Based on our established close relations, the matters of the spilled tea and the forgotten wallet were insignificant charges to be graciously accepted. Marika Moisseeff (2013) describes a feature of Central Australian sociality which she labels 'relational responsibility'. Being related, in this sense, entails being part of a network of mutual support for one another's actions. To blame, in this context, is to stake a claim, or to acknowledge that one circulates within the moral economy of particular individuals and

groups. From this perspective all accusations I have described so far can be considered forms of 'testing' – that is, conduct carried out "to establish the state of a relationship" (Peterson 1993:870). Molly's impulsive imputation and Callum's redistribution of responsibility can be rendered requests hedged on shared identity and relatedness: despite their assertive nature they are less denunciations – "you have done this!" – than entreaties – "will you share this burden with me?". Allowing oneself to be blamed for the mundane consequences of another's doing is an implicit act of generosity. In this way, *blame* is a way of interacting that is premised on, and governed by the regulations of, relatedness.

The attribution of *blame* according to relational dynamics

Here I demonstrate how the direction of charges of *blame* follow the state of relations between individuals and groups. Yasmine Musharbash (2008b) illustrates that the primary social concern among Warlpiri people are the relational dynamics between individuals and groups, and how relationality is a subtle yet central force in the organisation of everyday life. In the Victoria River context I have found charges of *blame* operate much the same way. I address this through another case study.

Case study 3

One morning Gloria (63) asks me to take her to town, 300km away: she wants to drop off a huge load of frozen beef to her son's place (they've run out of money and everybody is hungry), and we're bringing Hugo (17) and Andreas (16) along for the ride. Eric (11), Gloria's grandson, is furious *that he can't come – there's no room in the car and he has to go to school anyway – and an enormous tantrum ensues. There's no calming him down, and the frozen meat is already defrosting in the morning sun, so Gloria urges me to hurry up and we regrettably leave Eric to his tantrum. Halfway to town we're veering round a corner on the highway when a large bird of prey leaps up from a kangaroo carcass it's picking at on the side of the road. Startled, the bird tries to flee, but its escape route is in train with our course on the highway corner. I can't brake safely or quickly enough, so the bird is collected by my windscreen, which smashes, and the bird bounces to the side of the road. Immediately Gloria mutters to me sagely, "that's why you gotta slow down". We pull over, and Andreas suggests we go try look for the eagle to see if it's still alive, so he and Hugo head off while I*

assess the damage. When they return the young men announce that the only trace of the bird is a single wing feather, which they present with laughter. Andreas comments "that Eric na": the others murmur their agreement, but I don't understand. Gloria elaborates that smashed windscreen is a consequence of our disgruntling departure in the morning, adding "you shoulda let him jump on for ride". With no phone reception and a lack of other options we have no choice but to keep driving to town at a crawl. To make matters worse, a short distance from town we acquire a flat tyre as well. This time Andreas just laughs and murmurs, "Eric".

This case study foregrounds an important aspect of *blame*, particularly the implicit logic that bad events are the doings of, or outcome of, bad relations. The issues of the bird, the windscreen and the flat tyre again demonstrate an emphatic commitment to a peopled interpretation of causality: our conspicuous departure was causally linked to the bad event. (Gloria's immediate response was to chide the driver – "that's why you gotta slow down" – which I suspect was an attempt to hedge any attempt *I* might make to blame *her* as the conspicuous instigator of our travel and hurried departure). Further, our best intentions (Eric had to go to school! He couldn't come but it was for his own good!) were rendered irrelevant in the face of his catastrophic upset. Explicitly, however, the rationale for the 'bad event' lay plainly in the ruptured relations that precipitated it: our abrupt and unsympathetic departure caused immense distress to young Eric, and the proportional consequences were our just deserts. His day was ruined and rightly so was ours. Whether the medium was ancestral rage generated by Eric's upset ("old people might be?") or supernatural capacities of his own ("he got *something* that boy") remains open to interpretation: what was immediately clear from the very moment of impact was that my or our actions towards him were the direct cause of our predicament. These relations turned bad caused the bad event.

In everyday Victoria River life, bad things always happen for a reason, and that reason is almost without exception found to be other people. Determining precisely who is almost always a matter of assessing the states of relations surrounding the bad event. Because Victoria River people closely scrutinise relational dynamics as a matter of everyday life (see Musharbash 2008b), determinations are rarely hard to come by and are most often attained

through examining conspicuous states of relations among people associated with the event. As Blakeman demonstrates, issues of responsibility and culpability "are strongly shaped by people's understanding of the relationships among the people involved" (2013:190). Tea doesn't just spill, wallets aren't just forgotten on their own, and huge birds certainly don't just happen to smack into windscreens: each 'bad event' must, by unquestionable necessity, be the consequence of something that somebody else has done. More often than not the source is found in a state of poor, destabilised or otherwise ruptured relations.

In this formation culpability is less a matter of good or bad *actions* than of good or bad *relations.* Case studies 1 and 2 can further be understood through this paradigm. Accepting that intentionality is not necessarily relevant when formulating a charge of *blame*, the spilled tea and forgotten wallet are attributed to some moral failure of the blamed. If we had been good relations we wouldn't have hurried up Callum, and if I were a good relation to Molly I would have filled up her cup more quickly. If you want to know who will be blamed for a bad event that has just occurred, assess the state of relations between the parties involved.[27] From flat tyres and miserable fishing trips to fatal car accidents and lengthy terms of imprisonment, this is the categorical underpinning of every single instance of Victoria-River-style *blame* I have encountered.

Blame and inter-group relations

The case studies and discussion have to this point addressed events which can be termed 'in-group' instances of blame. In this section my analysis of *blame* addresses an instance of blame between 'mobs' (differentiated social units). I first explore what constitutes a 'mob' generally and in the context of *blame* specifically, and then explicate my analysis through a brief, tragic case study.

[27] There are categories of exception to this 'rule' too. For example, when somebody in poor health is hospitalised before passing away, Victoria River people sometimes infer that hospitalisation, or more particularly 'that doctor' or 'that nurse', caused the death. This has to do with local conceptions about what happens in hospitals: some Victoria People suggest that these are sites of depravity where Aboriginal patients are experimented with, hooked up to machines which drain their life force, their blood and organs are harvested and they are gradually medicalised to death. Moreover, for remote-living Aboriginal patients hospitals are often a relational void – patients are surrounded by mostly non-Aboriginal medical workers as well as sick and dying Aboriginal people from all over the Top End, but often utterly without kin. This lack of relations in itself may be an underlying causal factor.

‘Mob’ life and ‘the given word’

Basil Sansom (1980) provides a detailed analysis of the logics that regulate and determine social action in the Aboriginal fringe camp pseudonymised as “Wallaby Cross”. His analysis relies heavily on what he terms ‘the given word’, which refers to a

> formulation consensually determined to express the outcome of political action in a mob and fashioned to provide mob-backed warrants that are treated as the grounds for further social action (1980:27).

Essential to Sansom’s analysis is the process of constructing ‘mob-centric’ truths – that is, statements that are formulated by a group and accorded the status of “objective existence” as fact by group consensus (1980:102). A given word is constructed, repeated, accepted and factualised in the inherently public social setting of camp life (see also Liberman 1985; Myers 1979) so that all who have business overhearing can aver, dispute, or silently – but actively – bear witness to the construction of a formulation. Kenneth Liberman (1985:44) describes this process as a “collaborative discursive activity” by which members of a group “produce a determination which is unquestioningly accepted as the absolute character or events”. In the context of *blame* Blakeman terms this formation a “jural community of kin” (2013:185). Because social units *work* to produce determinations (Blakeman 2013; Liberman 1985), the ‘given word’ of a mob is akin to its intellectual or actual property (Sansom 1980:25).

To place ‘the given word’ in a local context, because the Victoria River is certainly a ‘jurisdiction of the word’ in Sansom’s terms: any time Victoria River people gather, reunite or speak on the phone the first and most important object is not asking ‘how are you’ but finding out ‘what bin happening’. “Jerome and Pearl had a big argument and now Pearl is staying at her mum’s”; “those youngfellas from Top Camp tried to take on us mob but Blaise settled it real quick”; “Andreas is married up with that girl, what’s her name, Carlo’s daughter”. These interactions – exchanges of ‘intelligence’ – communicate what events have occurred, who was involved, and implicitly but crucially, what they reveal about the states of relations between kin. When Victoria River people call from, or have visitors in, prison, the same rule applies. Conversation does not dwell on how the captive is finding

their time in prison, the quality of food, the conditions of confinement and so on (because everybody knows all about this anyway), but rather gathering relevant social facts: intelligence on the states of relations between people. Because there are so many countrymen imprisoned at any one time, these exchanges go both ways.

Importantly, in the context of inter-group relations, Sansom maintains that

> The joint holdings of a mob's current words (…) *distinguishes* one mob from another, makes the members of one mob *different*, a *separate* and *distinct* collectivity among countrymen (1980:26, original emphasis).

In a context of universal kinship classification, where everyone is related, social units or 'mobs' are differentiated in part by their members' determinations concerning social events. 'The given word' is so significant in Sansom's analysis because he deems a group's political positions on social events as an essential foundation of the social unit. Membership of a 'mob' is based not merely on generalised principles of kinship or shared space and resources, but also on commitment to 'the given word' – a set of consensually-determined social facts.

I appraise the preceding case studies through Sansom's formulation of 'the given word'. On a micro-social scale the charges of blame that were laid in the wake of these events – the tea, the wallet, the windscreen – have the substance of 'objective' determinations about the causal flow of social events. Although perhaps to an outside observer these imputations may seem incommensurate with the actual or empirical factors that led to the unfavourable events, to the members of the mob holding intelligence – the given word – the facts are crystal clear. If anybody asked what had happened ('why is there tea all over the floor?', 'why are you back at camp so soon?', 'what the hell happened to Patrick's windscreen?'), the answer would be delivered in those consensually (if non-verbally) determined terms ('he bin make her spill that tea', 'that mob bin hurry me up too much', 'he bin upset that Eric'). To deviate from a 'given word' suggests frail allegiance to that word and the mob that holds it, equivalent to stating "I don't see things the same way as you". In "jurisdictions of the word" (Sansom 1980:195) like the Victoria River context, this amounts to a denial of shared identity and relatedness.

From this perspective, who you *blame* aligns with what social units you are part of, who you hold dear, and ultimately determines who you are. This is most apparent in the wake of tragic events and unexpected deaths.

Case study 4

A single-vehicle road accident claims the lives of two young people, a man and a woman. The two survivors are traumatised but otherwise relatively unharmed. The driver of the vehicle is charged with manslaughter and a raft of driving offenses, remanded and refused bail.

Here we have an immensely tragic event and a series of empirical factors associated with it. A vehicle, apparently driven by an intoxicated person travelling at speed and at night, overturned on a straight, unsealed section of road. Two lives were lost and many others ruined. In the days and weeks that followed, between periods of intense grieving, mourning families and 'mobs' discussed the events and circumstances leading to the tragic deaths. Nearly everybody related to those involved asserted that the cause lay somewhere outside of these 'empirical' factors.

While I spare specific detail on who held which convictions about the causal elements of this tragedy, I submit that the differential perspectives of family groups involved reflected pre-existing states of relations. Those most aggrieved, the close families of the deceased, quickly came to the conclusion that "that car can't just jump for no reason", seeking causality further afield. Some close relatives of the deceased man said they "don't blame" the driver because they know he would never do anything to harm his close relation. Others suggested the surviving passenger, their in-law, had actually been driving the vehicle but swapped places with the driver when he was knocked unconscious from the impact. One family contracted the services of a 'clever man' from a neighbouring region to assess particular criteria and determine the true culprit, settling conclusively on a finding of black magic. This charge located culpability well beyond the four who were travelling in the car, landing instead on a geographically-distant group of kin with whom those involved had bad relations. All of these family groups and more were grieving deeply, and directed *blame* in

directions which reflected their particular and jointly-held social realities – a 'given word' which both articulated and consolidated mob membership at a time when it mattered most.

While all these discussions were taking place, an entirely different set of findings were being deliberated by settler institutions. Days after the accident occurred a nurse visited mourners at the camp of the deceased woman's mother to check in and offer counselling services (which were unanimously declined). She remarked to the grieving mother that "it's all very sad but it's also a good lesson for you mob: no more drink driving". Medical workers contacted the family months later to provide them with a summary of the autopsy. They come home in tears, traumatised and expressing their own interpretation: the way they saw it, the cold delivery of precise details about the deceased's blood alcohol level and which parts of her body were crushed or broken seemed to suggest 'that clinic mob' blamed the deceased herself. Meanwhile the driver was incarcerated on remand for over a year, while police officers and specialist detectives inspected the crime scene and gathered statements and evidence to establish a case, which was prosecuted in slow motion within the overburdened judicial system.

In the wake of this immense tragedy, which radically altered the course of several people's lives, *blame* assumed a significant role in people's understandings (plural) of the event. The driver's imprisonment was an unfortunate yet relatively insignificant outcome to many involved – a footnote, a 'just so' aspect of life. His incarceration could not bring anybody back or right the wrongs done, which in any case were not consistently attributed to the driver himself. While he was imprisoned his young daughter was effectively orphaned and raised in the interim by different family members. Despite the legal findings, forensically and juridically determined, many of the groups involved maintain that the event was the outcome of an entirely different set of social facts.

Blame and incarceration

Chains of causality are identified through the social practice of *blame* and associated with instances of imprisonment in ways that rarely align with those determined by the criminal legal system. Although incarceration is a wholly normalised aspect of everyday life for

Victoria River people, when somebody goes to jail it is nevertheless apprehended as a 'bad event'. Perhaps most of all what makes imprisonment 'bad' from an Aboriginal perspective is the disruption of relations it causes, so when someone goes to jail their relations often have cause to cast blame. The inverse is also evident: when an 'enemy' or bad relation is incarcerated, the members of a dissenting mob may be quite pleased, which was the attitude of some groups in the wake of the tragedy described above. In almost every case of imprisonment I encountered during my fieldwork, however, *blame* was assigned by effected parties to somebody other than the person who was locked up.

Case study 5

Diane (19) and Ruby (15) have just found out that their father Leonard (41) has been sent back to prison. He has been 'out' for a couple of months and has been living in a regional town with his wife Rosie and their infant daughter. The text message Diane received from their step-mother Rosie was very concise: "your dad gone locked up can you call me back". The two sisters assess the situation from the moment Diane reads out the text message. They speculate that Leonard may have breached his parole conditions (which later turns out to be accurate), or that Rosie might have fabricated some "bullshit story" to tell the police. Ruby suggests calling her back, but Diane says "fuck that, what I wanna call im for! [why should I call her?]". She adds, "what kinda wife that Rosie anyway, why she wanna make him go locked up alla time?".

Diane and Ruby's response to their father's imprisonment demonstrates all the aspects of *blame* I have described so far. A *peopled* string of causality was formulated in which a related other – their step-mother, Leonard's wife – was determined culpable. While Rosie was distressed that her husband had once again been locked up, her intentionality was dismissed: rather her conspicuous proximity to his arrest was associated with a presumed moral failure towards him. By the time we all got back to camp, 300km from where Leonard had been arrested, the 'given word' there was that Rosie had gotten him locked up again. Casting *blame* along these lines articulated Rosie's culpability as relative outsider (step-mother, in-law) and consolidated the state of relations within the extended family aggrieved by Leonard's imprisonment.

This case study draws attention to the gendered nature of Aboriginal hyperincarceration in the Northern Territory. Statistics demonstrate that family violence perpetrated by Aboriginal men, often towards wives and female partners, is the most significant factor in their disproportionate rates of imprisonment. Families of Victoria River men incarcerated for this category of offence, however, attribute culpability according to what is socially relevant from their perspective. Most often the reason 'he' is locked up is because of 'her' doing – a moral failure associated with an inferred bad state of relations between them. Moreover, the wife or partner of a frequently imprisoned man can be said to 'always want him to go locked up' by his close relations ("you know that girl like, he can't sit and drink proper way, want to start argument, always jealousimbat bla im husband"), and women also refer to their imprisoned partners as 'doin my time'.[28] I understand such assertions as 'mob'-formulated determinations and moreover the products of a 'systematic perspective' on the world and social events. From other perspectives they could be read as expressions of a culture of misogyny, an entrenched practice of victim-blaming, and so on. I suggest only that such interpretations overlook what is socially relevant within particular Aboriginal domains.

In nearly every instance of arrest and incarceration I documented during my fieldwork, someone other than the arrested or imprisoned person was blamed. This much is true for incidents categorised by the courts as family violence, assault and reckless bodily harm, property crime, petty theft, hindering police activity, drink driving and other driving offences and manslaughter. In the case study which opened this chapter it was the imprisoned young man's cousin-brother who was blamed. In the wake of tragic events, particularly those culminating in death, blame can be cast far and wide and often includes charges of

[28] When women are blamed for their partner's incarceration they tend to live out the sentence elsewhere, even if they are the victim of violence leading to incarceration. A woman's departure in such cases conforms to the standard Aboriginal practice of withdrawing from sites of social friction. In the context of *blame*, relocation reflects and reinforces a state of bad relations with those who might hold the woman responsible. Often in circumstances of toxic partnerships which culminate in violence and imprisonment a man's family will encourage him during and following his incarceration to 'move on' and 'find a new wife', discouraging the couple from staying together, emphasising again the central role of (bad) states of relations.

sorcery.[29] In these cases responsibility is attributed to individuals and groups far beyond the scope of legal prosecution. Even within this scope it is often the case that charges are pursued and court orders are maintained despite requests from a victim that they be dropped. Bad events happen between people, people do bad things to one another, and these circumstances are prosecuted by the carceral state as crimes committed against itself with the judicial apparatus as independent arbiter. Rather than bodies of evidence collated and presented for prosecution in 'public' court settings where justice is determined and delivered, Victoria River people are usually more concerned with those principles I have described here.

Conclusion

I have described how a Victoria River social practice, firmly grounded in a cultural logic in which relations are a primary referent, renders bad events as the doings of related others. The directions in which charges of *blame* are issued most often conform to states of relations between individuals and groups. I have suggested that this social practice is at odds with the normative and proscriptive rationality of the criminal legal system, and it is to this tension which I now turn.

In their sentencing remarks judges and magistrates are often compelled to 'send a strong message to the community'. Such messages are frequently echoed by other state actors, like a nurse to a grieving mother. The 'strong message' ostensibly conveys that whatever prosecuting offence is intolerable to society, and the chosen form of communication most often assumes the form of a prison sentence. A number of months or years is conjured respective to the maximum sentence available, the seriousness of offence and precedents of personal criminal history, while discounts are offered to offenders who plead guilty, visibly exhibit remorse, and accept responsibility for their crimes. In my experience it is not uncommon for those facing charges to wholly refuse responsibility, because the reality as they see it does not conform to the allegation. Unfortunately for them, "that lawyer and

[29] As noted by David McKnight (1981a; 1981b) and others, charges of sorcery in Aboriginal contexts are explicitly associated with pre-existing conflicts and outstanding grudges – in other words, with the states of relations between individuals and groups.

judge just can't listen", yielding longer remand periods, more protracted court procedures and stronger prison sentences.[30]

Judgements and prison sentences are vested in the social contract that "we, as a society, agree on the rules and, as individuals, must follow them; if we do not, we are punished" (Braman 2007:103). The reality for many Aboriginal people is that legal and moral codes are imposed from outside and above, and without consent. The prevailing logic of *blame* implies, among other things, an implicit cultural refusal of the punitive colonial response to Aboriginal life. Some Victoria River people accept the social contract wholeheartedly: indeed, someone may become so incensed by an event or circumstance that they announce their willingness to 'do jail time' so long as retribution is dealt to the subject of enmity, be it intimate partner, bad relation, or police officer. Again however such verbal or physical social action is grounded in relational responsibility (Moisseeff 2013) rather than anything resembling those models of responsibility advocated quite forcefully by the carceral state.

I do not intend to justify 'victim blaming', relegate *blame* to the sanctum of 'traditional culture', or render Victoria River people cultural automatons. Rather I suggest that the methods of determining responsibility and culpability wielded by the settler state are quite distinct from this social practice firmly embedded as it is in a persistent and enduring cultural logic. At present two ways of thinking – ideological commitments – persist alongside one another incommensurably: on one hand, the individualising rationality of liberalism and its calls for Aboriginal people in particular to 'take responsibility' (Kowal 2012; Pearson 2011); on the other, a social logic governed by principles of relationality. This is quite evident when sentencing remarks go unheard by anyone not already occupying the echo chamber of the court room; these persistently 'strong messages' materially articulated in Aboriginal hyperincarceration mostly do not reach 'the community' addressed or imagined.

[30] In some cases judges acknowledge 'cultural practices and responsibilities' in leniency of sentencing for offences such as drink driving ('you were required to drive even while drunk because your kin insisted; in acknowledging your cultural responsibility I therefore offer you a reduced or suspended sentence'). These instances perhaps reflect one side of what Emma Kowal (2008) identifies as a dichotomy of *sanitized* and *unsanitized alterity*: forms of cultural difference congruent or not with the liberal politics of recognition. Other cases, those determined to require a 'strong message', would fall on the other side of this dichotomy.

If they are heard at all they fall not on deaf ears but ones tuned to an entirely different set of social facts.

As the supreme court judge I quoted earlier remarked, ‘anyone with passing familiarity’ already has some grasp on this notion. Perhaps anyone similarly positioned might also recognise the futility of relentlessly incarcerating people who think in terms of this social logic, or even consider the roles that the tangible criminalisation of a way of thinking might play in a broader context of carceral genocide. In carceral domains Aboriginal perspectives and lives are quite readily overruled and disregarded: under settler colonial occupation it is the settler “whose memory becomes history and whose ideology becomes reason” (Tuck and Ree 2013:642). This contradiction haunting the regulation of Aboriginal life is one product of the ‘unfinished business’ which the eliminatory logic of hyperincarceration strives to resolve.

Chapter 3 – 'They treat us like bullocky': a history

Most of the Victoria River region is occupied by pastoral land. Huge expanses of country are intersected by river and road, fenced with barbed wire, dotted with bores and tanks which cattle roam between from morning to night. Hay bales and salt licks dot country along with rusted, steel-framed holding yards where nothing but brown dust and dried shit are left once the muster is done. There are carcasses scattered throughout: the remains of cows who couldn't bear the heat, or who fell afoul of bullet or road train, dried heaps of bones and leather, their guts and eyes poked out and gobbled by dingoes, birds of prey and wild pigs. Once we came across a cow stuck in the mud, still alive, with only her head poking out: a slow leak from a bore tank had gradually melted the concrete-like dry soil into an impossibly soft, black custard of murky depths. We spent half an hour dragging her out with my four wheel drive and a tow rope, but by the time we did she was too exhausted to get up and died soon afterwards. She must have been stuck in there for days.

Cattle, or 'bullocky' in local idiom, are a significant part of contemporary Victoria River life. Most older people were born and grew up on cattle stations in the region, and their pride in having been a part of the Aboriginal pastoral industry offers a spark to any dreary conversation. While Victoria River people exhibit a profoundly compassionate disposition towards cattle, the same mammals comprise a primary and rich source of protein year-round, and everyone – men and women, children and old people – is at the very least familiar with the intricate and physically demanding task of boning cuts of beef from 'killer', a freshly slaughtered beast. This contradiction between compassion and brutality is often evoked in everyday discourse to express the feeling that one has been subjected to dehumanising treatment. Someone who feels neglected or unloved by kin might protest by claiming "you mob treating me like bullocky!", and older people who dread check-ups at the clinic might remark that "that nurse wanna drain me like a bullock" in reference to the extraction of blood and urine samples. Nowhere is this metaphor more poignant than in Victoria River conceptions of the carceral system. Men compare the stark conditions of their imprisonment – being moved from cell to cell or transferred between facilities without notice, lining up at feeding time – to being treated 'like bullocky'. One hot afternoon in a

group waiting for their turn outside the local court a middle-aged man nodded at a road train full of cattle groaning down the highway and commented “you look, they all on death row”, explicitly identifying the symmetries between his own and his countrymen’s predicament and the cattle being transported to their slaughter.

This chapter is rooted firmly in analogy. I consider the present regime of hyperincarceration as only the latest iteration in the historical trajectory of settler colonial management of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory. This is a historical, material and affective investigation in which I examine settler colonialism in various forms it has manifested on the Victoria River, from its advent in the late 19th century to the present. One aim is to make it clear exactly what Victoria River people mean when they draw comparisons between bullocky and prisoners. I stretch this metaphor beyond its local application, applying it more broadly to particular arrangements and dynamics which have continuously rematerialized throughout the history of occupation to the present. I consider the broader dynamics of relations between Aboriginal people and the settler state, including the provision of social services to remote settlements. By way of analogy I suggest that pastoral stations are to cattle as the settler state is to Aboriginal people: these relationships are mediated by moods and concrete structures of containment, dehumanisation and arbitrary violence.

In drawing this analogy I apply post-/anti-colonial scholarship to conditions and processes locally and experientially relevant to the Victoria River context. Achille Mbembe (2001:175) concludes his seminal work ‘On the Postcolony’ by asking:

> who is a slave, if not the person who, everywhere and always, possesses life, property, and body as if they were alien things? … “slave” is the forename we must give to a man or a woman whose body can be degraded, whose life can be mutilated, and whose work and resources can be squandered – with impunity.

Like the category of ‘native’,

> such an assertion entails exclusion from the field of “the human” the person thus cast within the perimeter of animality… From this point of view, the whole epistemology of colonialism is based on a very simple equation: *there is hardly any difference between the native principle and the animal principle* (2001:175-176, my emphasis).

I suggest that since settlement Victoria River life has been subjected to the same material and affective conditions articulated by Mbembe. Throughout the history of occupation the classification of Aboriginal people has varied from animal (a surplus population which can be killed with impunity) to property (a disposable labour source to be exploited) to citizen (nominal equality). Yet one has only to glance over any inquest into a death in custody, or findings of a royal commission, to confirm that the (extra)judicial punishment, torture and execution of Aboriginal people remain features of contemporary Australian society (see also Razack 2015). In this chapter I therefore take seriously Mbembe's assertion that under a (settler) colonial regime *there is hardly any difference* between native, slave and animal – this I think is the thematic connective tissue perpetuating the state containment, dehumanisation and arbitrary violence of Aboriginal life.

Letting both material conditions and affect take the reins, this chapter follows the contours of the Australian settler colonial regime as it has been experienced in the Victoria River region since the turn of the 20th century. I consider both the banal, everyday structural violence and the events of climactic violence inherent to the management of Indigenous life under a regime of liberal, ongoing settler occupation, and the persistent recurrence of three themes – containment, dehumanisation and arbitrary violence – along this trajectory. I first articulate in more detail the prisoner-bullocky analogy in which these themes are particularly explicit. I then consider three dynamics which have remained features of (the governance of) Aboriginal life for the past century – slavery, racial terror and organised abandonment – and one which has emerged relatively recently – waiting. Although I suggest that Mbembe's native-slave-animal equation applies readily to local history, and persists, unswervingly, into the present, I conclude by reflecting on the limits of the analogy guiding this chapter.

Prisoners and cattle

Eugene (27) was terrified when he was first imprisoned. He already had strong impressions about what prison would be like from all his close relations who had endured it before him, but he wasn't really prepared for the experience. There was the uncertainty of what would happen to him while he waited in a holding cell at a local police station, then panic, and then

reluctant acceptance when he was told he would be remanded in Darwin's prison before facing court. The next morning Eugene was fed, handcuffed and escorted to a paddy wagon and transported in a hot, deafening cage for several hours to Katherine. They arrived at the watch house, where he was escorted into a large cell with "a bunch of other blackfellas" he didn't know at first but with whom he soon became familiar. After another day or two they were lined up, placed in handcuffs and shackles, and escorted into another paddy wagon. There were around six of them, "all black, all youngfellas like me", who were driven another three hours in the hot, loud and cramped containment cell to Holtze Correctional Facility on the fringes of Darwin. On the way there was some chatter, some laughter, but mostly anxious silence to accompany the roaring diesel engine. The grim reality of Eugene's situation finally dawned on him when the paddy wagon arrived at Darwin's prison. The heavy gates of the loading bay opened, the paddy wagon entered, the gates locked behind them, and the prisoners filed out. They were handed over from NT Police custody into that of NT Corrections and 'processed': they were stripped, searched thoroughly, including in their oral and anal cavities, handed ill-fitting orange garbs, their heads were shaved, and they were sorted into cells. After Eugene's head had been shaved, after he was stripped and searched and clothed in orange, he caught a glimpse of his reflection and thought for the very first time "jeez, I look like a real criminal". He no longer recognised himself.

There are countless parallels between Eugene's experience and that of cattle being mustered for sale and slaughter. While Eugene and his fellow captives were jammed into paddy wagons and prison vans, cattle are transported between stations, holding yards and slaughterhouses in double-stacked open-air trucks; prisoners are processed in degrading rituals (heads shaved, cavities searched, bodies stripped and reclothed in colour-coded uniforms) while cattle are de-horned, weaned and castrated; prison guards document and confirm biometric data, security level and medical conditions, and allocate a prisoner identification numbers, while cattle are branded, registered and marked with ear tags. The materiality of the prison itself resembles that of stock yards and vice versa (Figure 1) and both stations and prisons rely on robust infrastructure (steel, barbed wire, concrete) to contain their captive populations along with personnel trained in the violent, indifferent execution of custodial care. Darwin's Holtze Correctional Facility often becomes so overcrowded that prisoners are forced to sleep in impossibly hot and overcrowded cells, or

in hallways and reception areas – transient spaces even less fit for human habitation than prison cells – while cattle spend their lives in rudimentary squalor, transitioning between paddocks, yards and their final destinations. 'Muster' is a daily prison ritual, a term explicitly derived from the pastoral activity focused on the containment and accounting of a teeming, anonymous, inhuman aggregate. Both prisons and stations are sites of implied transformative work (bovines are produced into commodities, 'criminals' are 'rehabilitated') and, inherently or implicitly, of carnality. Both are centred on maintaining a revolving stock of living, breathing mammals who don't want to be captured or killed; both are the site of endless cycles of confinement, nourishment, transfer and release. Both are industries. The economic value of cattle is calculated by mass weight, sold locally or exported live internationally, while prisoners are enmeshed in a more complex international prison-industrial arrangement which includes privately-managed prisons, globalised military and software technologies, endless training and (re-)education programs, small businesses and multinational corporations profiting from prison labour, and the legal apparatus and its operatives – judges, lawyers, police, guards, bureaucrats and the media and political classes. The entire pastoral venture is predicated on the eventual slaughter of cattle, and culls, die-outs and theft are regrettable but inevitable contingencies. The deaths and wasted lives of Aboriginal captives remain an inherent feature of carceral settler colonial state.

Figure 1. Containment infrastructure

I draw out this analogy firstly to emphasise how containment, dehumanisation and arbitrary violence are synonymous with incarceration. Yet these are features of prisons generally, and

are not unique to the Victoria River or even the Australian context. Paying close attention to the dynamics of contemporary Victoria River life, catching snippets of informal oral histories, and reading material about the history of the region, the same dynamics produced from this analogy re-emerge on pages, from mouths, and in the experience of quotidian existence. While the 'prisoners as cattle' analogy is a particularly dramatic demonstration of this notion, the parallels run deeper in the mundane realities and conditions of contemporary Aboriginal life. The history of settler colonialism in the Victoria River region (as is the case elsewhere) is one in which the bodies, lives and ways of life of Aboriginal people were and are rendered expendable. The following sections explore this history through snapshots of the Victoria River present, which I frame as historical reverberations of particular notions, processes and conditions – namely slavery, racial terror and organised abandonment.

Slavery

The 'Sentenced To A Job' (STAJ) program, first deployed in 2012, is the Northern Territory's current prison 'employment' program permitting some prisoners to engage in 'paid' work within and outside of prison, pending security clearance, offense category and other eligibility criteria. The work generally involves unskilled labour, including folding and packing audio headsets for the national airline, QANTAS, collecting rubbish for local councils, mine labour and even slaughterhouse work, which is familiar enough for people raised on cattle country. Once bed and board fees have been skimmed and remunerated to the Corrections Department, pay rates under the program are woeful, usually around $5 an hour. Funds not spent on exorbitantly priced commissary items are held by the Corrections Department and are transferred to ex-prisoners upon release.[31]

STAJ is a profoundly market-oriented 'solution', effectively placing prisoners in the custody of businesses and corporations. The program is designed to 'rehabilitate criminals' through emancipatory engagement in the labour market, the idea being that the provision of training and meaningful work will reorient problematic individuals towards productive

[31] Theoretically at least: it has been reported that nearly $1m of NT prisoner's money was left unallocated and retained by the Corrections department (Gibson 2020).

rather than destructive lifestyles. The experiences of Victoria River people who have been incarcerated do not align with these purported goals. The prison labour regime is generally seen as a better way to pass the time than being stuck in a cell, and men who have engaged in the program for years speak proudly about finishing their sentence with enough cash scraped together to purchase a second-hand vehicle good enough to get home in. These vehicles, which typically have a very brief shelf life, seem to be one of the main benefits of engaging in STAJ work. As the following case study demonstrates, prospects of employment are not.

James (38), who has engaged in prison work on and off for years, was excited when a real job finally came up back home. It was a maintenance gig with a regional organisation: a permanent, relatively well-paid, full-time position in a low-pressure environment with straightforward yet satisfying tasks, and thus in high demand in a region where most working-age Aboriginal people are not engaged in formal employment. He asked me to help him make a résumé on my laptop, and we discussed what we could include in the document. After years in prison he had gained countless qualifications (e.g. certificates, heavy machinery operations licenses), and I think he was perhaps even overqualified for the position. However, James paused ominously during our conversation, then said "what they gonna say when they look at that big gap on there [my résumé?], that many years!". He answered his own question with a wry grimace: "they gonna ask me for reference, look what kind of job I been doing, where I been workin, all that kind – 'ohh, you been locked up?' – no more, leave im na [forget about it]".

That was the beginning and end of James' search for employment. For all the years of training, education and 'rehabilitative labour', he didn't see the point of even trying to compete with other applicants who had not been locked up for years on end. Quite simply, nobody (or no non-Indigenous Australian business owner) wants to hire somebody (especially somebody Indigenous) who has been to prison.[32]

[32] Why would they, when the choice is between paying proper wages to a non-Indigenous applicant or using Indigenous labour at reduced cost?

Instead, James remained on 'Newstart' payments from Centrelink, which he has been for most of his adult life when not imprisoned. This is the case for the majority of Aboriginal adults on the Victoria River, where low rates of formally recognised employment are an absolute and apparently permanent norm.[33] Participation in the federal government's Community Development Program (CDP) is required for Newstart recipients living in remote parts of Australia, nearly all of whom are Aboriginal. The 'work-like activities' under the CDP are typically pointless and degrading ("painting rocks" is a popular euphemism) – what David Graeber (2018) would categorise as 'bullshit jobs'. Non-compliance with the mandatory 25-hour, 5-day 'working' week means welfare payments are cut, often for weeks or months at a time. Even if participants attend all of these 'mutual obligations' the hourly rates before any penalties that are applied equate to just over half the national minimum wage, and their expenditure is quarantined via the now widespread BasicsCard (Dreise, et al. 2020).[34] CDP has been described as a form of modern-day slavery in that it denies participants the basic human right of withdrawing their labour (Altman 2017), and it punishes a formally (semi-)nomadic people individually for their enduring cultural emphasis on mobility. CDP has been widely condemned for actively compounding the already-entrenched rates of impoverishment and structural inequality typical of remote Aboriginal settlements (see for example Altman and Markham 2019).

Some Victoria River people who were born on cattle stations in the region in the middle of the 20th century are today participants in the punitive CDP system. The conditions of station 'employment' during that period were categorically those of slavery: if workers were paid at all, the rates dramatically undercut those of white employees; it was common for Aboriginal workers and their kin to work in return for meagre rations, or to 'book down' for exorbitantly priced clothing, luxury consumables, work gear and other commodities. Men, women, and children were required to work under these conditions. Those who tried to flee

[33] A counterpoint to the stagnating effects of unemployment in the region is a small but successful Aboriginal owned contracting company which gainfully, meaningfully and fairly employs around a dozen young and older men.

[34] The BasicsCard is a component of a welfare quarantine program administered through Centrelink. 'Customers' of Centrelink subject to this program have a portion of their welfare income transferred to a BasicsCard account which cannot be used for transactions involving tobacco, liquor or gambling. Nearly all BasicsCard 'customers' are Indigenous. There are a variety of inventive tactics which Victoria River and other Aboriginal people deploy to evade or co-opt BasicsCard regulations which I do not discuss here.

these environments (pursuing bush life, more equitable stations, or less overtly hostile Christian missionary institutions) would be tracked down by station whites or by police and escorted back to the confines of the Aboriginal station camp (Lewis 2012; Raynes 2000; Rose 1991).

Physical violence, beatings, whippings and threats of execution were features of Aboriginal life on remote Victoria River cattle stations at least until the 1960s. These were considered suitable punishments for abscondment, petty theft, 'talking smart' or neglecting duties. Victoria River people also recall novel forms of punishment such as the 'mosquito peg': "manager might grab you, strip you down, tie you up langa pole or tree, leave you there all night so mosquito can bite you raw, drain all your blood, make you sick". Eve Tuck and K. Yang explain the logic structuring such action:

> the slave is a desirable commodity but the person underneath is imprisonable, punishable, and murderable. The violence of keeping/killing the chattel slave makes them deathlike monsters in the settler imagination; they are reconfigured/disfigured as the threat, the razor's edge of safety and terror (2012:6)

Stations were thus one configuration of the native-animal-slave formula. Managers were also known to give 'problematic' Aboriginal men dangerous tasks like breaking in wild horses (Raynes 2000), and to banish individuals from stations 'for a spell', forcing now-sedentary men and women back into a way of life that was near-impossible to maintain and exposing them to the threat of even more hostile whites such as squatters and poddy-dodgers (Lewis 2012; Raynes 2000).

It is no coincidence that Deborah Bird Rose (1991) likens the conditions on mid-century Victoria River pastoral stations to primitive prisons. Her oral history work with men and women who survived the era centres the racial terror, overt and structural violence and strategies of containment which characterised these institutions. Eugene articulated this likeness quite succinctly:

> To me, [the experience of imprisonment] really make me think like back in the old days, when gardiya take blackfella for slave. Same way. Like, they treat blackfella [today] like the way when they first come here. But they doin' it other way now.

I stretch this comparison further to suggest that the same dynamics persist in contemporary native-state relations within but also far beyond carceral facilities. Those engaged in prison labour experience the same inequitable pay rates as their pastorally-enslaved ancestors. Many of those in the 'free world' endure a punitive welfare regime and income quarantining descended from the rationed subsistence of the Aboriginal stock camp. There are no 'rations' and no more whips, mosquito pegs, or threats of (fatal) violence enforcing labour relations: instead a dense, automatised, punitive, bureaucratic agency threatens Aboriginal people who miss 'work' with economic precarity and resource scarcity. Going without sufficient food, power, and even nappies and infant formula are common for households living under these conditions, and hunger is experienced with some frequency (see also Altman 2018).

I am gesturing here to the fact that 'slavery' is a term deeply relevant to contemporary forms of Aboriginal engagement with the market economy, mediated and enforced by the settler state. The economic conditions endured by Aboriginal people in mid-century pastoral states on the Victoria River are structurally analogous to features of both prisons (STAJ labour) and contemporary remote Aboriginal settlements (CDP obligations). Anthony Redmond (2021; see also 2022) recently detailed how historical pastoral and policing arrangements in the Kimberley region exhaustively fulfilled the criteria by which the Australian Human Rights Commission today legally defines slavery (Allain 2009). In Figure 2 I elaborate on Redmond's model to emphasise the parallels between formal slavery – a practice now apparently globally condemned – and STAJ and CDP labour, which many Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory endure. While prison and cattle stations serve(d) to contain and maximise the utility of a source of disposable labour already marked for categorical elimination, CDP reinforces the same demographic's status as a disposable population. Recall Mbembe's (2001:175-176) assertion that the 'slave' is one "whose body can be degraded, whose life can be mutilated, and whose work and resources can be squandered – with impunity".

"[F]actors that might indicate that a power attaching to a right of ownership has been exercised:	**Cattle stations (20th C)**	**Prison; STAJ**	**CDP**
The partial or total destruction of the juridical personality of the victim;	✓	✓	✓
Some restriction or control of an individual's autonomy, freedom of choice or freedom of movement;	✓	✓	✓
The control of matters relating to an individual's sexual activity;	✓	✓	
The psychological control or oppression of [an] individual;	✓	✓	✓
The control or partial control of an individual's personal belongings;	✓	✓	
The measures taken to prevent or deter a person from escape;	✓	✓	
The absence of informed consent or the fact that consent has been rendered irrelevant by the use of force or coercion, the use of deception or false promises or the abuse of power in the context of the relationship where the individual over whom the power is exercised is in a position of vulnerability;	✓	✓	
The threat or use of force or other forms of coercion;	✓	✓	✓
The use of, or the fear of the use of, violence including, for example, the cruel treatment or abuse of an individual;	✓	✓	

The quality of the relationship between the accused and the person over whom the powers are exercised, including any abuse of power, the person's vulnerability, the person's socio-economic situation and the duration of the relationship;	✓	✓	✓
The exaction of forced or compulsory labour or service, often without remuneration […]"	✓	✓	✓

Figure 2. Components of slavery and their historical and contemporary applications

There remains something to be said for the affective experience of pastoral slavery, the afterlife (Dillon 2018) of which remains a feature of contemporary Victoria River life. James's father, Peter (72) was born and raised in the Aboriginal camps of cattle station occupying his paternal Country in the 1950s. Despite the conditions of enslavement, Peter, now long-retired, mostly reflects warmly on his early life of station work. Peter's fondness for working with cattle, mustering on horseback, droving herds over massive distances, camping alongside cattle and countrymen, and accumulating prized possessions such as cowboy hats, boots and belts are the main topics he returns to whenever other conversation runs dry. No conversation ever ends without detailing the grotesque counterparts to these joys.

One hot afternoon Peter (71) and a group of young men including myself are lazing in the shade. We are killing time, eating and 'talking story'. Someone brings out Peter's new cowboy hat, hefty, jet-black, flat-brimmed, and a couple of the kids take turns trying it on, posing and laughing, before Peter seizes the hat. He demonstrates excitedly how some people like to fold up the corners at the front to exude a certain cowboy mien – but he says prefers a straight, flat brim all the way around. "My daddy, he bin wearim lakijat [used to wear it like this]", bending the front of the brim down over his face, "ahhh, like Merican Cowboy! But from Australia: from the bush!". He's animated, exuberant, relishing memories from his droving days. "Old days, never used to rollim smoke, nothing, only:" – he mimes manipulating an invisible portion of chewing tobacco in the palms of his hands,

exaggeratedly whacking it in the side of his mouth, chewing dramatically – "put im here, fuckin ride a horse anywhere" – mimes belting a horse with one hand, throttling the reigns with the other, bouncing and leaping in his seat – "and when you ready – cheurgh" – spits to one side with hyperbolic swagger. "Ahhh, fuckin cowboy ay!". He pauses, reflecting on his glory days. Then the energy and passion suddenly drops, as his tone turns to one of caution, restraint, and then ridicule: "And he a yej boj again, that cowboy", he says as he leans back.

Peter launches into a running gag of sorts, a narrative joke about a category of person he refers to as Yej Boj – "yes, boss". The joke always takes the same call-and-response format: Peter will lean forward, put on a hideous, exaggerated, rough Australian accent and twist his face into a snarl, embodying the persona of a mid-century white pastoralist barking an order at a timid Aboriginal subordinate: "Hey boy! You see that mob a horse there, round im up, takem langa that top paddock!"; then he'll shrink feebly down into himself, and whimper "yej boj" in a timid, high-pitched tone. The deep snarl: "Hey old man! Didn't I tell you sweepim up that yard there!?" – and the whimper: "yej boj" – "You fuckin deaf or what? Get to work!" – "yej boj". "Hey young fella! This your wife here?!" – "yej boj" – "Well I'll be takin 'er for the night!" – "… yej boj" – "You can 'ave 'er back in the morning!" – "… yej boj".

Sometimes when he's running through these scenes Peter will elaborate on the yej boj character: "he like that, alla old people workin la station" (i.e. all the Aboriginal people working on stations were like this); "always gotta say 'yej boj'. Can't talk smart, you gotta say yej boj every time, nomore 'okay', 'yeah alright': always gotta say 'yej boj'". "My daddy, he bin a yej boj… an' me too, I'm a yej boj again".

Peter's Yej Boj character graphically demonstrates the experiential quality and conditions of Aboriginal life on Northern Territory pastoral stations in the middle of the 20th century. Sentiments of fervent pride in fully embracing the alluring cowboy identity, and deep satisfaction in mastering the skills required for pastoral work, are tinged by the profound subordination of Aboriginal people in the same environment. The explicit detail, euphemism and exaggerated affect in the narrative reveal the physical, sexual and emotional violence and exploitation that Aboriginal people were often subjected to on these cattle stations. Peter's candid delivery also demonstrates his familiarity with these conditions: as an older

Victoria River man he was born on a pastoral station occupying his paternal Country, and as such was born into conditions that his kin endured for generations. Identifying his own father as a 'yej boj', he acknowledges that the disempowerment and subordination illustrated in the caricature run deep in personal and regional history. When he concedes that he himself is a 'yej boj' he acknowledges that the power dynamics between station white and Aboriginal 'boy' persist to this day in his own interactions with (white) settler authorities: contemporary station managers, but also police, welfare officers, Centrelink agents and staff of health and other organisations overseeing the administration of Aboriginal life.

The relationships between Aboriginal people on mid-century cattle stations and their white settler captors were underpinned by racial hierarchy, and mediated by sheer unrestrained violence designed to inflict pain and suffering, to degrade and to dehumanise. The containment of Victoria River men, women and children rendered them slaves, and as both slave *and* native, they were regarded and treated as fundamentally non-human, as animal. These conditions changed significantly when the economic utility of a captive Aboriginal workforce became unsustainable.

Pastoral slavery ended after a culmination of events (including the award of equal pay, increased dependence on machinery and equipment, a depressed post-war cattle economy) led to the categorical expulsion of Aboriginal workers from the stations occupying their Country from the late 1960s. During this period masses of Aboriginal men, women and children were loaded onto cattle trucks and dumped on the fringes of regional towns, underpinning their status as dually dehumanised and dispossessed of economic capacity. This period also saw the establishment of many formalised Aboriginal settlements in the region. Relevant here is Beth Povinelli's (2019:115) genealogy of the contemporary Aboriginal 'hyperghetto', which she describes as "the spatial setting [for] new forms of capital abandonment" (see also Wacquant 2001). This transition repurposed the Victoria River demographic from a disposable labour force to a disposable population (see also Veracini 2018). The present regime of hyperincarceration echoes that transition. A brutal market rationality aligns history's pastoral slaves with today's prison labourers: the Aboriginal workforce is only useful when it is cheap and captive. For those outside of

carceral grasp there's a punitive welfare regime which seems designed to make life impossible.

It is understandable then that Victoria River men still look to pastoral work as a means of escaping the prospects which meagre alternatives offer. One man in his 40s decrying yet another training scheme plied by CDP facilitators, proclaimed with frustration: "we not plumber, mechanic, work with computer, we fucking *cowboy* right back!". Parents and grandparents gush with pride seeing photos of their children and grandchildren wearing ringer shirts, jeans and boots at nearby or faraway cattle stations. Unfortunately these positions are often short-lived. The work is gruelling, the pay doesn't quite cut it, and often the managers exhibit the same attitude toward Aboriginal people as their forefathers – that is, they regard and treat them as less than human, worth little more than the cattle they oversee.

Racial terror

Tim (16) was walking back from the shops in town with a small group of close kin, cousin-brothers and -sisters around his age, when the cops pulled them up. They pointed to Tim and called him by his brother's name, Alex (19). It turned out that Alex had missed his court appearance that day because he couldn't get a lift to town, so a warrant had been issued for his arrest. Tim tried to tell them they had the wrong man, but the officers saw things differently. They pushed him to the ground and handcuffed him, responding to the shouts of protest from his relations with threats of arrest for hindering police. To prove their case the cops produced a device programmed with facial recognition software which they pointed at his face: a match. Tim, now in tears, his face scratched from the hot concrete it was pressed into, was dragged away in a paddy wagon. Only after the witnessing family members ran home to tell his mother who promptly presented at the police station was Tim released.

Events like this are unnervingly familiar to Victoria River people. Although immensely stressful and infuriating, nobody was surprised by what occurred. After all, police frequently turn up at any time of the day or night, sometimes undertake extrajudicial punishment while 'forgetting' to turn on body-worn camera devices, and everybody has an 'entertaining'

story about a close relative hiding under a bed or dashing barefoot into the bush when the cops rolled into camp. A popular form of extrajudicial punishment retained by police in regional frontier towns is to arrest Aboriginal captives and to intentionally dump them several kilometres out of town, where combination of heat, highway and the darkness of night pose a very real threat to life – a weathered inverse of the same policing strategies which kill Aboriginal people on the freezing frontiers of Canadian towns (Razack 2015). Stephen Dillon (2018), a scholar of racial policing and incarceration in the US, describes the prevalence of these tropes in Black families and communities in terms of 'possession': the history of chattel slavery haunts the present, manifest in the domination and termination of Black lives by market forces and pervasive carcerality; today's police are yesterday's slave patrol (see also Ralph 2019). In the Victoria River context, however, the tropes of colonial violence and racial terror have their roots deeper than the informal, state-sanctioned regimes of slavery in the region. I approach this point again through analogy.

There is an item of regional history which has to my knowledge largely escaped formal documentation, and yet which even Victoria River children can provide a summary. During early settlement, when many Victoria River people were still living 'in the bush', and when the police force comprised only a minor element of 'frontier justice' in the region, a group of white station employees set out to conduct a raid. It's unclear exactly why: to send a 'strong message' about theft of cattle or station stores, revenge for threatening or harming a station worker, an unprovoked and gleeful genocidal spree. Whatever the motivation their actions were directed indiscriminately and en masse. They located a group of Aboriginal people – men, women and children, estimated numbers varying between half a dozen and thirty people – who were seeking refuge from settler hostilities in a secluded gorge (not identified here). The station men trapped the group in a section of the gorge where no escape would be possible, then collectively opened fire, aiming to kill every single Aboriginal person in sight. A day or two later a couple of local Aboriginal men stumbled upon the atrocity and, searching through the piles of their murdered countrymen, found a young infant who was still alive, malnourished but unharmed, his mouth still clinging to the breast of his slaughtered mother. The men took him back to the police station at Timber Creek where he was raised by extended family members. (His progeny still live and prosper in the region.)

I seek to emphasise the indiscriminate affect of this event.[35] Whatever the nominal cause for their actions, the brutal deluge unleashed by the now-anonymous station whites was utterly uninhibited and emphatically genocidal in intent. This is to say that not just men but women and children, all of them, were the target of the rampage, suggesting that categorical elimination rather than selective retribution was the motive. Under the logic of early settlement, as this massacre demonstrates clearly, Aboriginal people were a pest population to be eliminated (Wolfe 2006). These actions were at least partly informed by settler colonial imperatives concerning race and property, reinforced by other genocidal events in the region (poisoning flour to punish ration theft; murder as punishment for cattle theft). Indeed the very first instances of Aboriginal imprisonment in the region were motivated by property concerns. Charge sheets from the first half of the 20th century (police officers then being judge, jury and sometimes executioner) are littered with Aboriginal men being sentenced to 6-12 months' imprisonment or hard labour for "having in their possession a portion of the carcass of a bullocky which can reasonably be suspected of having been unlawfully obtained" (TCPS 1925-1961). Yet the sheer brutality of this event, and countless others like it (see Lewis 2012; Raynes 2000; Rose 1991; Willshire 1896), suggest there is more to it.

While racial terror operates as both a means of discipline and a means of production in colonial contexts (Taussig 1987), these techniques have a deeper significance on the settler colonial frontier. Sherene Razack (2005) understands the torture and dehumanisation of captives on the frontiers of empire as *rituals* of violence: depraved and sexualised violence both produces the captors' mastery and makes and proves the captives' lack of humanity. It is through "violent journeys into [settler] personhood" by which the status of the native as human and as holding or belonging to the land are denied, and through which the white, masculine, land-owning settler is (re-)established (Razack 2020:84). Writing on Aboriginal deaths in custody in Canada, Razack (2015:114) emphasises that the "foundational violence"

[35] There were many similar events in the region's history, some documented in Deborah Bird Rose's *Hidden Histories* (1991), Darrell Lewis' *A Wild History* (2012) and many more alluded to throughout the grotesque autobiography of Constable Willshire, *The Land of the Dawning* (1896), but the one I detail is among the most well-known by Victoria River people today.

of settler colonialism mean native bodies can be degraded, be left to die, and be killed with impunity because the settler gaze and legal apparatus equate native with animal, or as not fully human, and that these dynamics are present across various internal settler colonial frontiers (Razack 2020). These themes dominate Victoria River history, which established rigid racial hierarchies that persist to this day.

A sentiment which remains among Victoria River people is that "gardiya can shoot you any time" – settlers can kill Aboriginal people with impunity. This is something that usually only older people remark in relation to the conditions endured by their ancestors. Yet while this notion has its roots in the pastoral frontier, its persistence into the present re-emerges in everyday events like Tim's arrest. In the wake of the 2019 police killing of Kumanjayi Walker in Yuendumu – the officer was acquitted of all charges – younger as well as older people started to make comments echoing this sentiment ("policeman there look, he might shoot us mob"). More broadly, most Victoria River today people maintain a distinct wariness and visible unease around white station managers and workers – for instance when a family, hunting or fishing on a pastoral lease they are legally entitled to be, fish, hunt, and camp on, fall suddenly silent when a station vehicle appears.

The same motivations driving the massacre at that gorge in early 20th century Victoria River persist well into the 21st century. They are evident when police battered and arrested a wholly innocent youth in the place of his brother. They are present when police threw a young pregnant woman whom I know onto the ground, kneed her in the back and handcuffed her in a position now globally known to cause positional asphyxia (Perera, et al. 2021) and causing physical pain and catastrophic emotional stress about the unborn infant in her womb. These motivations also inform more mundane methods of policing and governing Indigenous bodies (Lea, et al. 2012; Vincent 2018) in settlements, towns, cities and the highways which connect them, but it is in those climactic rituals (Razack 2005) of violence that the settler subject is founded, comes into being and is repeatedly remade (Razack 2015; 2020). The same affect informs frenzied social media groups based in regional towns and settler-majority suburbs of the Northern Territory describing Aboriginal people as 'filthy animals' and 'protected species', and calling for armed vigilante groups to patrol streets day and night because the carceral state isn't doing *enough*.

These themes persist because, as scholars like Mbembe and Razack attest, colonial domination is predicated on the denial of the native subordinate's humanity. While US scholars locate the historical origins of Black hyperincarceration and hyperpolicing in the abolition of slavery, I gesture again to analogy. I think of the work done to commodify cattle across their lifespan – branding, castration, de-horning, slaughter, butchering – and the trained indifference of their practitioners. The task at hand is not a matter of who but what, and the product of the work is a rendered thing. A thing which can be beaten, shot to death, locked up for no real reason, left to die, or not, it doesn't matter, I am just doing my job. Sheer arbitrary violence, indifference to suffering and terror, is only possible when its focus is on something not considered fully human. Before the rise and after the fall of slavery in the region, the trajectory of Victoria River interactions with the settler state and its actors revolves around dehumanisation and arbitrary violence as a matter of course.

Organised abandonment

One summer, when the heat had properly set in but the rains were still a long way off, the bores ran dry. The guy sent by the local resource centre said the aquifer still held water, but the bore pipes weren't reaching it and they wouldn't until the subterranean bodies of water were replenished during the wet season. In the meantime personnel drove portable water tanks into the middle of the camps – old and battered contraptions usually used for road maintenance. With these the residents of homelands and town camps in the region – at least 100 people – would have to make do. People filled up tanks, buckets and bottles and carried, dragged, and drove them, even pushed them in prams, back to their houses. While the water source in town, where gardiya reside, was unaffected, this was how Aboriginal camp residents lived for a few weeks: drinking, bathing, washing clothes and dishes and babies with rationed, hygienically suspect water that was periodically trucked in and ran out at least once a day. The water shortage exacerbated the already-dismal state of housing infrastructure for Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory – across the board these households are radically over-crowded, dilapidated, under-maintained and poorly-designed for a warming climate (Grealy, et al. 2019; Lea 2008b; 2015; 2020a; Lea and Pholeros 2010). Of course, people got sick – from dehydration, from unsanitary water storage, from being

unable to properly clean themselves, do laundry properly or wash everyday items. This lasted until the rain finally came.

In my fieldnotes I documented my own astonishment and frustration at these conditions, which were extreme even by the standards I had become accustomed to. I wondered, to myself and out loud, whether the state would ever expect non-Indigenous people to endure such conditions. My companions responded with good humour, summarised in the assertions that "we right, we blackfella!": we are used to it. This much is true. The provision of substandard infrastructure producing poor health and prospects has been a feature of Aboriginal life well before the state assumed 'responsibility' for Aboriginal housing. The Aboriginal camps on 20th century Victoria River cattle stations were the prototype for contemporary remote Aboriginal settlements.

In a survey of Northern Territory cattle station camps commissioned by Vesteys (Vestey Holdings, an international conglomerate) that anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt (1987) conducted in the 1940s, they described scenes not dissimilar to these conditions. The Berndts were there to assess the conditions of Aboriginal 'employment' at these remote outposts, contracted by Vestey Holdings to offer solutions to bolster an enfeebled, sick and dying workforce which wouldn't significantly effect profit margins. In the same period that saw countless Aboriginal people imprisoned or otherwise punished for 'stealing' the beef which their land and labour produced, the Berndts found abject sites of neglect and decay. The standard conditions in Aboriginal camps were poor sanitation (open and unirrigated sewage) and negligible nutrition (rations of flour, sugar, tea, little or no vegetable matter, low-protein scraps of station beef). The consequences were a general state of ill-health, poor nutrition and flu outbreaks that cumulatively killed Aboriginal people in vast but imprecise figures, and produced startling infant mortality rates (Berndt and Berndt 1987). Police diaries from the period indifferently document the numbers, genders, approximate ages and sometimes the names of Aboriginal people who died at station camps (TCPS 1925-1961), locating the carceral settler state at the administrative intersection of the market economy and Indigenous life and death.

These conditions were inadequate for the sustenance of human life. Indeed the disposition of neglect from station whites to their Aboriginal captive workforce was premised on their perceived lack of humanity. The futility of this existence is encapsulated in the Berndts' description of the disillusionment expressed by Victoria River women in the 1940s who refused to bring new life into the world, a sentiment summarised as: "why should we breed more for gardiya … the way they use us?" (1987:90). This bestial analogy reverberates with Mbembe's native-animal-slave equation. Disposability is a condition imposed racially, marking categories of people as less-than-human, or as human waste (Razack 2017). Zygmunt Bauman (2004:86-87) asserts that "the right way to deal with [human] waste is to speed up its 'biodegradation' and decomposition while isolating it as securely as possible from the ordinary human habitat". The containment and infrastructural abandonment of Aboriginal people in squalid concentration camps reflected their position as a captive but ultimately disposable population.

Fast forward nearly a century to the present, and while Aboriginal birth rates continue to rise, the material conditions of Aboriginal life in remote settlements are dismal, with health statistics and mortality rates to match (Lea 2012). The issue of Aboriginal housing continues to be a political football for Territory and Federal governments while millions are squandered on bureaucratic and corporate perpetuation (Allam 2020; Garrick 2019) of those material conditions: houses that are underserviced, overcrowded and increasingly unfit for human habitation especially as the planet warms, contributing to poor health (Lea 2008b; Lea and Pholeros 2010) and premature or even sudden death (James 2021). Meanwhile, captives in Northern Territory prisons continue to experience conditions of overcrowding which exacerbate interpersonal violence as well as poor physical and mental health and reinforce the innately dehumanising experience of captivity.

I understand these historical continuities as components of a form statecraft which Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2002; 2007; 2015; 2021) identifies as *organised abandonment*. There are many other terms expressing similar modes of 'state killing and letting die' or 'state withdrawal' (Povinelli 2008): what Gareth Lewis (2021) describes as the 'malevolent absence' of the state; and Avery Gordon (2008b) as 'socioeconomic abandonment'. Following David Harvey (2006), Gilmore's terminology emphasises the centrality of private

and state capital in the 'fatal couplings of power and difference' (2002) which facilitate and rationalise the targeted abandonment of particular categories of people. More recently, on the racial and spatial determinations of health in occupied Palestine, Osama Tanous and Rabea Eghbariah (2022:7) emphasise the role of the settler colonial state whose organised abandonment produces "toxic geography[ies]" which lethally define the qualities and possibilities for life under ongoing occupation.

Again turning to analogy, when I consider contemporary arrangements on the Victoria River my mind turns to the pastoral expanse, and the cattle left to their own devices within fenced paddocks and holding yards. In settlements, dilapidated two-room structures housing a dozen people across four generations with no internal taps or bathrooms barely fit the definition of a 'house' (Lea and Pholeros 2010), and yet they house so many Victoria River people. I don't think there is that much disparity between dumping a water tank in the middle of an Aboriginal settlement and driving off, and dumping hay bales and salt licks and making sure the bore troughs are topped up. I don't think it is a stretch of analogy to compare the weathering of houses, families, bodies and lives to the indifferent abandonment of, say, a cow drowning and stuck up to her neck in mud, or the pastoralists neglecting to reorganise the infrastructure that slowly and violently ensured her suffering and death. This I think is at the core of Indigenous-state relations.

Waiting

Since Vince (21) moved away from his immediate family following a personal crisis a month ago, he hasn't been able to attend mandatory CDP 'work-for-the-dole' activities. His payments have been cut off so he lives on the resources of the relations he's staying with. He reckons when his uncle comes out from prison next year he'll be able to join him at his station job nearby. In the meantime, every morning he rings up Centrelink to figure out how he can start claiming welfare payments again. Each time he calls he waits on hold, sometimes for hours, until another disembodied voice tells him to visit the local resource centre and speak with a representative there. The resource centre is 60km away, so when he can get a lift he attends the office as instructed. The people there tell him he should just call up Centrelink to sort it out. When he says he has done that already, they *sent him* here*, they*

say they can't help him until a case manager visits the centre next month: he should make an appointment for then, or visit the office in town, over 300km away. He misses his next appointment because he's unable to get a lift for the 120km round trip. It's three months before he starts receiving payments again.

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Caitlin (36), a mother or four, has been living on the veranda of her parent's place for the past four months. She doesn't mind right now because the weather is cool, but when the heat starts settling in she will need to find a place to live. She has been on the public housing waiting list since her husband was imprisoned a year ago, and keeps hearing word from case workers that she will have own 3-bedroom place in Darwin soon: "next month might be". She wants this to happen, desperately, so she can live independently of her parents, raise her young children in a more stable environment, and be close to her husband for prison visits. Three years later she waits still.

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Phil (30) was on remand for 11 months by the time he was sentenced. There were endless delays, a myriad of arbitrary procedural matters that he didn't seem to fully comprehend, or which he didn't consider warranting verbal description. When the day finally came the magistrate decided that a suspended (i.e. non-custodial) sentence would have been adequate. Phil was released immediately, having wasted nearly a year of his life in a prison cell.

Waiting is a ubiquitous feature of the modern bureaucratic nation state (Bauman 2004; Graeber 2015; Gupta 2012; Hage 2009). Craig Jeffrey (2010) describes 'timepass' – boredom and disengagement arising from socioeconomic stagnation – as a widespread form of suffering among middle class Indian men. Andrew Whelan (2019) utilises Nina Power's (2012) notion of the 'weaponisation of time' to describe the reckless financial torment of welfare recipients in Australia's 'Robodebt' scandal.[36] The violent implications of time when yielded by the state emerge in waiting, bureaucratic obfuscation, the withholding of wealth and blind charges of debt. Yasmine Musharbash (2007) observes that particular aspects of

[36] 'Robodebt' was an automated revenue collection and compliance scheme targeting individuals allegedly overpaid by Centrelink found to be unlawful.

existential boredom in Aboriginal Australia are part of an absurd postcolonial temporal imposition. Waiting is one of the more insidious aspects of carceral violence: Behrouz Boochani (2018:43) articulates the protracted punishment of its endlessness on one of Australia's island prison colonies as "a mechanism of torture used in the dungeon of time". Waiting has also become a ubiquitous feature in milieus of contemporary Aboriginal life.

Victoria River people seem to spend a significant proportion of their lives waiting. Waiting for a new house or outstation funding that will never come, on the phone to Centrelink, for an update about a relative in custody, for the distribution of royalty money, for a call back from a lawyer, health officer or anthropologist, for someone to come out of jail or from welfare. To the liberal settler state these forms of waiting are just desserts for those who don't conform to the social contract (Povinelli 2008). For Victoria River people the endless suspense of waiting and the violent deprivation in its wake are routinized and experientially unremarkable; such are the "Kafkaesque worlds of wild policy that Indigenous people daily endure" (Lea 2020a:753). As Akhil Gupta (2012) and Sherene Razack (2015) note in vastly different contexts, bureaucratic indifference is an intrinsic component of structural violence and is a lethal force when levelled at subaltern populations by operatives of the state. Violence structures all of these interactions: if you don't wait judiciously enough you don't eat, get a house, or get out of jail.

Contemporary Aboriginal life is under siege (Eickelkamp, cited in Hinkson 2018:256). This is how I understand the protracted violence – temporal and structural – that people like Vince, Caitlin and Phil experience on a daily basis. Sometimes when I consider these overlapping and interminable structures of neglect I find comfort in condemning the Northern Territory as a failed state: the endless obstacles delays that cumulatively make Aboriginal lives, and ways of life, impossible can be readily ascribed to the difficulties of complexity. Yet Tess Lea (2012) emphasises that what appear as repetitive policy *failures* are actually built into the structure and personalities of colonial governance. Similarly, Leonie Cox (2000) labels the chronic miscarriage of services for Murri individuals and settlements in Queensland as 'bureaucratic apartheid': punitive abandonments legally enshrined and deftly organised. None of it is accidental; the deprivation and neglect are features not anomalies. It is little wonder that some Victoria River people, particularly young men, drop out of the system

altogether, eschewing bureaucratic enmeshment to live off the resources of kin rather than endure what Jon Altman describes as “bureaucratic torture” (2016:7). Others, like Phil, are not so lucky.

Again I look to analogy to understand these instances in which lives are repeatedly and perpetually suspended. I turn to cattle waiting in paddocks, waiting in stock yards, waiting in trucks, waiting in line at the slaughterhouse. Containment of bodies in space and in time, with certain death at the end of it, is the primary metaphor. Like cattle in steel yards, Vince, Caitlin and Phil have no choice but to wait: they are stripped of agency, and as a matter of course simply submit to the brutal embrace of the infrastructures of abandonment (bureaucratic, temporal, carceral) designed to contain them. One sees this wherever Aboriginal people rub shoulders with the carceral settler state: housing, education, health, welfare and of course prisons. All seem geared towards deprivation: of income, of housing, of relations, of freedom. The only words James, who has spent over a decade cumulatively behind bars, could muster to describe his experience is that “it’s like stealing your life”. The same can be said for the more mundane, but equally powerful, coercion of waiting outside the prison.

Conclusion

The broader elements I describe are not particular to the Victoria River context, to Indigenous people in Australia or even to settler colonial populations globally. Rather such dynamics emerge everywhere that humans are besieged by capital and its processes of differentiation, of which settler colonialism is but one. This chapter details the localised inflections of this process. The tragic and intersecting forms of violence that mark so many Aboriginal lives in contemporary Australia are a consequence of this ongoing history: these material and affective conditions produce frustration, trauma, rage and despair, perpetuate social conflicts, and culminate in relentless events of arrest and incarceration which in turn yield more conflict and despair, and on it goes.

I have described by way of analogy how the management of local Aboriginal life has always assumed the dynamic of stockman and cattle. The latter must be contained by the former,

whipped into shape or abandoned as necessary; if they die by accident (or otherwise) nobody need be held accountable. A key difference is that cattle are a massive source of capital in the Northern Territory and national economies, while the Aboriginal demographic, excised from the lands cattle now roam freely, is frequently condemned as precariat, surplus and economic burden – apart from the millions circulating the economy each financial year in the personnel and economies which work so hard to contain them. Recall that the Northern Territory economy depends critically on the perpetual disfunction and state of emergency of failing Aboriginal policy and infrastructure (Lea 2008a; 2012; 2020b).

In this context where a metaphor has been quite forcefully applied Eve Tuck and K. Yang's (2012) assertion that 'decolonisation is not a metaphor' is critical. The power of this assertion here lies in the fact that the conditions of ongoing settler colonial occupation are material: they cannot be undone by metaphor, rhetoric, policy or work which pretends otherwise – facts which predominant political formations will always seek to evade. While so much is to be gained from Indigenous dispossession, when a market rationality determines life and death, when the state project sees, treats, contains and abandons surplus populations as animal, property, thing to be killed or let die with impunity, metaphor is explanatory alone.

Chapter 4 – Childhood in the shadow of saturating carcerality

It's late one night in the young men's camp. A bunch of us, aged between 10 and 19 (plus myself, then 28) are playing card games and joking around. There's a break during which games are suspended while everyone refuels on cordial and noodles. Oliver (12) turns to me and starts talking about his two uncles, both of whom are currently incarcerated. The room we are occupying is usually inhabited by one of these uncles and his family. Oliver is their favourite nephew, he says: they always pick him first to go on hunting trips, and always give him anything he asks for. He talks about them for a little while, then pauses before asking: "your family go locked up all the time Patrick?"

Oliver's question (my answer was an uneasy and embarrassed "no") and this scene more broadly offer several insights into how Aboriginal childhood is inflected by relentless carcerality. The first is the perhaps obvious notion that children are profoundly affected when their close relations are arrested and imprisoned. Another is that even as a child Oliver tacitly understands that his uncles' (and many other relations') imprisonment is closely associated with race and Aboriginality. I think that when he asked whether my own family "go locked up all the time" he already knew or sensed what the answer would be: as Ute Eickelkamp (2017:64-65) and Marika Moisseeff (2011) have observed in different Central Australian contexts, Aboriginal children are acutely aware of the radical inequalities which characterise and structure their worlds. Underpinning these notions is the more subtle dynamic of prolonged carceral absence. Although they are spoken about frequently, people like Oliver's uncles are for the most part relegated to the realm of social memory during lengthy prison sentences, resembling what Gary Robinson (2005:10) has alluded to as "a disorganisation of fragmented wishes and needs".

This chapter is about childhood in a social context of hyperincarceration. I suggest that carcerality saturates and structures local Aboriginal childhood and the social worlds of children, and demonstrate how this is felt, embodied, comprehended and lived. I begin with an overview of Victoria River childhood and elaborate on what I mean by 'saturating

carcerality' in this context. I go on to discuss the myriad ways carceral absence materialises as a predominant theme in the everyday lives of Victoria River children, before exploring two sentiments and values apparent at the intersection of childhood and carcerality: fear and care. In the final section I describe scenes of children's play in which arrest and imprisonment are predominant themes. I understand such play as a process both expressing and approaching a resolution to trauma inflicted on the social body, including children, by a regime of relentless hyperincarceration and hyperpolicing. I conclude with reflections on the implications of this regime for how we might think about present and future states of Aboriginal childhood.

Firstly though a brief note on the content of this chapter. I open with Oliver's blunt question not only for its analytic content but also because it foregrounds the emotive qualities which emerge in what follows. Plainly, here I discuss the trauma and emotional torment of children in ethnographic vignettes – real life circumstances – wrought with heartbreak, spoiled innocence and personal tragedy. For this reason, perhaps more than anywhere else in this thesis, the subject matter of this chapter could be interpreted as fodder for the reproduction of 'damage narratives' (Tuck 2009) or 'suffering subject' tropes (Robbins 2013). I also note that the experiences and the suffering of Aboriginal children in remote communities have been a matter of considerable debate in Australian anthropology and broader political and public discourse in recent decades (see for example Altman and Hinkson 2010; Cowlishaw 2003; Sutton 2001). I acknowledge these contentions. While I did not set out specifically to examine Victoria River children's experiences and perspectives on carcerality, Aboriginal children are the largest and fastest growing demographic in the Northern Territory (ABS 2017), and although recent studies have attended to the complex dynamics inherent to being a young Aboriginal person in the twenty-first century (for example the edited collection Eickelkamp 2011b), Australian anthropology has largely neglected the lives and worlds of Aboriginal children as a research focus (for a detailed review of literature see Eickelkamp 2010). Although the involvement of young Aboriginal people in the criminal legal and child protection systems has been the subject of sustained political, media and public attention over recent years (Fallon and Neighbour 2016; Gunner 2017; Parkinson and Averill 2022), and despite the carceral domination of (young) Aboriginal lives, to my knowledge very little anthropological or academic material has addressed the

experiential qualities that I articulate here (a recent exception is Chapman 2022). A few ethnographies have demonstrated the severe negative impacts of systemic racism (Moisseeff 2011) and social and economic stress (Burbank 2011; Robinson 2008) on the lives and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and youth. I similarly contend that Aboriginal children bear a significant brunt – material, emotional, psychological, developmental, relational – of the settler state's regime of hyperincarceration.

Carcerality in infancy and childhood

Here I examine various stages of infancy and early childhood with attention to the role of carcerality in children's lives. My point is that various threads and threats of the carceral settler state disrupt, prohibit and otherwise make aspects of Victoria River childhood impossible, in turn destabilising foundations of personhood and processes of relationality. Grief, detachment, trauma and a lack of identity and sense of place emerge in their stead.

This process is in motion before a child's life has even begun. From a Victoria River perspective life begins when the spirit or life essence of a child reveals itself to the father-to-be. This typically occurs while the father is hunting or fishing and he perceives unusual behaviour in the object of his hunt: a fish, goanna or wallaby might 'come right up' to the man, as if wanting to be caught and killed (see also Redmond 2001:151-157). When the child's mother consumes this meal she ingests the essence of the child, which may occur before or after she becomes aware of her pregnancy. When a child is born they will usually have a birthmark or other anomaly where the fishing hook, spear or bullet pierced the animal: this same species is declared to be their totem, and the particular site of origin ('where dad bin find im') remains of personal significance throughout life. These practices and concepts resemble what Eickelkamp (2017:61) describes as the "tangible external existence of parts of the self", literal components of personhood which connect individuals in space and time with immediate and ancestral relations. These connections are interrupted and obliterated by hyperincarceration: unless a relation of equivalence (e.g. the child's father's brother) 'finds' them instead, a father who is in jail during his wife's pregnancy may never have the opportunity to 'find' the child in this manner. Although one man described how he "dreamed" the conception of his son (again see Redmond 2001)

while he was imprisoned for a short time, I know several young children for whom by reason of paternal incarceration the matter of their site of origin and their totem – structuring principles of Victoria River personhood – are ambiguous or unidentified.

Carcerality profoundly organises such young Aboriginal lives, from conception to birth and through to infancy. One mother whom I interviewed, Belinda, spoke plainly of the emotional difficulties of bearing and giving birth to a child while imprisoned: "they bin let me out for hospital, have that baby there, then go right back to prison". While Belinda was grateful she was able to keep her son with her and for the relatively generous treatment she received as an imprisoned mother with child ("they treat you right, all the officer, lawyer and all that"), her newborn son spent the first months of his life in Sector 4, the women's section of Darwin prison, separated from the rest of his family. She told me that her older son, then around 4 years of age, asked her if he could stay with her in prison too, because that's where his family was. Belinda found this request so heartbreaking that she asked her sister to stop bringing the older child on prison visits altogether. Another mother, Freyja, was staying with her husband at his family outstation following the birth of their newborn daughter Jean. One evening her heavily intoxicated husband beat her to the point an ambulance was required. Police attended to arrest the husband (another substantial prison sentence), but, confoundingly, they also arrested Freyja. Although Jean was then in the care of her grandparents, the infant was transferred to Territory Families, the child protection authority known colloquially as 'welfare'. None of Freyja's charges were upheld, but the damage was already done: it was nearly two weeks before we – Freyja's sister, her husband and myself – finalised arrangements to collect Jean from welfare ourselves, a two-day return trip.

These events – being born and raised in prison, being transferred to welfare custody a few weeks into life – are just a shade beyond the 'normal' for many Aboriginal people. A significant proportion of the children I came to know during my fieldwork had spent some time "la welfare" (in the custody of Territory Families institutions or the homes of non-kin 'carers'), while parents, grandparents and other carers are familiar to the point of mundanity with home incursions from welfare personnel, police and other state authorities. That Belinda's and Freyja's children were 'only' infants, in a life-stage prior to cognitive and

social development, might entail that these events would surely not be comprehended or remembered.[37] However it is a social fact in many Aboriginal societies, including the Victoria River context, that nascent social personhood is recognised and taken for granted from the moment of birth. Infants are treated as though they fully comprehend events, interaction and social action (see for example Hamilton 1981). This I believe reinforces the personal and psychic injury for infants as well as their close relations when they are born or removed into carceral institutions during the earliest stages of life. As the following vignette demonstrates, these themes intensify throughout childhood.

Adam (in his late 30s) was arrested early in the morning, detained at the local police station throughout the day, and in the afternoon he was to begin the long transfer journey to the Katherine watch house and onwards to the jail in Darwin. By chance a group of us are sitting in the park when the paddy wagon rolls in to fill up fuel. Adam's silhouette is visible in the cage on the back. When he sees the vehicle, Adam's son Joel (3) immediately recognises it as the thing that took his father away: he gets up and tries to run over, but he is scooped up by his mother so he bursts into tears, arms reaching for his father. She carries the wailing toddler over to the cage and with permission from the police lets Joel hold his father's hand through the steel mesh to say goodbye. When it's time for Adam to leave Joel's mother holds up his wrist to wave farewell to Adam, but as the vehicle departs the boy is inconsolable: he cries and cries. A few family members get up to wave goodbye and offer comfort to the toddler, but it's no use. Over the next couple of weeks whenever Joel sees a police paddy wagon drive by, and the local Night Patrol vehicles too, he bursts into tears again and tries to run after it.[38] *A close relation always rushes after him, usually uttering words of comfort*

[37] This was the attitude of Jean's older sister (aged 12) who remarked that "you shoulda just leave im [Jean] there!" when the infant came home to a radically overcrowded house: "he right there la welfare, only little baby one, we got no room here!". The implication was that Jean should have stayed in custody for 'just' another couple of weeks until her mother had resolved the pending health and legal matters. This again points to the radically normalised nature of carceral and custodial intervention in contemporary Aboriginal society and the relational decay it engenders.

[38] Since the 1990s many regional towns and remote settlements have used Night Patrols, staffed mostly by (local) Aboriginal people, ostensibly offering alternatives to policing, to service the needs of Aboriginal communities (among others see for example Anthony and Blagg 2019). Night Patrol vans are visually similar in make, model and modification to NT police paddy wagons: although the colour schemes are different, both deploy a new model Toyota Hilux with caged personnel carriers fitted on the back.

and phrases reminding him "your daddy gone now, im there la Berrimah! [jail]", gesturing north in Adam's direction.

Joel's emotional torment foreshadows what for many Aboriginal people becomes a lifelong antipathy towards police, policing and imprisonment – a sentiment evoked explicitly by often violent arrests, the omnipresent spectre of the police paddy wagon and the welfare vehicle, and more subtly by the absence of incarcerated kin. In Joel's short life Adam had already spent two years in prison, so the few months between his last release and this arrest were really the only period during which the toddler had the opportunity to form relations with his father – and indeed with any of his paternal relations who reside some distance away. In the wake of his father's arrest, which was itself certainly a source of trauma, particular vehicles became symbols for this violent extraction and the emotional pain it evoked.[39] Thereafter, each time a police paddy wagon or night patrol truck passed, it was plain that Joel relived the experience. Each time he would be swept up and consoled by his mothers, siblings, grandparents or other kin, who try to remind him that his father was no longer caged in the back of the paddy wagon but instead imprisoned far away. For Joel this notion did not hold: all that he knew was that truck = father = anguish.

As infants grow and develop, their exposure to hyperincarceration and hyperpolicing becomes at once more intensified and their comprehension more desensitised. The more fully socialised children become, the more their relational network develops, all the more known relations are entangled in carcerality. It is quite common to hear toddlers of 2, 3 or 4 years old to remark casually, even cheerfully, "im locked up" about parents, siblings, uncles and other kin (see also Eickelkamp 2013:103). I do not believe that at this age any child would really understand what it means to be incarcerated, but such casual delivery speaks to the sheer relentlessness of hyperincarceration as a social fact in this context. This casual sentiment may also be associated with an aspect of Aboriginal childrearing and socialisation

[39] It's beside the point but this form of departure goes firmly against particular principles guiding the treatment of children in Victoria River sociality. I have been scolded countless times for trying to drive away from a camp in the presence of a crying child who wants to come with. It is a profoundly wrong (and in a particular sense dangerous) thing to depart from a place when movement towards departure has upset a child: "if he cryin we gotta *warai* [stop; wait]". Usually the only acceptable response is to patiently wait until the child has stopped crying (perhaps expediated by offering them a treat) before making a move.

in which caregivers tend not to shield children and young people from the realities of everyday life, including matters to do with police and prison.[40] Annette Hamilton (1981) describes a practice in an Arnhem Land context half a century ago by which children do

> not grow up to believe the world is a secure and protected place, only to perceive a rude shock later. People make no efforts to conceal their real emotions from a child … (1981:66)

Inherent to the very public orientation of some Aboriginal socialities (Liberman 1985), it is not pragmatically possible to conceal from a child the fact of a close relative's imprisonment. Moreover, as hyperincarceration is a thoroughly normalised condition, most parents see no reason to do so, and young children become intimately familiar with carcerality as a matter of course and a fact of life.

As much as exposure to these forces is utterly normalised, Victoria River children often express and exhibit hostility towards police and welfare authorities. I have seen children aged from 3 or 4 years and up 'flipping the bird' at police cars as they pass by, the offending digit often hidden behind a hand or a tree: a fun, tongue-in-cheek gesture no doubt rooted in the same modality of relational tensions as those which anguished Joel. Most Victoria River children are well-versed in the world of hip hop music, particularly the work of the celebrated figure Tupac whose lyrics about policing, incarceration and racial injustice in United States ghettos resonate strongly with their own experiences and nascent world views. I know children whose literacy is quite limited but who can recite the lyrics of numerous hip hop songs verbatim and in full, while even those less well-versed in Tupac songs spontaneously and gleefully recite impactful lines about carceral and racial inequality: "cops give a damn about a negro"; "penitentiary's packed, and it's filled with blacks"; and especially "fuck the po-lice!". At the same time that these glimmers of resistance and hostility occur, Victoria River children also experience local and regional police (and to a lesser extent welfare and parole officers) as "peopled" (Chapman 2022:5): many are known by name, some may be thought to be "right" (i.e. 'doing an okay job'), some are despised and when new *plijamen* arrive on rotation their physical characteristics (age, gender,

[40] One woman told me that she "felt sorry" for her children (aged 3 and 7) when their father was first locked up, so she instead told them he was at stock camp. This white lie didn't hold for very long, and moreover was a distinctive and atypical measure in a context where people are more often very direct about facts and feelings.

tattoos, muscle and fat distribution) and disposition ('right', or 'cheeky one' i.e. dangerous) are the subject of ongoing commentary among children as well as adults. Unlike Lora Chapman's (2022) fieldwork in Alice Springs, I scarcely observed jovial and familiar interactions (joking, 'fist-bumps') between (white) police officers and (Aboriginal) children; those that I did witness were (or seemed to be) typically characterised by an air of forced cheer and underpinned by tensions rooted in glaringly unequal power dynamics.

Saturating carcerality is of remarkable significance in a cultural domain which eschews overt behaviour regulation in relation to infants and children. As has been well-documented, Aboriginal societies often emphasise the value and development of personal autonomy, and this is particularly evident during childhood and in practices of childrearing (see for example Eickelkamp 2017; Hamilton 1981; Musharbash 2011; Myers 1991). Infants and children are expected to ask for things they want and need and are rarely admonished for 'bad behaviour': instead, older relations encourage them to more fully realise and embrace their 'pre-given' identity and personality (Eickelkamp 2017) and more explicitly to become 'boss for oneself' (Eickelkamp 2017; Martin 1993; Musharbash 2011).

Although these notions underpin Victoria River sociality and childhood in particular, a marked dispositional shift is present when police and welfare personnel or vehicles are in sight. If a child is crying, playing at a distance or perceivably misbehaving when authorities roll in, older relations snap to attention and immediately chide the errant youngster: "welfare mob that way look!"; "[be quiet]! *Plijaman* here!". These urgencies are grounded in the historical – and continuing – interventions by welfare institutions in Aboriginal societies glossed as The Stolen Generation (see Haebich 2000), localised inflections of what Eve Vincent (2017) describes as 'spectres of welfare'. Moreover, these expressions are quite distinct from preferred methods of soothing or discouraging an infant's crying. For example, older kin often attempt to distract children from distress by pointing out a (real or imagined) nearby situational feature – a cow, kangaroo or dingo perhaps – and encouraging them to focus on it through comforting murmurs ("moo moo there look, moo moo!") and close nurturant embrace. More to the point, carcerally-inflected forms of behaviour regulation are often more successful than the latter: even a toddler in an out-of-control tantrum can be hushed into silence in a car driving past a police station. Young Victoria River people are

acutely aware that when carceral authorities are present, normal practices and ways of being and doing must be suspended.

This brings into question the notion of childhood innocence. Western liberal sensibilities and human rights discourses emphasise the innocence and purity of children (Samson 2020) and the (human) rights of the child. As Naderah Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2019) and Sherene Razack (2019) observe in the process Shalhoub-Kevorkian labels 'unchilding', such determinations are abandoned in the radically unequal context of settler colonialism. This is also the case in a social environment saturated by carcerality. Victoria River children sense that they are tarred with the same brush as their imprisoned relations – an impression which is sometimes verbalised explicitly. In the lead up to one Christmas, for example, local police officers took it upon themselves to drop off 'Santa sacks' for children in the surrounding Aboriginal settlements. Nobody was home at the camp I was staying at the time that the police made their rounds, so the children resident there missed out. One boy (11) muttered his suspicion that "that's cos they don't like us mob ay" – i.e. 'we children didn't receive any presents because the police don't like our family, many of whom are incarcerated'. As Eickelkamp describes in the Anangu context, Aboriginal children are tacitly if not explicitly aware of the radical inequalities that structure their worlds, and which render Indigenous life as a "starkly negative mirror" (2017:64) of settler society.

There is no more resounding example of children being punished for matters beyond their own control than the custodial intervention of welfare authorities. I know numerous Victoria River children who have been taken by welfare for short or long periods, and the spectre of removal remains a permanent feature of life for parents and other carers as well as children. One nine-year-old boy described the horrors of living "la gardia house gotta welfare" (in white people's house with/under welfare): aside from the profound trauma of being separated from his entire family for an extended period, including his older sisters who were also taken away, years later he remains haunted by being kept in a dark, locked room for hours at a time. Many of the behavioural issues he exhibits today are attributed by some of his older kin to his time in welfare custody: "That welfare mob bin buggerim up properly this kid!". Beyond such immediate difficulties, this boy also spent much of a crucial social development phase 'la welfare'. Years later, any time he slips up on matters of

fundamental ‘cultural knowledge’ – e.g. calling his father’s brother ‘uncle’ instead of ‘dad, forgetting words and names in local dialects, not knowing how to properly skin and butcher hunted animals – his peers tease him for having ‘gardiya brains’. The term ‘gardiya brains’ implies demonstration of modes of thought or being distinct from local Aboriginality, modes which in this boy’s case have been emaciated through carceral intervention by the settler state. This is one example of genocide in the sense advanced by Raphael Lemkin (1944), emergent and articulated with explicitly carceral inflection in everyday discourse.

For the most part these same childhoods are also happy, vibrant and characterised by creative, relational and nurturant dynamics. Even the youngest of these children are accomplished hunters and fishers; quite capable at skinning, filleting and preparing bush foods; they know the names of ancestors to call to ensure good outcomes while travelling and hunting, and the names of many of the species and terrains which underpin their way of life. At the same time some children express dissatisfaction with, even resistance to, particular features of their circumstances: living in considerable impoverishment and at times going hungry as a result; living in a ‘rubbish’ house without a TV or phone reception; living in a perpetually ruptured world constantly bombarded with incursions by the carceral settler state. This sentiment is succinctly captured in the words of Oliver (12), who announced on the morning we learned of his older brother’s imprisonment: “Well fuck this I’m not goin school today”. Sometimes it is all too much for a young soul to bear.

Children’s relations with imprisoned kin

Here, I am concerned with the ways another aspect of carcerality influences and structures the ways Victoria River children live, feel and relate: the absence of imprisoned kin. I begin with a scene of return.

We arrive at camp late one afternoon: myself and two men aged 17 and 18. They have spent an intense few days evading police and absconding to a regional town, eventually culminating in their arrest for their alleged involvement in a petty crime (the charges were subsequently dropped). I happened to be passing through the town when they were released and gave them a lift back home. As soon as we pull up at camp half a dozen of their younger

(cousin-)brothers and -sisters, aged between 4 and 10, swarm the vehicle: they tap on the windows, pull open the doors and engulf their returned relations. The whole time, in between optimistic demands for treats and lollies from town, is the gleeful chant: "you got locked up, you got locked up, you go locked up!".

The preceding days at this camp had been profoundly 'boring', a term which Yasmine Musharbash (2007) associates in the Warlpiri context with an absence of *relations* and company rather than an absence of *things to do*. This boredom was also accompanied – and articulated – by constant wondering aloud by children and adults: "what time that mob comin back"; "you reckon that tubela [those two] locked up already"; "tomorrow they gonna come back might be". Immediately, the return of these young men from a relatively short absence signalled there was more going on, more excitement, more relational infrastructure to shape the day around. The unrestrained glee at their return also foregrounds how significant these young men are in the lives of their younger siblings and cousins – a significance embellished in no small part due to the incarceration and absence of a decent chunk of their extended family.

The young children's jeering chant ("you got locked up!") renders the young men's arrest both a normal event and a novel transition. Like their fathers, uncles and some of the older women in their family these young men too had conspicuously embarked on a possibly lifelong expedition down a path riddled with hurdles and snares of carcerality. The timbre of the children's calls also revealed the thrill of a vicarious encounter with the carceral state. I perceived the particular mood of this chant as akin to how children or young teenagers in my own social milieu – middle class, urban settler society – might tease a relation or companion for having a boyfriend or a girlfriend. The correlating implication could be summarised: 'you have reached a stage of life which I/we have not yet reached'. This transition is both confronting and embarrassing, experienced as funny, absurd and the subject of ridicule. (For their own part these young men wordlessly brushed off the teasing and demands of their younger kin and the concerned questions of grandparents, and nonchalantly approached the camp kitchen: "any feed?"). Hyperincarceration as a social fact and lived reality is not always so entertaining.

It's hot, over 40 degrees, and the sun is high in the sky, but at least the humidity is decreasing as the middle of the day approaches. Eric, an eleven-year old boy, is sitting in full sun on a bench in the park, crying and occasionally yelling out in frustration. He was supposed to go to school today, but he refused: he's waiting on a phone call from his father, Leonard. Leonard is imprisoned over a thousand kilometres away, and Eric has to wait for the phone call here in the park because there's no decent phone reception in the settlement where he lives. Leonard was supposed to call last night, and the day before, but he didn't, or he couldn't – but there's a chance he'll call around lunch time today. Eric's mother, grandmother, and aunt occasionally approach him to give him food, water, encourage him to come out of the sun, and to try calm him down, but he cannot be consoled. He sits there for a couple of hours, sobbing, occasionally allowing himself to be distracted by a game on his phone. It's not until early afternoon that the battery dies and he gives up. He says he hates his dad, that he wants him to come home.

His father's incarceration is a source of ongoing dismay to Eric. This scene was the culmination of months of carceral absence: a general sense of missing and wanting, forgotten and uncelebrated birthdays, emotional deprivation in the form of paternal nurturance, and material absence manifest in broken things which don't get fixed. These cumulative stressors, however minute, assemble as a deep relational void in Eric's emotional and social world. Most of the time this void goes unarticulated: children and indeed adults don't often verbalise such particular feelings of missing or yearning (see however Eickelkamp 2014a), but occasionally things boil over.

Eric's tantrum demonstrates the emotional toll of such enforced parental abandonment, consolidated by the material realities of contemporary remote Aboriginal life. Eric and his father are not alone in this state of incommunicado. Phone calls are practically the only way imprisoned people can maintain contact when their relations live a two-day return trip from the prison, a difficulty which is aggravated by the fact that many Victoria River settlements have no (or no functional) mobile phone reception. While in other social contexts written letters are a significant form of communicative action beyond prison walls, it is not feasible for those with limited literacy. Prisoners are not permitted to make calls to public phones like those present in many settlements: security regulations mean only phone numbers

registered to particular categories of individual ('family member', 'friend', 'lawyer', 'employer') can be called, and a (timed and monitored) conversation can only proceed when prison staff approve that the person who picks up the phone is identical to that registered with the contact number. Young children simply do not understand such processes and requirements, leading to frequent questions of "mum can we call daddy now"; one mother described how her young children were often "jealous" and upset when their father finally called but were only allowed to speak to him for a few minutes. Also evident is the existential burden that carers for children of incarcerated men bear. Beyond the additional financial difficulties, extra childrearing duties and other forms of emotional and material care, Eric's maternal relations perform significant amounts of emotional labour in this scene and well beyond it – but the reality is there is nobody who can fill the void left by his own father. Recall the notion of children being punished for matters beyond their control: Eric's tantrum represents the profound existential anguish that this condition engenders. Indeed this is but one of many 'collateral consequences' (Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999) which the children of incarcerated parents suffer – statistically, thousands of them in the NT alone.

Another, differently pronounced, consequence is the relational void that forms between children and imprisoned kin. This can emerge viscerally, for instance when one man returned to his family only to be shunned by his toddler-aged children who did not recognise him; or in the case of a teenage girl who visited her father but *he* did not recognise *her* – he had entirely missed her advent into young adulthood and she was literally unrecognisable to him. When concrete relationships are not articulated or maintained in everyday life they are rendered abstract, banished to the domain of social memory.

James (38) has been incarcerated for the last 4 years. During this time his wife Jonie (34) and youngest daughter Paloma (10) have mostly lived with Jonie's family at a settlement a couple of hours away, Jonie with her own parents and Paloma in the home of her aunt and uncle. When James returns from prison it is 'cold weather time' (the dry season), a period during which people spend nearly all of their time – cooking, eating, socialising and, most relevant here, sleeping – outside. For the first couple of nights after his return James, Jonie and Paloma sleep outside in their own pile of swags and blankets distinct from other

sleeping arrangements in the camp: they are a family again. After a few days Paloma's aunt and uncle are heading back to their outstation, and Paloma jumps on board to stay with them again. James and Jonie stay put, and do not see Paloma until they also visit the settlement a week or so later.

In *Yuendumu Everyday* (2008) Yasmine Musharbash makes the case that Warlpiri sleeping arrangements – where and in whose company one sleeps – can be understood as an expression of relatedness between kin. Especially relevant here is the dual notion that someone who sleeps in a particular formation one night may sleep in an entirely different arrangement the next; and that such modalities align with daily events and the outcomes of social action which influence the state of relatedness between sleepers: "Warlpiri people inscribe domestic space as text with the positioning of their bodies each night, and every night a new text is produced" (2008b:77). Also relevant is the high value some Aboriginal societies place on mobility (Memmott, et al. 2006; Peterson 2000) and personal autonomy (Martin 1993; Myers 1991) – so it is very common to see children shift camps within a settlement from one day to the next and jump on cars going to other settlements or regional centres hundreds of kilometres away at the drop of a hat.

It should suffice to say that the same or similar practices can be observed in the Victoria River context, particularly during the dry season when people mostly sleep outside on swags and mattresses or in tents. [41] So when I comment that by sleeping in their own nocturnal camp James, Jonie and Paloma were "a family again" it is to acknowledge a meaningful relational event expressed and reinforced through the intimacy and materiality of sleep(ing arrangements) (see Figure 3). This is significant in itself: Paloma was six years old when James was imprisoned, and four years is a long time for a child – a period during which I understand she was able to visit him only once or twice. Those few days that mother, father

[41] If not: I encountered similar dynamics in the camps I stayed at throughout fieldwork. One aspect of this was the frequency of conversations among people of all ages and especially among children about where and with whom they would sleep; another is the fact that when I first arrived at one camp I slept alone, and was then gradually incorporated into the constantly changing constellation of sleeping arrangements – this incorporation signalling the genesis and development of ever-dynamic states of relatedness. In Paloma's case, I know from my time in their camp that when she stays with her aunt and uncle the sleeping arrangement typically assumed the form of their social unit – Paloma's aunt on one side, her uncle on the other, their daughter and Paloma (and more recently their infant son) nestled between them.

and child spent living and sleeping as a nuclear family unit were the only period in nearly half of Paloma's lifetime that she was together with her 'full' mother and father. Although she had spent the vast majority of the preceding four years in the camp of her aunt and uncle (relations who she also calls 'mum' and 'dad'), the expressed state of relations following James' return suggested that the structure of her life would return to 'normal'.

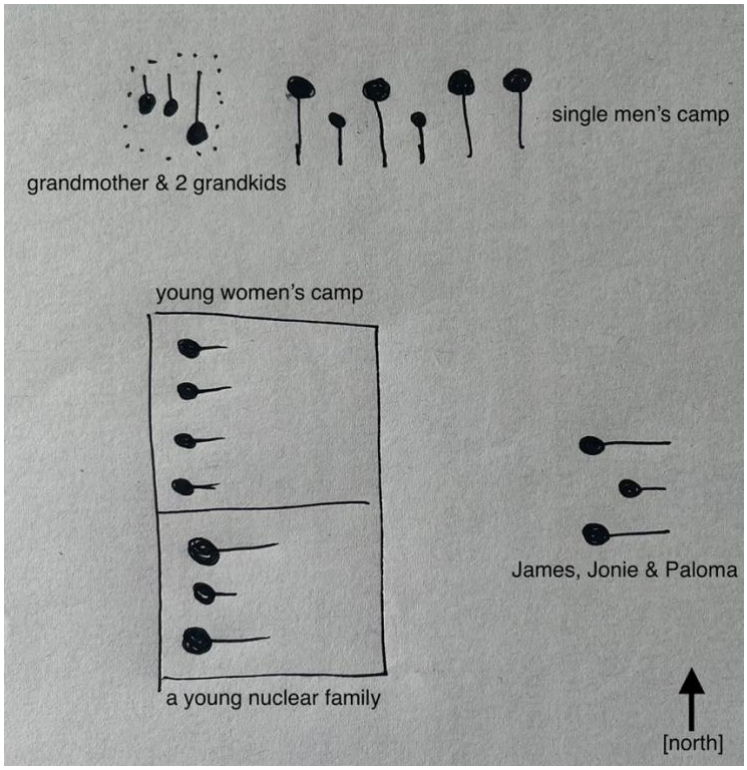

Figure 3. Example of (dynamic) sleeping arrangements in camp.

Paloma's departure from camp signalled otherwise. For his part James seemed a little put out or defeated when Paloma indicated she wanted to shift camps, suggesting that she stay 'home' with them. However, the values of autonomy and mobility, particularly in the context of childhood, translate to: if you want to do something, do it; if you want to go somewhere, go there; nobody will or should stop you from doing so, unless your action represents a transgression. As Musharbash (2008b) and Eickelkamp (person. comm., 2022) observe, even young Aboriginal children are keenly aware of the social significance of choices about where they sleep and with whom. What Paloma wanted to do and where she wanted to go was expressed in her movement from James' camp to that of her aunt and uncle – it signalled who she wanted to be with.

The implications of these gestures are largely tacit, but camp selection and sleeping arrangements are concise indicators of relational dynamics. What I think Paloma's choices indicated is that in terms of emotional and relational proximity, she was much closer to the aunt and uncle she returned to than the father (and to some degree the mother) who had returned to her. Rather than being, travelling, staying and sleeping in James' company she 'voted with her feet'. While the implication is that Paloma felt firmly at home *somewhere* (albeit elsewhere), I interpret this as an index and expression of relational decay: the reality is that she barely knows her father, and he barely knows her. This is related to – or an inversion of – what Fred Myers has identified as an issue of "ontological security" (2011:82-83) in Pintupi sociality and childhood socialisation – security garnered in practices and relationships of nurturance. For Paloma, her sense of self was more properly embedded in a camp where father did not sleep, an implicit social fact engendered by his years-long prison stints. Perhaps this represents too an expression of what Gary Robinson has described as the "reciprocation of abandonment" (2004:16). The abandonment was reciprocated once more: less than a year later James was locked up again, for another extended period.

James and Paloma's relationship is one example of the disintegration of ties with kin engendered by carceral intervention by the settler state. James alone has a close extended family (his 'mob' or social unit) of about 40 people, around half of whom are children, and every person who endures longer (and successive) terms of imprisonment faces the same prospect: varying degrees of alienation from close kin. The image I am trying to conjure here is one of deep, overlapping social voids in children's relational networks – voids which statistics indicate almost every Aboriginal child in the Northern Territory experiences.

Fear, care and the carceral state

It has been a distressing day: Adam was arrested and chauffeured to prison earlier in the day [described earlier]*, and now everybody – around a dozen family members of all ages – has retreated to the grass, sitting in loose clustered rows which follow the shade cast by trees overhead. After a while the general air of post-arrest distress and despondency is replaced with relaxed chatter. We are waiting for someone's pay to be deposited so the shopping can*

be done before heading back to camp, and while we wait the kids are playing, teenagers are slumped over their phones, and older people either chatter idly or sit calmly in silence. Suddenly somebody notices a brand new and impossibly white Toyota approaching: "welfare there look!". The tension escalates immediately to a collective state of alarm. Some of the kids turn their heads sharply in the direction of the oncoming vehicle, while others not paying attention are barked at by older kin: "welfare comin!", "get back here now!". Everybody stiffens visibly: even the teenagers look up from their phones. Small children are ushered into adult laps and others told to stay close and stop playing. The Toyota pulls up right in front our group, who fall into a hushed silence: some peer nervously into the car while others deliberately turn their heads to stare firmly anywhere else. Two white women in their twenties or thirties get out of the car and wave cheerfully at the Aboriginal assemblage in front of them before heading over to the shop. There is a collective sigh of relief when their uniforms reveal them to be not welfare authorities but members of a community legal service: a false alarm.

The immediate transition from calm to panic in this scene, and the collective response to the apparent threat, illuminates two aspects of how carcerality is perceived and encountered in Victoria River life. The first is the fear which struck the entire group, myself included, at the spectre of the welfare vehicle, and the second is the nurturant, protective impulse which arose in direct response. I consider these notions as experiential dynamics particular to everyday Aboriginal life, particularly childhood, under ongoing settler colonial occupation.

Fear

One of the most visceral responses Victoria River children exhibit at the prospect of carcerality is fear. As I suggested in a previous section this is far from the only sentiment characterising these relations, but fear and related feelings (anxiety, panic, terror) are a powerful feature of the intersection between Aboriginal childhood and the carceral state. Elsewhere (Horton 2022) I describe a similar scene in which a group of children and grandparents fly into instant panic as a police vehicle approaches their camp: children are told by grandparents to hide, all wrought with fear. I also know from past employment that

in settlements across the Top End a standard response from Aboriginal children to the arrival of Toyotas branded with the Northern Territory Government logo is to flee on sight, and to scatter in directions difficult to follow by vehicle, for example between houses or into heavy scrub (see also Thurman 2020:146). I have observed countless events like the scene described above, which I understand as symptoms of being perpetually 'haunted' by the carceral settler state, manifested in fear of the constant and very real prospect of being locked up (for adults) or taken away (for children).

The immediate tension triggered by the apparent approach of the welfare vehicle was precipitated by Adam's arrest. This sequence belies a murky awareness of how the carceral state operates – an awareness born of overexposure and cultivated by suspicion and bad faith. Everybody from the small children playing to the old people calling them to attention instantly knew, or had the feeling, that because one of their number had been taken, they were now coming for the children too. Although there was no apparent reason that children in this group would require the attention of Territory Families, this understanding was both unspoken yet utterly palpable. Based on fieldwork with *mestizo* children in Ecuador, Esben Leifsen (2011:154) describes how quotidian events of "pain and suffering transform into experiences of trauma and destruction difficult or even impossible to articulate directly". What Leifsen calls 'muted expressions' might adequately describe the learned silence, urgent stillness and quiet, collective alarm which Victoria River children exhibit in this scene and whenever spectres of the carceral state appear.

This fear, predominantly latent but at times overt, not only subtly structures children's behaviour but also shapes their world view. Fear of being taken by welfare transitions to a looming teenage threat of being incarcerated in Don Dale, and by young adulthood being incarcerated in adult prisons looms as a prospect of possibility or probability for some if not many, particularly young men. For those who become parents as young adults the notion of being incarcerated (or one's partner being incarcerated) *and* having one's child taken by welfare custody are silent features of everyday life. This has implications for how Aboriginal children are raised, and how Aboriginal people nurture children.

Care

Evident in events like that described above are ethics and practices of care and nurturance. The concept of 'nurturance' in Aboriginal childrearing and sociality more broadly has been the subject of sustained anthropological focus since it was brought to attention in Annette Hamilton's (1981) 'Nature and Nurture' and subsequently Fred Myers' study of post-contact Pintupi society in the Western Desert (1991). The Pintupi term *kanyirninpa* is a semantic cluster entailing 'holding', including caring, protecting and nurturing (McCoy 2008; Myers 1991). Brian McCoy (2008) emphasises that *kanyirninpa* should be considered above all else a praxis of care and nurturance – a praxis vested in relationships with kin and in Country which provide what Myers later identifies as an "enduring 'anchor'" (2011:88, citing Munn 1970), a set of (ideally stable) social, relational and psychic foundations in which Aboriginal personhood is rooted. I elaborate on this notion in the Victoria River context in the following chapter: here I am concerned with an emergent feature of nurturance under enduring settler colonial occupation.

I suggest that approaches to and experiences of nurturance have become heavily inflected by carcerality, particularly a primal sense of fear of carceral intervention. Rather than an almost unconscious practice – nurturing for nurturance's sake – care at times becomes an urgent and desperate requirement in the face of what is most dreaded: children being taken away. In moments like that described above children are placed in laps, called closed and held tight because of the overwhelming threat posed to the child and to the social body by the spectre of the carceral state. [42] This is quite distinct from practices like *kanyirninpa* which are intimate, tacit and vested in the development of the child as a social person and the reproduction of Aboriginal sociality as a whole: the aspect I attempt to describe is informed by immediate and desperate urgency.

This carceral-colonial dynamic is also articulated explicitly in the contemporary use of the word 'care' in everyday vernacular. Children who are temporarily or permanently registered

[42] I can recall less than a handful of comparable examples of such urgent and emphatically protective 'holding' during my fieldwork when carceral authorities were not present or anticipated: once during an event of domestic/family violence and once during an intense drunken brawl that ravaged a settlement for an entire evening. These were the only other events during which carers felt the need to call in and *hold* their young wards with any real sense of urgency, panic or terror.

with Centrelink and Territory Families as living with relations other than their parents are referred to as 'in the care of', and their nominated relation as 'carer'. The bureaucratic matter of 'care' is of substantial everyday significance when carers receive additional welfare payments in a context of widespread financial and material impoverishment. I suggest that relationships of 'care' assume a quotidian and relational form of interpellation (Althusser 2014). For example a child who wants to jump on board with family driving to a nearby regional centre might be denied by his grandmother accordingly: "no, you la my care, you gotta warai [you are in my care, you must stay put]"; a mother with a husband in prison might tell her young daughter "I'll put you back la my care when dad come out". This kind of discourse ('hailing' in Althusser's terms) marks a contemporary perversion of the concept of 'nurturance' and the relational structure underpinning it within the arbitrary, bureaucratic, punitive and carceral entanglements which are the forms the settler state most often assumes in Aboriginal life. For one, these interactions are an affront to those deeply-held values of autonomy and mobility. Further, unsaid but implied in such discourse is the omnipresent threat of carcerality: if you jump on that car welfare will come and take you away; for now you are formally not my daughter. The nine-year-old boy who was so blatantly traumatised by being locked in a room and denied the presence and embrace of his relations while 'la welfare' would testify to the nature of such 'care'. Absent is any sense of 'nurturance' in the Aboriginal sense: rather it is cold and clinical, rooted in paperwork rather than relationality, a monstrous inversion of Victoria River style care.

Carcerality structures intimate relations and practices of nurturance between kin, articulated in contemporaneous assessments of who can go where and with whom. Fear becomes entangled in ways of caring, being and relating. Eickelkamp (2017:76) concisely asserts how the complexities and inequalities of contemporary settlement life mean Anangu children "live the precariousness of *kanyininpa*, of holding the self in place". In a context of hyperincarceration such precarity becomes a central dynamic of childhood.

Play

An uneventful afternoon finds a bunch of us sitting in the shade at camp trying to figure out what to do for the rest of the day. Sick of waiting around, Oliver (12) makes his own fun. His

youngest brother, Joel (3) is toddling around us playing with a length of rope he has found somewhere. Oliver observes this and breaks into character. "Alright, you under 'rest. You comin with me. You gonna go locked up na, I'm the police", he declares, seizing Joel and the rope, and tying up his hands. Joel breaks into giggles and plays along. Oliver keeps up the pantomime: "come on, you gonna go Berrimah [prison] na, you Adam Smith [Joel's father's full name], you gonna go locked up for a long time". Constable leads prisoner by rope from the shade to a broken-down car in the driveway. Joel is still laughing uncontrollably – until he is (gently) thrown to the ground and (gently) mock-beaten. Joel bursts into tears and the grownups chastise Oliver for upsetting his brother. Joel runs back to safety where his grandfather unties him.

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I am driving with Annette (in her late 30s) and her son Hudson (3 years old), myself in the front and Annette with Hudson on her lap in the back. Annette and I are chatting as we drive when Hudson, bored, notices a reel of fishing line on the floor of my car and he picks it up. The fishing line is very thick, and he pulls out a length of it, looping it around his neck. Playfully, he chants "I'm locked up, I'm locked up, I'm locked up!". When I turn around to see what he's playing at he brings the fishing line up to my neck, laughing "you're locked up, you're locked up mangurn *[white person]".*

These instances of spontaneous idle play illuminate several aspects of the carceral saturation of Victoria River childhood. Perhaps the least obvious is the catalyst for these games: a length of rope. Oliver was compelled to tie up and arrest Joel the moment he noticed the toddler playing with an old rope, and Hudson's boredom in the presence of the fishing line prompted him to play a similar game, first on his own and then incorporating myself.[43] There is a chance these instances are based on a cognitive awareness that of various terms for 'police' in Victoria River languages and dialects several are derived from

[43] By this stage I had been living with Hudson and his family for nearly three months. During the first couple of weeks of my stay he stubbornly addressed me only as *mangurn* (a constant source of amusement to me), but after persistent correction from his older relations he had called me nothing other than 'uncle' or 'Patrick' for a couple of months. At the time I thought it remarkable that he reverted to calling me *mangurn* again in the moment he was toying with the theme of arrest and incarceration: there is a shade of possibility that this was associated with the inherently racial nature of hyperincarceration. More implicitly, Hudson's play concerned the unthinkable – an Aboriginal person 'arresting' a white man: an inversion of the reality of settler-Indigenous relations.

words meaning ‘rope’, ‘chain’, ‘to tie up’. I doubt that the three-year-old knew this, and I doubt even more that he would have seen and comprehended the now infamous and iconic photographs from the turn of the 20th century of Aboriginal men from the Kimberley incarcerated and chained up by the neck *en masse* – although these games certainly evoke the same image. What is remarkable to me is the instantaneous and repeated association between lengths of fibre and being ‘locked up’. At the very least this demonstrates that hyperincarceration is such a predominant theme in the lives and minds of Victoria River children, even infants, that it erupts spontaneously and consistently during moments of idle play with the most rudimentary, yet symbolically potent, of props.

This begs the question of what precipitates such games. In Oliver’s case Joel’s father Adam had been arrested and taken away to prison two days before his older brother playfully seized him. Further, Oliver’s ‘game’ with Joel focused not only on the materiality of arrest and incarceration (the rope, the car/‘paddy wagon’), but also its inherent and uncontained violence. As Frantz Fanon (2008a) observed, children are acutely aware of the ‘fact of blackness’ – the racial and hierarchical structures inherent to colonial contexts (again see also Eickelkamp 2017:64-65; Fanon 1963). Oliver’s playful emphasis on violence indicates his perception also of the “racial terror that is a central part of settler colonialism”, particularly on the frontier (Razack 2020:2). While Oliver was certainly witness to Adam’s arrest, as far as I know Hudson had never witnessed a comparable event – although his father was then imprisoned and had been for a long time. Once I became aware of this particular kind of game I realised it was actually a somewhat common form of play: I observed no less than

half a dozen similar re-enactments among boys and young men. [44] [45] Looking back on my fieldnotes around these other events I could find no reference to an arrest in the preceding days or weeks that would have been significant to those playing. This points to several different notions of what else might prompt such a vivid and contagious form of play.

The first, concerning the experience and resolution of emotional distress, can be approached from a psychological developmental and psychoanalytic perspective. Eickelkamp notes in the context of sand-storytelling, a form of play and sociality among Anangu children, that spontaneous games:

> most commonly depict events – remembered, as they are being observed, and sometimes in anticipation – that preoccupy the child at the time, consciously or unconsciously, and hence reflect how children perceive the structure of their everyday life (2013:111)

In a similar context Carmel O'Shannessy (2013) observes that children "reproduce elements from their experience of the world in ways that develop their understandings" of their social environment, and that play can be deployed as "a way of dealing with fears and confusions from the adult world, by incorporating them into play routines which they initiate and over which they have control" (2013:132). Demonstratively, during The Intervention (a.k.a. the NT Emergency Response), Eickelkamp observed a group of children playing in a creek bed,

[44] Children play with all sorts of themes, so attention to this particular form may require some qualification. The game 'Cops and Robbers' was popular when I grew up in primary school playgrounds in Sydney, and I understand it still is among the children of my non-Indigenous friends and family (mostly glued to the metropoles of the eastern seaboard). This game involves two teams, 'cops' and 'robbers', where a small group of cops has to round up a bigger group of robbers who are always freeing each other from 'jail'. There are differences, however, between structured games like this in metropolitan playgrounds and the 'free play' involving arrest in places like the Victoria River. For one, the mainstream cops and robbers game revolves more around chasing and being chased – the opposing roles are little more than a thematic lens applied to the setting of play. There are similar games played by Victoria River children (notably the settler colonial trope of 'cowboys and Indians') but I have not observed any 'cops and robbers' games. Further, the roles in cops and robbers are not typecast: the cops in one round become robbers in the next. Finally, games like cops and robbers are more likely informed by popular conceptions of the role of police filtered through media (e.g. 'Paw Patrol', 'Law & Order', etc) than direct experience. Out of the handful of Victoria River households I primarily associated with there were few televisions, and there is a much lower saturation of mainstream media in this context.

[45] I haven't seen girls or young women 'play' in this particular way. It could be the case that different forms of play are socialised according to gender as is the case among Anangu people much further south (Eickelkamp 2011). Certainly both girls and women as well as boys and men engage in 'teasing' or 'cruelling' of infants, including references to imprisonment ("[poor thing], daddy gone locked up", "where you brother? He locked up!!"), but the kind of rough-and-tumble play-acting described above seems to be the domain exclusively of boys and young men, perhaps indicative of a gendered relationship to carcerality from a very young age.

one of whom uttered in Pitjantjatjara: “the military is coming to the Northern Territory and welfare is taking the Black children away!” (2011a:506). These events and analyses demonstrate that, through play, children find the space and opportunity to take control of events and circumstances looming in their lives. Similar dynamics are present in other Aboriginal societies affected by radically high suicide rates (Robinson 2008), substance use (Robinson 2004:16) and alcohol-fuelled violence (Martin 1993:23), as well as internationally by children living in war zones (Jong 2002) and the wake of natural disaster (Bateman, et al. 2013).[46]

We can therefore understand play like that of Oliver’s as a way of coming to terms with an emotionally distressing event through its playful re-enactment. Although it is evident that witnessing the arrests of loved ones, and more abstractly living under a regime of hyperincarceration, is a source of profound anguish to Victoria River children, this form of play is also demonstrably productive.[47] I want to suggest that the prolific popularity of this type of game is fastened to the relentlessness of carcerality in Victoria River life. Other games I observed seemed to go in and out of fashion: some literally according to the season, such as games revolving around a particular waterhole which is only full around half the year; another, inspired by the plot of Marvel’s ‘Black Panther’, simply faded out of style once everyone has already seen the movie and played out particular scenes to exhaustion. Games employing themes of arrest and incarceration, however, were always in vogue. It is plain to see that even from a child’s perspective carcerality is an ingrained social fact that nobody individually or as a society has any real measure of control over. Perhaps this is why children come back to the same game, over and over again: carcerality is the perennial

[46] Incidentally I have not observed children re-enacting or playing on the theme of domestic and family violence. It is however quite common to see children (almost exclusively boys) ‘play fight’, which I think is certainly in emulation of (preparation for?) the kind of ‘fair go fights’ which periodically take place between young and middle-aged men and women, and which preoccupy entire settlements including children when they occur. Although everybody involved in such incidents is by definition related and therefore ‘family’, this form of engagement is quite distinct from domestic and family violence in the more specific and gendered sense. While such events certainly affect children in myriad ways (e.g. Leifsen 2011), it is perhaps significant that domestic and family violence apparently do not enter the realm of play.

[47] This is particularly the case when there is a desperate lack of adequate and culturally appropriate trauma counselling for remote-living Aboriginal people at the most critical of times, as Liza Scarfe (2022) has recently pointed out, let alone counselling designed for children enduring more relentless yet quotidian traumas inherent to the settler colonial regime (Lea 2020a).

subject of play because it is a permanent fixture of and unresolved experience in everyday life.

Another aspect present in this form of play is the unbridled thrill which characterises children's re-enactment of arrests. In rehearsing these police deeds there is so much attention to detail: gnarled facial expression and vocal tone, dragging and throwing the victim to the ground, a knee to the back, mock-beatings. These mimicries, informed by visceral proximity to their real-life counterparts, are the emotive focus of the games and their true source of fun. These tropes communicate very frank statements about the racial stratification that underpins contemporary Aboriginal life: white people wielding state-sanctioned power can abduct, beat and humiliate countrymen without consequence.

Extrajudicial violence and humiliation of the captive are always the subtext of the scenes these children re-enact with such gusto. Didier Fassin, who conducted long-term ethnographic studies of police in urban France (2013), recently examined police violence and its underlying drives (2019). Ultimately, he suggests, what motivates 'extra-legal' punishment afflicted by police upon arrestees – beatings, humiliation – is what Nietzsche phrased as the "voluptuous pleasure…the enjoyment of violation": that is, the secret, indulgent pleasure of cruelty (2019:558). In other words, police inflict humiliating racial violence largely because a) they can, and b) it feels good. I suggest that this is something that Victoria River people, including children, already know intuitively: I understand scenes like Oliver's re-enactment of Adam's arrest with Joel as his proxy not only as an outlet for the intolerable and perpetually unresolved conflicts produced in a context of hyperincarceration, but also as an opportunity for participation in a paradigm of inverted domination. The rapacious and violent caricature of the sadistic white police officer is embodied fervently and with relish; these children are having fun because they know or imagine that (secretly) it feels good to be the uniformed whitefellas (they need not imagine what it is like to be the blackfellas). With acute attention to the intricacies as well as the blunt facts of these events, children observe the degree of thrill attained in arresting someone, binding them, throwing them to the ground and into a paddy wagon. Certainly, re-enacting these scenes makes the play-constables and even their victims split at the seams

to contain their laughter. Police live out this same violent, hierarchical, racial, colonial fantasy on a daily basis and through idle play these children get a turn as well.

Finally, there is an element of this form of play which is future-oriented. This is hinted at in Oliver's interpellation of Joel by his father's name – "come on, you gonna go Berrimah [prison] na, you Adam Smith" – no doubt emulating the remarks of the arresting police. This association and correlation of toddler son and adult father is very likely an articulation of a local concept implying the dividuality of the father-son assemblage as 'the same person', which I touch on in the following chapter. What this notion also reveals is the statistical likelihood that children who grow up in a context of hyperincarceration will go on to be imprisoned themselves (e.g. Clear 2007). Geza Roheim (1932) made the profound observation that "children of the world play, in actuality, only one game – that of growing up" (cited in Dender and Stagnitti 2015:6). In these scenes, children play out carceral events which they witness and experience constantly, and which many will continue to realise as they grow older. It is on this theme which I conclude.

Conclusion

To international fanfare in 2008 then-Prime Minister of Australia Kevin Rudd offered an apology to the members and families of the Stolen Generations. With profoundly liberal rhetoric focussing on the past-tense cruelties and future-tense hopes and equalities, he acknowledged the "pain, suffering and hurt" caused during a particular period of Australia's governance (Rudd 2008). He proclaimed that a "new page in the history of our great continent can now be written" and that "the injustices of the past must never, never happen again". *Never again* has thereafter become the slogan for various political and activist campaigns opposing various interventions of the carceral state in Aboriginal life, particularly in the lives of Aboriginal children.

Among those to whom The Apology's rhetoric collectively appealed, the members of Victoria River Stolen Generations are all beyond childhood now. Many have passed away, several returned to their true places of origin, while others never made it back. Since The Apology carcerality has become only more concentrated in remote Aboriginal life: the

various shapes and forms of The Intervention; the issues and events leading to the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory, its recommendations tabled and subsequently shelved; and most recently emergent reports from Don Dale of escalating incidents of self-harm, suicide attempts and 'walls smeared with blood' (Gibson 2022). Meanwhile the rates of youth and adult incarceration continues to intensify, removing and displacing fractal social networks and relationships within Aboriginal families. This represents not so much 'another stolen generation' in the singular but the continuity of an intensifying carceral genocide. The realities of contemporary Aboriginal life under this regime render the *never* in the adopted phraseology redundant: *again*, *again*, *again*.

To approach an articulation of the place that this regime holds in the lifeworld of Victoria River children I consider the words of that nine-year-old boy who was so emotionally and personally devasted by the period he endured 'la welfare'. Quite casually and in passing he told me how, even though his older sisters used to run away from where they were detained, he stayed put and never tried to flee: "they was really cruel that Welfare mob, but if you run away then they gonna put your time even longer. That's why I never run away from welfare, me, I bin just do my time and come out free". To 'do one's time and come out free' is the mantra that many Victoria River adults recite to comprehend the insufferable complexities of imprisonment they endure, and it is this sentiment which too has become a component of contemporary Aboriginal childhood under ongoing settler colonial occupation.

Chapter 5 – Hyperincarceration and contemporary Aboriginal masculinities

During a series of conversational interviews with groups of young Victoria River men I posed the particularly loaded question: 'does going to prison make you a man?', to which the consistent answer was a resounding 'no'. In this chapter I explore various threads of this question and response, and more broadly examine the role of hyperincarceration in shaping the lives and possibilities for life of Victoria River men. I begin with an overview of the contemporary realities of Aboriginal life and Aboriginal masculinity, and demonstrate how the prison looms as an absolute certainty in a social context otherwise characterised by ambiguity. I attend to a popular trope in mainstream discourse about Aboriginal hyperincarceration which has it that going to prison resembles a 'rite of passage' in contemporary Aboriginal societies. I go on to outline a theory of *carceral masculinity* to articulate how hyperincarceration renders contemporary Victoria River masculinities simultaneously powerful and fragile. I then consider relationships between fathers and sons on two levels – sons whose fathers are perpetually captive to the social void of carcerality, and fathers who fear and grieve losing sons to the same – and expand upon the model of 'intergenerational trauma' described by Brian McCoy (2008) in the Western Desert context. I understand carcerality all at once as a source of turmoil, deprivation, masculinity and emasculation: a dynamic arrangement which rigorously structures the lives of *all* Victoria River men, not just those who are imprisoned. In discussing how Victoria River men talk, think and feel about prison and imprisonment, I seek to articulate an elusive set of responses to the simple question: what does it mean to 'be a man' under a regime of hyperincarceration?

An overview of contemporary Victoria River masculinity

Contemporary Aboriginal masculinity endures a protracted crisis. Ongoing settler colonial occupation and governance, and the resultant material conditions of sedentariness, profoundly shape the lives of Victoria River men and (the meaning and value of) the contributions they can make to their world. The social, economic and ceremonial roles of

Aboriginal men, once essential providers, have been subverted by near-universal welfare dependence, reorganising economic and relational dynamics with kin (McCoy 2008; Peterson 1993). Access to terrains once freely journeyed and inhabited is hindered by pastoral and other settler occupation, the consequent spatial exclusions, and scarcity of vehicular travel wrought by widespread material impoverishment. Profound racial hierarchies render even the most senior ceremonial authorities as subordinates to the settler individuals and organisations which to a significant extent control their land, money, housing and health, and which constantly turn their world upside down by removing and incarcerating their relations.[48] In general terms Victoria River men have very few means by which to develop or sustain social and economic roles, or avenues to cultivate a meaningful life beyond the prism of relatedness.

Underpinning these issues are the historical continuities which challenge the endurance of Victoria River life itself and pose an existential threat to a society emphatically organised around the principal of patrifiliation (McConvell 1998). More broadly degrees of substance dependence and political and media discourses converge to reinforce powerful stereotypes of Aboriginal men, quite effectively rendering them public enemy number one: they offer no productive contribution to Aboriginal society (or Australian society for that matter) and instead spend all their welfare money on grog, appropriate other funds leaving nothing for their wives to feed their children, they beat women and children and each other, and expose their communities to vicious and sexual violence (see for example Zaunmayr 2022).

Aboriginal men emerge as *the* problem underpinning the public-facing aspects of Aboriginal disadvantage, and hyperincarceration emerges as the solution. When I say the popular stereotypes about Aboriginal men are *powerful* I mean to emphasise the discursive power of these narratives (Adgemis 2020): these tropes of which Aboriginal men are resentfully cognisant are also narratives foundational to settler statehood and personhood – they drive and justify the imperative, political and psychological, to police and imprison at such devastating rates (Razack 2015; 2020). While a share of the men involved in my fieldwork

[48] This is a generalisation to which obviously there are exceptions: there are Victoria River men and women who can turn the same authorities into a quivering mess.

were imprisoned for reasons which live up to the stereotype, namely domestic and family violence, many too were sentenced for petty, non-violent offences often involving alcohol or obscure, bureaucratic offences. A disconcerting proportion were arrested or imprisoned *without* being sentenced, only to be released days, weeks or months later with charges dropped or sentences suspended. Arrest and imprisonment are events that many Victoria River men (will) experience during their lifetime, and some simply expect it.

Carceral inevitability

Franklin (21) and I are driving out of the grounds of Darwin's prison after visiting Blaise (19), who is a couple of months into his first prison sentence. Blaise is Franklin's cousin-brother, and Franklin remarks that Blaise is "the first one from our lil generation to go locked up". He pauses in thought for a moment and starts listing who he thought would be coming next: "probly Tyler (18), he'll be first, and [his brother] Tobias (21), they gotta follow they father [who has cumulatively spent more than a decade in prison]. Then might be Alexander (17), his little brother (16) too… My little brother (17) probably not, but maybe I dunno…" he pauses again and adds with a laugh, "Max (14) he gonna go for sure, he probly gonna go Don Dale this year".

Although nobody I worked with *wanted* to go to prison, it is something which many anticipate. In his his bleak predictions Franklin names no less than half a dozen young men, all close relations, whom he expects will be incarcerated in the near future. One of those named, Alexander (17), later spoke quite candidly about his expectations of going to jail: "when I first go locked up probly I'll hate it, frightning [frightened], but I'll just get used to it … I'll probly love it, feel like home!". Absent in Franklin and Alexander's remarks is any sense of dread or terror. To be sure, the saturation of carcerality in Victoria River life has eroded the capacity to *feel* in response to news of a relation's imprisonment; this is apparent among young men when they consider what the future may hold.

Alexander's perspective seems rooted in a 'might as well' attitude, one we might interpret accordingly: the possibility of incarceration looms always, so rather than resisting you might as well accept it. Alexander was raised primarily by his maternal grandmother following the

death of his mother several years ago, while his father has been absent for most of his life. He has had a few run-ins with the law and was imprisoned at Don Dale for a few months when he was younger. Although he does not like to speak about his time there, when he does speak about imprisonment he speaks from experience. He dropped out of school around the age of 13, has limited literacy and fluency of Standard English, already has a criminal record, and engages in the kind of recreational activities that might attract further police scrutiny. These demographic features alone increase his likelihood of being incarcerated. Perhaps he also does not anticipate (or desire) much more for his life beyond engagement in the world of kin – a world which is explicitly inclusive of the prison.

Something I have found useful to 'think with' in this regard is time I have spent with my own grandparents when they were residents of retirement facilities in metropoles beyond 'the field'. In these sites the absolute and imminent certainty is death. Everybody knows it is coming, and so death is spoken about flippantly by all, the subject of jokes, even welcomed. In terms of a more culturally specific analysis, Alexander's 'might as well' sentiment towards incarceration seems to be an individualised expression of a tendency Moisseeff (2011:264) describes among young Aboriginal men in Central Australia, who "attempt to attain self-sufficiency on their own, becoming fatally entangled in a logic of self-nurturing". In the context Moisseeff describes, such logic is materialised in chronic substance use, recklessness and violence directed towards the self and to others; in Alexander's case the prison emerges above all others. More broadly such open sentiments may be regarded as an "affirmation of confidence in the face of unsettling uncertainty" (Besnier, et al. 2018:865): when going to jail is one of the only certainties in life, why not simply embrace it?

This 'might as well' sentiment is most prevalent among younger men and men who are not parents, and fatherhood represents a point at which such ambivalence dwindles. While men like Alexander exhibited degrees of ambivalence about going to jail, the handful of his age-mates who had young children of their own expressed absolute opposition to the notion: "what the fuck I wanna do that for?"; "you just wasting your life there la prison!". This reflects a deeper pattern among contemporary Aboriginalities. Moisseeff observes that attaining a status of adulthood is increasingly difficult in a society treated as "eternal children" (Moisseeff 2011:248), and becoming a parent is one of the few remaining avenues

towards the social embodiment of adulthood (2011:266). This does not mean that older men and young fathers do not also expect to go to prison. Rather, personal attitudes toward imprisonment become less ambivalent, more rooted in desperation.

Franklin and Alexander's candid predictions and expectations turned out to be dismally accurate. During this phase of my fieldwork only Blaise had been incarcerated, 'the first one' of their age-mates. Within a few years, two of them passed away under tragic circumstances, three were imprisoned (two in adult facilities, one in Don Dale), and more were arrested than I could keep track of. I can confirm that none of those imprisoned, Alexander inclusive, 'loved' it.

For many Victoria River men the prison looms as an ambiguous yet ominous certainty, radically shaping the structure and purpose of life. One evening I was sitting with a man in his late 30s who had recently returned from a very long prison sentence: it was not his first and it turned out not to be his last. He lamented he was 'lonely', and I asked why – he had returned to his wife, children and extended family where he was warmly embraced. He replied that he "got not mate anymore": all of his age mates, those who he grew up with, were presently incarcerated in prisons across Northern and Central Australia. He had not seen many of them for years. "Only me now, I'm the only one, *mijel* [myself; alone]". Fred Myers (2011) identifies a parallel sentiment among much older Pintupi men in regard to the relentless mortality which threatens the experiential domain of senior masculinity, forged and reproduced through devoted ceremonial engagement. He describes this sentiment, labelled *sorrow*, as "central to the dynamic of [contemporary] selfhood in Central Australia" (2011:99). I would add that the sentiments Victoria River men exhibit towards prison and imprisonment – ambivalence, inevitably and sorrow – emerge as structuring principles in the lives and futures of local Aboriginal manhood.

Prison: a rite of passage?

Popular wisdom has it that, for young Aboriginal men, the prison system has become a rite of passage, a novel form of initiation: that being incarcerated makes a boy into a man. This adage can be found anywhere that public debate broaches the challenges of overcoming

the nation's Indigenous incarceration rate, from the recent royal commission into the NT's youth detention crises (AAP 2016), to Senate inquiries (RRIC 2010).[49] McCoy (2008) contests this suggestion from a Western Desert perspective, and concludes that although some Puntu men cite their own prison experience to construct a formidable persona, the overwhelming recidivism rates alone imply this rite of passage is "very incomplete and limited" in function (2008:173). [50] Moreover, ceremonial initiation in both the Western Desert and Victoria River contexts remains *the* central avenue for man-making. Whenever I posed the question of the emergence of carceral rites of passage to Victoria River people, men as well as women, it was expressly refuted.

Yet in Australia as well as overseas the 'rite of passage' truism emerges frequently in popular culture, public sphere debates and liberal appeals to reform. The trope is contagious in its explanatory properties, and more often than not its propagators are situated somewhere near the pinnacle of the legal system itself: judges, lawyers, police and prison bureaucrats and politicians. Indeed, the first recorded suggestion that incarceration had replaced traditional initiation rites In the Northern Territory was in an edition of the Legal Services Bulletin, authored by a white police sergeant reporting from Groote Eylandt (Gilroy 1976). Although a responding article in the same journal disputed that claim (McGill 1976), the notion continues to enjoy currency and influence in media reports, public policy papers, and certainly political and legal institutions.

When I asked one senior ceremonial authority his thoughts on this trope he laughed, shook and said "might be la them [that may be the case from their perspective]! But not blackfella way! Make government look proud that's all". In other words the popularity of the 'rite of passage' trope may lie more in its political utility than any empirical reality. It is more than convenient for the juridical, political and media classes to maintain the impression that prison serves manifold purposes – containment of 'criminal' (surplus) populations, community protection, and a 'rite of passage' for hopeless generations lost to irreparable

[49] In 2010 an Australian Senate committee discussion paper found evidence that the effectiveness of the criminal legal system was undermined by this issue, obliquely recommending "strategies that create a sense of ownership and connection to criminal justice" to counter this effect (RRIC 2010).
[50] For example McCoy compares the structure of traditional initiation ceremonies with that of incarceration: both are organised around processes of separation, instruction and reincorporation.

anomie. Implicit in this narrative is the tacit settler perception of Aboriginality as a disabling condition (Razack 2015), one projected not only onto the Indigenous individual but across the entire (male) Aboriginal social body: perhaps carceral systems and infrastructures need tweaking, but the people contained within them are already broken beyond repair.

Carceral masculinity

I have come to understand Victoria River masculinity as a formation shaped, subtly but concretely, by the ubiquitous hand of the carceral state. While the conditions of contemporary Aboriginal life render other avenues of 'traditional' Aboriginal masculinity unattainable, the prison looms both as a certainty and as a site for the construction of alternative aspirations and embodiments of male power. Here I consider the intersecting and at times paradoxical entailments of this claim.

One of the most common remarks made by Victoria River people when their relations return from prison is "you bin put on weight". This is a result of the calory-dense (but otherwise nutritionally devoid) prison diet and the availability of weight-lifting equipment which captives have all the time in the word to make use of (pending interminable overcrowding, lockdowns and workforce strikes). On the same tropes among Black (ex-)prisoners in the United States, Rashad Shabazz observes that such 'bulking' ensures personal and existential safety "in the hypermasculine and hyperviolent world of prison" (2009:289). Moreover, like the prison itself both Black ghettos and remote Aboriginal settlements are vacuums of social and political capital, contexts in which Shabazz asserts men are required to "use their bodies and the threat of violence" (2009:287) to attain masculine social status.

When Victoria River men come back from prison bigger and stronger, and their kin remark on that fact, there is an implication that some degree of masculine power can be gained from incarceration. This can be paired with a local conception about fertility and paternity: Victoria River people can tell whether a father's unborn child will be a boy or a girl depending on his bodily composition during his wife's pregnancy. If his weight stays the same, or if he gains weight, it will be a girl; if he loses weight it will be a boy. The logic is that

a man's unborn son draws on and consumes his masculine essence during pregnancy and 'make[s] him weak'. In a general sense and particularly in the carceral context, losing weight is a symptom of emasculation and putting it on an indication of virility, strength and masculine power.

Yet conversations with Victoria River people about men's relationship to imprisonment reveal implicit critiques of the kinds of masculinities constructed in carceral settings. When a young man comes back from prison for the first time, Victoria River people expect him to bring with him an air of toughness: "he might *reggen mijel* [consider oneself a] big man, he gonna talk 'I bin go to prison, don't fuck with me', *lakijat* [like that]". This is a local reckoning of a feature of prisons worldwide. Exhibition of a hard, tough and threatening demeanour is a symptom, even a requirement, of doing prison time in men's prisons globally (Michalski 2017). The forms of violence inherent to carceral facilities – organised by principles of caging, intersecting deprivations, and interpersonal violence – become a way of life for prisoners, and this often endures long after release (Sykes 1958). Joseph Michalski (2017) emphasises the role of material and emotional deprivation in the reproduction of interpersonal violence as an absolute and global standard within prisons. *Hegemonic masculinity* is a term coined in the 1980s (Kessler, et al. 1982) and refined more recently (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) to describe practices and articulations of masculine domination. While this terminology initially applied to the context of male domination over women, more recent scholarship emphasises the extraction of (masculine) power from the subjugation of less powerful (less masculine) men as well as women (ibid.). Yvonne Jewkes (2005) applies the term to the carceral context, suggesting that incarcerated men acquire hierarchical domination over other captives by strategically 'wearing a mask', outwardly projecting a hyperbolic image of male power. When Victoria River people talk about young men who *reggen mijel,* they demonstrate a recognition of this process, and suggest that this veneer can be seen through. Implicit in these descriptions is a verdict on contested masculinities.

I use the term *carceral masculinity* to describe the various elements and contradictions embodied, acknowledged and implied by Aboriginal men's experiences of imprisonment. Although Victoria River people refute the 'rite of passage' trope, it is nonetheless evident

that the carceral state is intimately involved in the measures and stakes of contemporary Aboriginal manhood.

We are approaching camp one afternoon after picking up Diane (19), her new partner Silas (18), Diane's cousin-brother Tobias (21) and his grandmother Gloria (76) in town. The young couple have been together for a couple of months, and during this time Silas has been abusive towards Diane – but she is staying with him for the time being, and has brought him home to meet her extended family. As we turn off the highway Diane is telling Silas about her family. He will meet all her sisters back at camp, and her grandparents; Tobias here is one of her favourite bugarli (cousin-brothers), her other favourite is locked up. Her dad is locked up too, but her "nother dad" (classificatory father) has recently returned from a five-year prison stint. Silas will meet him shortly. Tobias chimes in: "he don't give a fuck that bloke, he bin in jail long *time!", and Gloria murmurs in agreement. Diane tells Silas "they been to jail lotta time my two dad!", and that "they got a big name there la Berrimah [at Darwin prison]!". Silas doesn't respond. Once we arrive and he settles in with his new in-laws he opens up a bit. Sitting in a small group of approximate age-mates, including Tobias and myself, he announces casually that he himself came out of Don Dale only a few months ago and is now doing his best to stay out of trouble.*

I think that by referring to her two fathers' (histories of) imprisonment Diane was vouching in their carceral masculinity. During their short relationship Silas has been violent towards her, but now that they were approaching her home and her people, I believe she was suggesting that he watch his step. Her fathers have a 'big name' in prison: they are hard men, and they are not afraid to take measures to protect her if required. The implication is that if Silas steps out of line in this camp, he will regret it. Silas' lack of verbal response was a standard reaction to unwelcome questions or conversation, but it was apparent that the message had been received. Very early on as he established himself in Diane's broader – male – relational network he made it clear that he, too, has already been through the grind of Darwin's infamous youth detention centre. (I'm certain that if I had followed up with the rest of the young men we were sitting with and asked what they thought of Silas' claims once he had departed, they would have laughed and responded along the lines of 'he *reggen mijel*').

I understand these interactions as expressions of, and appeals to, a dynamic of hegemonic masculinity expressed through the vernacular of hyperincarceration. As Niko Besnier and others (2018:841) emphasise, the Gramscian notion of *hegemony* is "embedded in institutions of civil society". These authors contend that no particular form of masculinity is above all others, but "rather it is the institutions of the neoliberal order that are hegemonic" (ibid.); the plural masculinities which emerge are thus social expressions of dominant (hegemonic) ideologies. I do not dispute this notion, but consider how experiences (and anticipation) of prison, the most totalising institution, locally configure expressions and aspirations of masculinity. Every Victoria River person has family members who have been to prison, and everybody senses that to a certain extent some of this masculine bravado is a façade, but there are ways to stack masculinities and prison experiences against each other. It is of note that Diane found some solace in the imposing figures of her elder male kin. As the term implies, hegemonic masculinity is typically associated not only with subjugation of other men, but also categorically of women. The term is thus deeply relevant to violence between men and violence between men and women – yet with the presence of her formerly incarcerated classificatory father, and even in the carceral absence of her own father, Diane evoked a sense of implied nurturance or protection.

The scholarship emphasises the fragility and precariousness of (hegemonic) masculinities (for an overview see Besnier, et al. 2018), and carceral masculinity is no different. While a tough demeanour and capacity for violence may be necessary to survive prison, carceral masculinity also entails becoming and being a person who has endured the ritualistic and punitive degradations of arrest, imprisonment, and court procedures; witnessing, participating in or being subjected to the various forms of violence inherent to carceral institutions; and surviving the emotional, material and relational deprivations of contemporary imprisonment. Despite masculine bravado, such experiences can be deeply emasculating, particularly for married or partnered men who by virtue of the 'prison grapevine' find themselves questioning the fidelity of their significant others, and for those who endure a crisis of paternity when the origin of their child is called into question. These experiences and deprivations surely have profound affects, and yet both within and outside of prisons men present themselves as though this is not the case: when they come out they

are bigger and tougher than ever. These same men also pursue alternative avenues for the construction of local Aboriginal masculinity – for instance the quiet, confident concentration that men of all ages dedicate to forms of social action such as hunting and fishing, or producing traditional tools, hunting equipment and weapons for circulation along ceremonial trade routes.

'Traditional' and 'carceral' masculinities

Throughout my fieldwork, whenever I engaged Victoria River people in conversations about prison and imprisonment both men of all ages and older women would repeat the same sardonic suggestion about an alternative to the hyperincarceration of Aboriginal men. "They always wanna lockimup men, well maybe try lockimup that woman for change!": instead of incarcerating men, try incarcerating women who start trouble in the first place. I do not doubt that this suggestion is grounded in a sentiment of futility towards the present carceral regime, and while I do not take it literally, it is a useful paradigm for understanding the precarity of contemporary Aboriginal masculinities. In a Central Australian context Marika Moisseeff (2011) observes the historical transfer of symbolic and material power *from* Aboriginal men, over women and children, *to* the settler state (and settler individuals and organisations), over Aboriginal populations generally – a process which has radically restructured gender roles. Of critical importance in this transfer is the dissolution of traditional and ceremonially maintained masculine power: Moisseeff asserts this has brought about a systemic equivalency in the social status of men and women (2011). Contemporary Aboriginal masculinity is thus wrought with several intersecting fragilities: the traditional social and economic roles of men have been dissolved, along with the explicit and implicit hegemonies inherent to a patrilineal social structure, leading to a functional lack of differentiation between men and women. Such systemic precarity only perpetuates prevailing crises: Moisseeff suggests that "by taking on the exterior signs of masculinity, [men] try to distinguish themselves from women", and includes events of male-on-female domestic and family violence in this analysis (2011:265).

Acknowledgement of these historical processes is implicit in Victoria River people's suggestions that the settler state should 'try lockimup women for change'. This notion was

often paired with a widespread conception that "woman got all that law now, backing him up from the Queen" – in other words, there is a perspective that settler legal system is more geared towards the protection of (Aboriginal) women than the rights of (Aboriginal) men. Without going into detail, a great many Aboriginal myths celebrated in ceremonial activity are concerned with laws and songlines which were once held exclusively by women (or feminine ancestral figures) but which are now kept and jealously guarded in the secret domain of 'men's business'. Although such myths and practices live and persist in many regions including the Victoria River, the contemporary sovereign rule of Her Royal Majesty The Queen and the laws (until quite recently) administered explicitly in her name have coincided with a gradual decline in the potency and pertinence of (masculine) Aboriginal law. Indeed ceremonial authorities often assert that many aspects of culture, law and ceremony are or would be viewed as illegal by the settler legal apparatus (broad brushstrokes intentional), and some Victoria River people, both men and women, anticipate that in future generations "blackfella law gonna finish". One set of laws undermines the legitimacy of another, and the masculine power associated with it.

As aspects of Aboriginal 'high culture' (see Beckett and Hinkson 2008) become less tangible, less accessible and perhaps less relevant to younger generations, carceral masculinity increasingly becomes a resource that men within a hyperincarcerated society can fall back on. A 'might as well' attitude towards incarceration, the trope that "I been to prison, I don't give a fuck", becomes more of a lived reality, more embedded in identity, and transmitted across generations. This is not so much the replacement of one set of laws with another but a complex process of cultural transition, including the gradual attrition of particular aspects of culture and tradition in the face of ongoing colonial occupation. Yet, as the following demonstrates, both carcerality *and* 'traditional' values continue to structure the contested space of contemporary Aboriginal masculinity.

One night a few of us intervene in an escalating argument between two intoxicated cousin-brothers, Blaise (19) and Tobias (21). Blaise has recently been released from a few months in prison, and Tobias has never been incarcerated. Their voices are raised, their faces inches apart and set in firm grimaces: they are ready to fight. Tobias' girlfriend and his younger brother pull him into my car, still yelling and threatening Blaise, and we drive back to his

camp. As we drive Tobias is fuming, directing his rage at the out-of-earshot Blaise, yelling out the open window into the night: "he only reggen mijel cos he bin come outta PRISON, well prison FUCK ALL I don't give a FUCK me, I'll take ANY CUNT, I bin there when you got your lil BIJA cut off you lil FRICK, I bin BUST ground for you, you fuck ALL, you just reckon mijel cos you been to PRISON… You lil yerlinga frick dool-doolbat mijel la prison, bakimbat mijel drop the soap la fuckin PRISON, only fucken GAY CUNTS there, I know what kind drop the soap lil cunts bakimbat mijel lil gay cunts!". The rest of us sit in uncomfortable silence, murmuring for him to temper his outbursts as we approach camp.

An explicit tension between 'carceral' and 'traditional' masculinities is evident. Tobias' conviction was that Blaise had adopted the volatile force of carceral masculinity: he refuted the prison-derived bravado that Blaise had exhibited after his incarceration ("he reggen mijel cos he bin come outta prison!") by appealing to a 'traditional' expression of masculinity, condemning Blaise as his subordinate in both age and ceremonial status (Tobias 'busted ground', or danced, at the latter's initiatory rites). Also present were tensions of a sort which are not properly mentioned in everyday discourse aside from in jest or by obscure allusion: Tobias made profoundly explicit reference to universal tropes about male imprisonment, accusing his cousin-brother of *dool-doolbat* (masturbating), and even worse of *bakimbat mijel* (fucking one another) and 'dropping the soap' (a universal euphemism invoking homosexual comportment or anal rape in carceral institutions) while behind bars.

In this outburst Tobias uttered things which are mostly left unsaid when a relation goes to prison, and which go to the heart of contradictions of carceral masculinity. Whether or not Tobias' assertions were rooted in fact, incarceration is in this regard deeply emasculating. Outside of Tobias' assertion is the reality that his own father, most of his uncles, and a handful of older cousin-brothers have been imprisoned, some of them for very lengthy sentences: would he level the same charges towards any of them? [51] I have never heard anybody make these kinds of comments ('dropping the soap', *bakimbat mijel*, etc.) to, or within earshot of, a man who has recently returned from prison and Tobias is no exception: I

[51] Victoria River people often assert that none of the homosexual or sexually violent conduct generally associated with prisons occurs in the facilities where their kin are incarcerated: "only 'Merican prison that one".

suspect that if he had uttered these words in Blaise's presence the conflict would have been more difficult to resolve. However in a more abstracted sense these tropes are frequently the subject of jokes between young men, and to a lesser extent among women whose husbands are locked up.

Carceral masculinity among Victoria River men is a complex arrangement of behaviours and riddled insinuation which is both projected as powerful – volatile? nurturing? – and understood as innately fragile. Both settler colonial governance and the inherent conditions of imprisonment contribute to this (emasculating?) precarity. In the following I elaborate on this model in a discussion of the relationships between fathers, sons and the carceral state.

Fathers, sons and the perpetuation of intergenerational trauma

There is a particular 'joke' in the everyday discourse of Victoria River men about fathers, sons and the nature of the relationship between them. Despite my persistent poking and prodding over the course of fieldwork I do not fully comprehend this 'joke', nor the implicit premise which makes it 'funny' – hence my use of quotation marks. The 'joke' has no punch line and is more of an ongoing gag or riff, and operates according to some assumed knowledge which despite my efforts I do not fully comprehend. Despite this I describe the 'joke' briefly here because it provides an insight to an aspect of hyperincarceration which is otherwise difficult to articulate concerning a patterned inheritance of the prison experience from father to son.

The 'joke' first became apparent to me early on during my fieldwork, when I noticed a form of 'teasing' amongst a group of young men. It took the form of addressing a young man by his father's name while playing, swimming, roaming about or otherwise socialising in a (male) group. Because my attention was skewed towards the subject matter of incarceration, I worked on an assumption that a boy or young man whose father was incarcerated or otherwise absent would be jeered at with this form of address. Often the victim would squirm and express embarrassment or frustration, sometimes retorting with "you na!" (lit. 'you now', i.e. 'rather yourself!') or by calling the name of the tormentor's father. After some time I realised that young men would make use of this 'joke' regardless

of absentee fathers – although as a rule it was never used in the actual company of fathers or towards someone whose father had passed away. Any time paternal interpolation was deployed there would be sniggers or raucous laughter from other male onlookers. This was also the case when young men were seen in the close and exclusive company of their fathers: for example when a teenager was seen approaching camp in the front seat of his dad's car, his dad driving and nobody else with them, his cousin-brother muttered quietly to the group "you look there: father and son", and others giggled quietly. Variations on this theme were an everyday event.

I have asked many Victoria men and women about this 'joke' and a related cultural trope but I am no closer to really understanding its inherent meaning which I feel is inherently tacit and obscure. Younger men tended to either ignore the question or laugh, although one went as far as reiterating: "'cause it's his dad". One senior man told me that the 'joke' amongst young men is an accretion, and that properly speaking such joking is reserved for the uncle-nephew 'joking relationship' (see for example Garde 2008).[52] [53] Another older man replied by describing a more general social practice: once a boy reaches adolescence he leaves the house of his father to live with age-mates or other kin. This man did so when he was young, and his teenage son has recently done the same. This aligns with what Fred Myers observes in the Pintupi context, describing what he "found to be a 'strange' *affective distance* of adolescent boys towards their fathers (and mothers)" (Myers 2011:85, my emphasis) which emerges with departure from the parental household (2011:88). I get the sense that the Victoria River 'joke' refers to, and spotlights as cause for embarrassment, such 'affective distance'.

The 'joke' is relevant to, and perhaps even derived from, another item of Victoria River culture in which a man is said, in very opaque and elusive terms, to be 'the same person' as

[52] Incidentally the joke sometimes took place between a classificatory uncle and classificatory nephew of similar ages, but use of the joke was equally prolific amongst other relations, e.g. cousin-brothers. Even half-brothers (same mother, different father) would target one another by calling their respective father's name. It did not occur between full brothers, i.e. those sharing the same mother and father.

[53] Murray Garde suggests that the ecstatic pursuit of (often lewd) humour in the context of formal 'joking relationships' stand in for actual relational closeness; this does not apply to close relationships among age-mates where close relationality is the organising principle of the social unit.

his father.[54] Anthony Redmond (2001) notes an analogous dynamic in the "mirroring" of father-son relationships in the Northern Kimberley: "[male] ego is the prism through which his father and his son, categorically identical personages in the local kin system, are reproduced… The father/son relationship is thus based upon reciprocity, since each continues to serially reproduce the other" (2001:102).[55] In 'Fathers and Sons, Trajectories of Self' (2011), a reflection based on more than 40 years of engagement with Pintupi people, Fred Myers describes a process of 'produced familiarity' characterised by the sustained development of relationships over generations. Myers suggests that Pintupi fathers' relations to their sons are at a certain point characterised or defined by themes of aloofness, diffidence and distance (2011:90) to compliment and reinforce their sons' development of relations with the latter's own generational age-mates, and with relations further afield.[56] He suggests that such "relationships within one's generation are necessary to *become like – or take the social place of* – one's adult parent" (2011:98, my emphasis). I think the inwardly focussed sociality among young Victoria River men, and their tendency to spontaneously venture elsewhere for work, marriage or leisure may be an expression of the first half of this formation – the 'development of relationships within their own generation'. The overt humour and implicit tensions concerning the nature of the relationship between fathers and sons resonates with the latter half – 'to become like – or take the social place of – one's father': the humour and discourse of boys and young men explicitly refers to sons as 'trajectories' of their fathers.

My point is there is a (perhaps universal?) dynamic of tension between fathers and sons, one aspect of which is *likeness*, and on the Victoria River this tension is heavily inflected by hyperincarceration. I touched on this notion in the previous chapter in my discussion of young children's play; earlier in this chapter Franklin noted more explicitly that his two cousin-brothers Tyler and Tobias would have to "follow they father" in his tendency towards frequent prison stints. In the wake of another young man's violent outburst his mother

[54] This is distinct from a related notion of gendered hereditary characteristics: for instance children are said to have the 'same footprint' as their father, while mothers pass on other characteristic features.
[55] The same is the case for Victoria River subsections: for instance my subsection is *jangari* and both my father and son are *janama.* For an overview of Victoria River subsections or 'skin names' see Stanner (1936).
[56] Geza Roheim (cited in Morton 2011) might have put such distancing down to a societally 'unresolved Oedipal complex' in Aboriginal psycho-social development.

chided him and told him he was turning out “same way like your dad”. Two teenage girls described how they anticipated the carceral trajectory of their close cousin-brothers in the explicit vernacular of the paternal trajectory: “Blaise (19) gonna follow his father, Eric (11) gonna follow his daddy too”. Below I consider this dynamic of fait accompli from two perspectives.

Sons in the shadow of paternal incarceration

Here I consider how hyperincarceration impacts the nurturance, social development and worldview of young Victoria River men. I suggest that despite practices expressing ‘affective distance’ between fathers and sons, paternal carceral absence – whether protracted over the course of child- and young-adulthood, or at critical moments of social development – has radical implications for how boys and young men navigate the world.

During a conversational interview with a group of young men, Tobias (21) addressed the impacts of his own father’s imprisonment throughout his childhood. His mother, he said, struggled to care for him and his five other siblings, and as a household they went hungry quite frequently. As the oldest son in the family (perhaps also as a ‘trajectory’ of his father) he bore some responsibility too: he and his age-mates conducted break-ins which yielded money, food and other comforts for his kin. In our conversation years later he was quite reflective about this experience:

> … like, blackfella, we s’posed to have our dad around to grow im up [to raise us], but me, I bin grow up on the streets, my dad never bin there to grow me up really, to make me a man, cos he was locked up for that many years! So I try to make myself a man, stealing, fighting, drugs … I bin try to make *myself* a man, running around with street kid, breaking into house, that kind [of thing].

In this exchange Tobias emphasised the protracted consequences of paternal incarceration. Young Aboriginal men are meant “have our dad round to grow im up” – to have a present father who maintains a role in raising, nurturing and ensuring the social development of his children. Tobias identified his father’s long-term imprisonment as a critical factor in his own youth, which in his description was largely characterised by substance use, petty crime and violence: attempts to ‘make himself a man’ in the carceral absence of his father.

Despite his best efforts to provide for his family, Tobias' subsequent descriptions of his attempts toward manhood correspond with an emergent psychodynamic feature among Aboriginal youths. Marika Moisseeff (2011) describes the collapse of a 'filiative function' in a Central Australian society whereby the capacities for Aboriginal people to meaningfully become independent adults have been decimated. I would place hyperincarceration among those settler colonial regimes and forms of governance by which Moisseeff asserts Aboriginal people have been "divested of their parental roles and treated as a society of children" (2011:239). The consequence, which aligns with Tobias' succinct summary, is that

> … Aboriginal youths, and more especially young men, struggle to demonstrate their allegiance to the Aboriginal community and to attain a degree of autonomy on their own. Often, paradoxically, this takes the form of self-destructive practices (2011:239-240)

Although at the time of our discussion Tobias was quite cognisant of these dynamics, individually and systematically, it was not long before he, too, entered that failed man-making domain of the prison. Not long afterwards his own father turned up there again too. By this time Tobias was also himself the father of a young infant. This is one emphatic expression of the carceral trajectory between fathers and sons.

A father's carceral absence can have permanent implications. 'Young men's ceremony' is a fundamental component of nascent Victoria River masculinity, a process of man-making in a very physical sense which initiates both fear and eagerly anticipate. [57] There was a buzz of excitement in the period leading up to the planned date of initiation for a group of seven or eight boys aged around 11-14. One afternoon, however, Eric (11) was told flatly by his father's mother that he would not be 'going through' with the rest of his age-mates: "next year might be, when dad come out". Of course, there are ways to navigate the absence of fathers in ceremony, particularly if a father has passed away. Carceral absence on the other hand is deceiving: a veil of impermanence makes it seem as if dad is always coming out 'next

[57] Young men's ceremony typically involves boys somewhere between the age of 10 and 15. The ceremony is focussed on ritual circumcision, a physical and social marker of manhood: boys and men tease one another with insults such as *bijawurru* (lit. 'foreskin having') which expressly disavow the adulthood, ceremonial status and masculinity of the male being teased.

month' or 'after Christmas might be' – but opaque sentencing and remand procedures, bail conditions and endless court adjournments make it impossible to plan ahead in any meaningful sense.

At this news Eric was visibly dismayed. The prospect of being denied (or of indefinitely postponing) initiation would have repercussions lasting a lifetime: as Moisseeff observes, the underlying objective of these events is to allow youth to "become autonomous beings capable of contributing to the perpetuation of their community and its cultural specificity" (2011:259) – to make boys into men. For Eric, missing out because of his absent father thus entailed both not (yet) 'becoming a man' in that particular sense, but also exclusion from the tight-knit social bond of *jimarri* – the ceremonially-forged status of age-mate which makes relations between already close kin even closer. Moisseeff (2011) and Myers (2011) observe that such relationships are not only deeply important during adolescence and young adulthood, but are also critical to social development – to attaining adult, masculine social personhood in a context already deprived of such paths. Despite 'affective distance', fathers are required to be there when it matters. In both Tobias' and Eric's cases there was instead an enforced and profoundly physical distance, materialised in prison infrastructure and hundreds of kilometres.

Brian McCoy's (2008) ethnography of Aboriginal men's health revolves around the Western Desert concept of *kanyirninpa*, a practice and philosophy of holding, growing up, engendering respect and in particular of nurturance. McCoy describes a holistic and all-encompassing notion by which masculinity in general and especially the social development of young men are premised on intergenerational 'holding', a paradigm for understanding health, social development and the transmission of traditional and ceremonial knowledge from older men to younger, future generations. While throughout life various older male relations (grandfathers, uncles, older cousins) are involved in this process, father-son-relationships are the prototype. Boys and young men who drift through young adulthood without a father, or with a father permanently periodically imprisoned, are deprived of such a critical 'enduring anchor' (Munn 1970 in Myers 2011) as the basis for individual social development.

These are the same themes articulated in different terms by Tobias when he lamented the absence of his father throughout his childhood and young adulthood. Without positive paternal nurturance young men have no meaningful model to replicate, no trajectory to follow. Moisseeff (2011:266) has formed the view that one of the only ways young Aboriginal men can escape such (self/destructive) 'limbo' is to become fathers themselves. All of this in part fuels what Diane Austin-Broos (2009:7) summarises as "an awful crisis of masculinity" in Central Australia, by which among "anomic youth who now, as they become husbands and fathers, spread their own desperation further".

The prison looms behind and structures the inherited trajectory of father-son relations. This reflects a global pattern of incarceration whereby those whose parents have been incarcerated are far more likely to experience imprisonment themselves (Clear 2007) – but the Victoria River emphasis on the paternal trajectory points to something more substantive, relational and deeply personal. For sons whose paternal relations are premised on cumulative years of carceral absence, the only 'social place' lying ahead is within a carceral facility. The only way to 'become like' their fathers is to disappear.

Fathers losing sons

Ben (in his 40s) gives me a call in the morning. He is at his young niece's birthday party where the police have just turned up in pursuit of his son, Mark (13): unbeknownst to anyone in Ben's family, Mark was supposed to face court this morning, and if he doesn't turn up in the next hour or so a warrant will be issued for his arrest. Ben and I find Mark at the boy's mother's house and take him to the local court. The waiting room is freezing, the walls covered in the vibrant artworks of senior regional Aboriginal artists. Mark is wriggling with nervous energy: pacing, giggling, tugging at his clothes and hair; Ben says he feels sick. A couple of minutes before Mark is to face the magistrate a public defence lawyers rushes out and flurries through his dismal options: someone misplaced the files, he is up for six charges instead of two but there is no further information available, there's no time to go over all of them anyway, for efficiency's sake Mark should plead guilty to all of them. Ben and Mark fall totally silent and follow the lawyer into the court room. The procedure is over in about five

minutes. The whole time Ben sits still and silent, face down, eyes closed, one arm clutched around his torso and the other propping up his head, powerless and sick with worry.

Benjamin and Mark's circumstances are representative of an intergenerational crisis affecting Aboriginal societies. Sitting before the local magistrate both father and son were reduced absolutely to the status of subordinate: the younger for his alleged crimes and the older for his role in raising the alleged criminal. Ben later described in explicit terms how that subordination felt:

> That's why we always scared – we gotta say yes boss, no boss, like that – it's *embedded within us*, that feeling that we can't talk up: it comes from the old days when we had no rights, no say, and from the ways police and *gardiya* used to just shoot us on the spot.

Ben's situation articulates a painful paradox of contemporary Aboriginal fatherhood: on one hand being a loving father, a respected ceremonial authority, and a skilful hunter and provider, and on the other being utterly diminished by the settler legal apparatus. Ben has already lost one older son to the social void of the prison, and was now faced with the prospect of Mark following the same route. In the court room Ben re-encountered the same sense of grief and powerlessness. As he collapsed into himself, the weight and anguish of this reality was crushing.

Implicitly, fatherhood represents a positive expression of Aboriginal masculinity in a context overshadowed by contemporary challenges of which carcerality is among the most dominating. The pain and suffering that fathers experience as their sons and younger male kin are drawn into this crushing cycle is difficult to articulate. Peter, in his 70s, is another ceremonial authority whose adult sons, fathers themselves, are also routinely imprisoned on a near-permanent basis. He told me that he no longer visits his sons when they are locked up, nor does he attend their court hearings. I first took this to be an expression of 'tough love' or even 'affective distance' (Myers 2011), but months later he said it was because it makes him "worry too much": he feels immense sorrow and grief when he sees them in court or in prison, so he withdraws from the experience altogether. When Peter's

maternal grandson Blaise, whom Peter had largely raised himself,[58] was eventually incarcerated for the first time, I offered to take Peter with me for a visit I had organised. He declined immediately, saying that "if I look him la that suit [prison uniform], shaved head, I just gonna cry". Peter's words conjured the image of the trajectories set by his own sons, Blaise's uncles. Was he setting out to follow the trail they had forged so well?

Ben's experience in the court room and Peter's detached expressions of grief are a product of the tension between Aboriginal men's lives and the carceral settler state. Despite social practices engendering 'affective distance' between fathers and sons (Myers 2011), masculine and paternal relations are categorically structured by close affinity. Hyperincarceration undermines such tacit, fragile structures and supplements them with pain, powerlessness and sorrow. McCoy (2008) describes the contemporary unfolding of intergenerational trauma among Aboriginal men of the Western Desert, identifying incarceration as central to the crisis. He refers to the "wounded male body" of Puntu masculinity, afflicted by the overt and slow violence of colonisation and compounded by contemporary strains particularly among younger male generations including substance use, domestic and family violence and incarceration. These 'wounds' are manifest in "pain and suffering within the social and embodied self" and more profoundly as "a form of trauma that has been deeply inscribed on the social body" (2008:200-201). He articulates this through Pat Dodson's metaphor of younger and older generations of Kimberley men as being 'stuck' on opposite sides of a 'river': such is the 'gulf' between older men and the knowledge, traditions and forms of nurturance they represent, and young male generations who inherit only trauma. The events in Tobias, Eric and Peter's lives resonate strongly with this notion, manifest in the "awareness and experience by younger and older men that what is critically important in their relationship and for the larger social body cannot be realised" (2008:201). As Ben sat in the court room behind his teenage the pain he experienced and later verbalised articulated the historical roots and contemporary broadening of such a 'gulf' in real time. The settler legal system materially and affectively cleaves this gulf through the protracted and obtuse tools of due legal process and custodial sentence.

[58] This is a gesture to my perception that, although Peter was Blaise's mother's father, and Blaise called Peter *jawaji* or 'grandpa', I did get the impression that Peter's role was more of a 'social father' (in the Aboriginal sense) than anybody else in Blaise's life.

Conclusion

For most Victoria River people, the answer to the loaded question with which I opened this chapter – 'can prison make you a man?' – is a firm 'no'. What it can do is reinforce a pretence of masculine bravado loaded with fragility and insinuation; fragment paternal relationships perpetuating cycles of intergenerational trauma; and undermine more broadly the role and status of Aboriginal men individually and as a social body. Rather than a rite of passage, imprisonment figures as a contested space which looms for many young Victoria River men as a depressing inevitability. As one Victoria River law man observed ("might be la them!") these degradations are of social and political utility to the settler state and members of its political and judicial class.

To conclude I want to address something more nuanced, something I have perceived about the ways Victoria River men *seem* following a prison sentence. One young man whom I knew for years before his first prison stint returned from it with a subtly rearranged disposition – something I noticed in others upon release too. There was something about the way this young man now carried himself, in particular something in his eyes, which made him seem radically different from the man I knew before his incarceration. Although his temperament was visibly hardened, and he was more prone to engaging in verbal and physical conflicts with close kin, the thing with his eyes was something that I discerned but am largely unable to articulate. Had he seen too much, or become disillusioned with life as he had previously known it? I can't be sure, because his life was tragically cut short soon afterwards. Before the young man's funeral his close cousin-brother told me that others had also perceived this change, and that some of their close relations thought he had been possessed by something dark – black magic, the devil himself, something worse – during his imprisonment. Whatever it was, this thing was understood by some to be the cause of his death.

Grieving silently in the dark at the sorry camp following this man's death I found myself struck by an unrefined sense of anger as I ran through the last months of his life in my head: anger at the sheer pointlessness of his imprisonment, the police pursuits and court

procedures which precipitated it, and the radical change in pace and meaning that these events wrought in his life. What did they all mean if he was just going to die anyway? Although I choose not to believe he was cursed or possessed by something supernaturally evil, I do think these events had something to do with his untimely death. In northern and central Australia young Aboriginal men in particular are afflicted by epidemics of chronic substance use and violence, and they are drastically overrepresented in premature mortality events such as suicide, vehicle accidents and alcohol-related misadventure. These issues leave dim prospects for the future. The ever-present prospects of policing and incarceration, I feel, stifle the glimpses of light that may remain. Aboriginal men in this part of the world endure a profound existential and intergenerational crisis, and the carceral settler state is at its centre.

Chapter 6 – Transgenerational impacts of hyperincarceration

Annette is in her mid-thirties and has two small children. Their father Charles, Annette's husband, is 12 months into his 18-month prison sentence. Annette is strong-willed, very intelligent, and fiercely independent – she has to be, as most of the time her household consists of herself and the kids. As well as ensuring her children are adequately cared for, she shoulders the burden of maintaining their relationship with their father, and helping them understand where he is and why. This work weighs heavily on her emotionally. She relies on her close family, particularly her sisters, to help out with some of her motherly duties from time to time, but some issues are exclusively her domain. Only once during his lengthy prison sentence was she able pull together the time and resources to facilitate a prison visit: it required two days of driving with the kids, two nights in a hotel, plus feed and fuel, costing "about a grand all up", all for a one-hour visit. Charles was over the moon during their time together, but on the way home Annette decided she wouldn't be doing it again – it was too expensive, and too physically and emotionally draining. Despite material and emotional assistance from her relational network, Annette says her life is quite difficult while Charles is incarcerated. Before he was locked up Charles had a well-paying job, but now the household income has more than halved, so making ends meet is an ongoing struggle on her single-parent income while chores, home maintenance and odd-jobs are often left unattended. Annette says that more often than before her food stores run empty. A lot of the time she is utterly exhausted by the end of each day. Most of all she says what gets her is that she's got "no mate" (no partner), and that there is no replacement for the kids who are growing up without their dad around.

Annette's story is far from unique in terms of the global experiential impacts of imprisonment within domestic units. Sometimes minutely subtle and sometimes glaringly apparent, Charles' absence shapes the lives, and the conditions of life, of his immediate family in numerous ways: financially, intimately, relationally, materially and emotionally. What is particular about this now-internationally widespread structural absence to the Victoria River context? How are the conditions of Aboriginal life, and Aboriginal ways of

being and relating, impacted by hyperincarceration, particularly that of young and middle-aged men? What happens to family and community structures – of economy and wellbeing, of care and social reproduction – when people are locked up all the time?

Approaching answers to these questions is the aim of this chapter, where I explore the transgenerational impacts of hyperincarceration on everyday life and social structure on the Victoria River.[59] I demonstrate how the carceral regime contributes to and accelerates the already-woeful material conditions of Aboriginal life in remote settlements, particularly in the domains of economic and health inequality. I then frame hyperincarceration as a force corrosive to relational infrastructures essential to the continuity of local Aboriginal life. I understand these impacts of carcerality – material and relational – as *transgenerational* not just because they affect generations older and younger than the hyperincarcerated demographic – young and middle-aged Aboriginal men – but because they also destabilise the foundations of social reproduction for future generations, and Victoria River society as a whole.

A depopulated relational universe

This chapter revolves around the concept of a 'depopulated relational universe'. In many Aboriginal societies *relatedness* is the central mode of engagement with the world (Musharbash 2008b; Myers 1991; Poirier 2000). While in any society the family unit is the primary context for childhood development and socialisation, Aboriginal concepts of 'family' are expansive, and the primary concerns of everyday life are relational dynamics. Hyperincarceration imposes fragility on and fractures intimate kinship arrangements by depopulating families and communities of critical relational infrastructure, particularly but not exclusively young and middle-aged men. To illustrate, the genealogies in Figure 4 delineate the demographic make-up of two camps involved in my fieldwork:

[59] The term *transgenerational* refers to effects which reverberate across, between and beyond different generations, a concept at the centre of Judy Atkinson's (2003) influential work on the transmission of trauma in Aboriginal societies. While my focus is on broader impacts and implications than trauma specifically, I emphasise how carcerality effects relational networks far beyond incarcerated individuals.

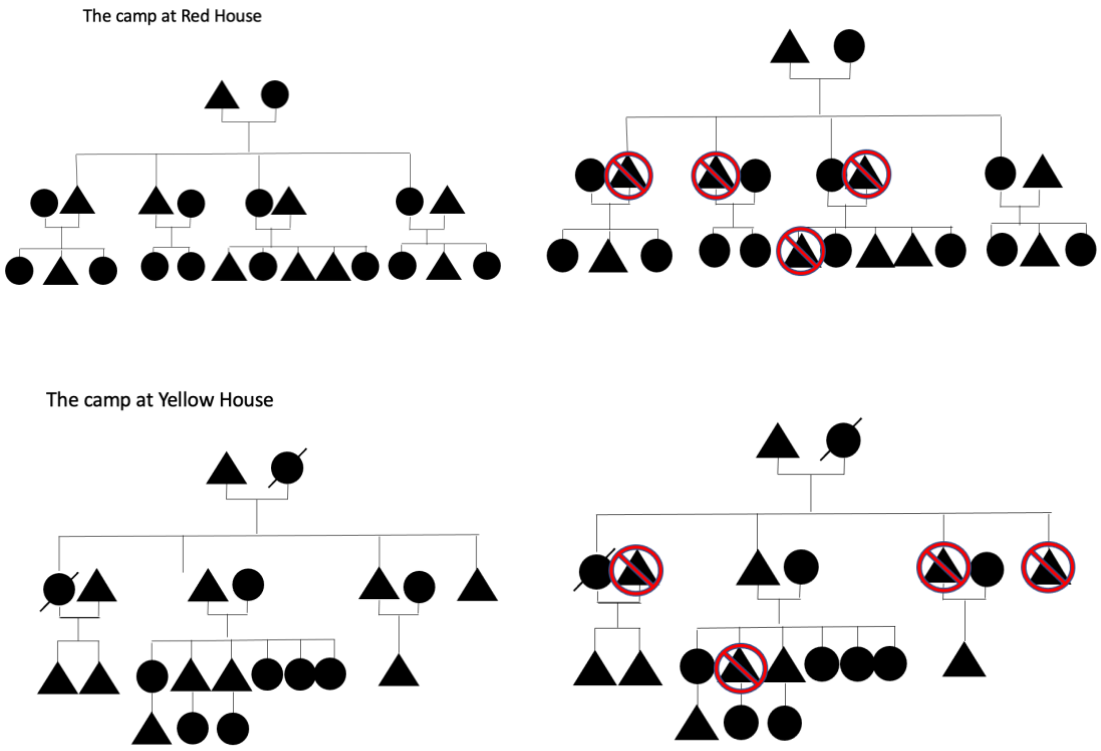

Figure 4. The Camps at Red House and Yellow House, with frequently incarcerated members blocked out in red.

In these family units, hyperincarceration practically eliminates an entire demographic category – termed here for convenience 'the middle generation' – from social life, and as I will demonstrate, from the field of social reproduction. The removal of this generation from circulation in everyday life fundamentally alters the constitution of households, families and communities. This is the effect I seek to emphasise when I refer to a 'depopulated relational universe'. Throughout this chapter I suggest that such depopulation has implications on both the household and the societal level.

A brief demographic overview of Victoria River households is required. There are four main categories of household or *camp*: young and middle-aged couples residing primarily with their own children; single mothers (single due to death, divorce or imprisonment) caring for their own children; households headed by grandparents; and young men's camps. The chapter is informed by insights from all of these household categories except for the last. By definition the vast majority of Victoria River households are intergenerational, meaning that

young children, parents, grandparents and other classificatory relations live together under the same roof, or in the same camp. The high rate of mobility in Aboriginal societies (Memmott, et al. 2006; Peterson 2000) also means that family members come and go with regularity. Although these social facts make it analytically difficult to isolate particular tropes as causally associated with imprisonment,[60] the case studies which follow offer snapshots and trends in which clear patterns emerge.

This chapter contributes to a growing body of literature, particularly in the US, which understands carceral regimes as projects which actively perpetuate social harm in the sites and demographics they target. Todd Clear (2008) asserts that the incarceration of one person can have 'destabilising consequences' for their close family, particularly in matters of housing, education, finance and welfare, and family relationships. At a community or neighbourhood level, the consequence is a 'tipping point' whereby the saturation of carceral and punitive strategies contributes to and consolidates social disorganisation leading to more intensified rates of imprisonment (Clear, et al. 2003). Megan Comfort (2008) describes the 'secondary prisonisation' of close family members of incarcerated men, particular wives and mothers, who despite being legally innocent find themselves punished and experiencing vicarious imprisonment; similarly Hagan and Dinovitzer (1999) frame the impacts on relational networks, particularly partners and children of imprisoned people, as 'collateral consequences' of mass incarceration. Broadly speaking the existing scholarship reinforces the notion that hyperincarceration further entrenches the circumstances of poor, racialised and otherwise disenfranchised urban communities. The first part of this chapter demonstrates how similar demoralising impacts are also empirically present in Victoria River life. However, there remains a lack of research addressing social effects in terms which are a) relevant to the material conditions of remote Aboriginal life, and b) meaningful to a specifically Aboriginal worldview, which is to say aspects of life relevant to local values and sociality. The second part of the chapter has a focus on particular structures, processes and practices characteristic of Victoria River society and social reproduction. I conclude by

[60] By this I refer to the problematics involved in differentiating carceral absence from temporary relocation of residence due to work, education, training, healthcare, visiting kin, mortuary requirements, etc. The primary difference between carceral and other forms of absence is that in the latter, people are elsewhere for something productive or beneficial (materially, educationally, financially, relationally, medically) and something other than the social and economic incapacitation of imprisonment.

reflecting on a metaphor expressing a Victoria River understanding of social structure and reproduction, and the implications of my analysis in terms of this analogy.

Material impacts of hyperincarceration

As Annette's experience shows, the incarceration of one person has myriad, intersecting impacts in the household they leave behind. My conversations with Victoria River people gravitated towards various difficulties encountered by family members during the course of loved ones' imprisonment. Not least among these, from carers' perspectives, were financial worries and related concerns about having insufficient resources to feed hungry mouths and growing bodies. Carers also held anxieties about the wellbeing of their incarcerated kin, and the emotional states of those they leave behind while locked up ("that little one worrying for his dad"). I also observed other stressors such as carer fatigue, permanent states of economic insecurity, and overcrowding in non-parental households directly associated with parental incarceration. In this section I isolate two domains of the material conditions of life in the wake of hyperincarceration: financial inequalities and impacts on health.

Financial impacts of hyperincarceration

Donald Braman (2007) has observed that the financial stress experienced by extended families effected by incarceration has intergenerational implications. The thousands of dollars expended in (because of) the absence of imprisoned relatives – on childcare, household costs, etc. – are figures eliminated from familial wealth, and this compounds over generations. Braman describes this as a "hidden tax" penalising the families of incarcerated individuals (2007:156). Although there is a generally diminished cultural emphasis on the accumulation of wealth in some Aboriginal societies (Peterson 1993; 2013), a similarly punitive and impoverishing effect is present. With more mouths to feed and bodies to care for, anything beyond basic sustenance can become pushed out of reach within Victoria River households. Vehicles for instance – the purchase of new ones, the repair of old ones, and the capacity for mobility, social action, and social capital they sustain – are relegated to a perpetual predicament just beyond possibility (acknowledged with a hopelessly optimistic 'next month might be?').

One of the more emotionally complex impacts of hyperincarceration on the Victoria River are arrangements and decisions around funerals. 'Sorry business' is a significant and everyday aspect of contemporary Aboriginal life (Musharbash 2016b), and funerals in particular demand heightened emotional and financial resources. A funeral service in the Victoria River hinterland typically costs at least $4000, not including other necessary expenses such as food, accommodation, ceremonial attire and gear, flowers, fuel and 'funeral clothes'.[61] The mortality rates among remote-living Aboriginal people (CTG 2020) also mean that these costs arise earlier and with more frequency than in mainstream populations. This is to say that even without the incarceration of kin in the picture, paying for funerals is a considerable expense for Victoria River people.

When family members are locked up, financial costs and decisions compound emotional tolls of funerals. Firstly, each incarcerated person is someone rendered unable to 'chuck in' for the significant costs involved. A concern that weighs most heavily on mourners, however, are the costs and logistics required for an imprisoned person to attend a funeral. While it is possible for prisoners to apply for day-release and transport, after overcoming bureaucratic hurdles family members have to fork out enormous figures. Because of day-release regulations, logistics and the distances involved, the only option for a funeral in the Victoria River region is to charter a plane for the prisoner, as well as two 'body guards' (prison guards) who accompany, and often are handcuffed to, the day-release bereaved. The figure for this kind of arrangement sits at around $7000. Considered in a context where making ends meet is a constant struggle, often the only option is for prisoners to miss the funeral of a loved one. The emotional torment of this reality, for both prisoners and their families, is an everyday reality which compounds and prolongs the experience of grief.

On a fundamental level hyperincarceration has destabilising effects on family and household finances. Consider the Camp at Red House in Figure 4, an intergenerational household headed by an elderly couple who care for an ever-changing line-up of (classificatory) children and grandchildren below the age of 20. Most of the latter receive no income, other

[61] All of these costs are dramatically inflated in remote and regional areas. Other high costs account for matters such funeral service delivery and transport to remote settlements. Some of these costs are supplemented by funds made available and administered by land councils.

than a young single mother whose primary expenditure is her own children. The elderly couple each receive pension payments on alternating fortnights, the grandmother receiving additional payments due to the handful of grandchildren registered in her care. The inflated price of everything in remote settlements – groceries, fuel, power, furnishings (see Markham and Kerins 2020) – and the meagre incomes relative to the number of mouths to feed means that bank accounts dip into negative figures each and every fortnight, days before each alternate pay week. Old and young people at Red House go hungry with consistency, and often live on nutritionally negligible diets during these periods. The days leading up to pay day often consist of asking kin at other households for money and tobacco, as well as meat and bags of flour and tobacco purchased earlier in the week for a few dollars and now jealously guarded. Luxuries like vehicle maintenance and children's birthday presents are often relegated to the realm of impossibility: "where from money?".

These difficulties can easily be written off as a consequence of an Aboriginal incapacity to properly allocate or preserve funds, a popular explanatory truism in policy circles (Altman 2011). Yet the absence of income-aged demographics in households like Red and Yellow House, the sheer ratio of providers to dependants, predetermines any capacity to make fortnightly payments last more than a few days. When the middle generation is back at these camps – when men are out of prison and when women return with husbands who have been released – the ratio readjusts dramatically. Grocery trips increase from once per week to three or four per week, and expenditures increase, because there is more money available to feed hungry mouths and growing bodies.

Relational infrastructure is therefore also critical economic infrastructure. The carceral absence of a central demographic reinforces existing financial positions, compounding the effects of entrenched impoverishment. In other words hyperincarceration makes poor households poorer – a consistent feature of neoliberal carceral regimes internationally (Wacquant 2009) – and contributes to very real hunger and material lack both for older carers and their younger wards. As Braman (2007) notes these impacts are felt intergenerationally, projecting well into the future of the present day. These issues also have cumulative implications for the health of families and communities.

Impacts of hyperincarceration on health

As Annette's predicament suggests, carceral absence places an excessive burden on carers. This is particularly the case for maternal figures and older people. Across the board, my conversations with Victoria River people dwelled on financial struggles that emerge when key people from a household are locked up. A husband and wife in their early 70s described children with an incarcerated parent as "just like they lost, runnin round everywhere, nobody to look after … and us two, we getting old now, can't do anything for them kids". A woman in her 80s lamented that "little kid growin up no father, only mother and grandmother…". A couple in their fifties "sort of a hold you up, can't go nother place, got kids too many to look after". The common thread in these comments is their emphasis on the generational gap that hyperincarceration produces in the lives and relationships of young and in particular older people. This abstract gap has very concrete implications for those left behind.

To illustrate, take the following excerpt from the daily doings of the elderly couple heading the Camp at Red House. Three of their four adult children were carcerally absent at the time, leaving at very least five and at times a dozen or so grandchildren in their care:

- *Wake up early, feed two grandchildren, an infant and a toddler, in their care;*
- *Make sure three more young grandchildren get on the school bus;*
- *Buy groceries, power cards, fuel;*
- *Fend off demands for cash from teenage and adult grandchildren to various degrees of success;*
- *Spend an hour on fruitless phone enquiry with Centrelink while jostling an infant refusing her bottle;*
- *Field calls from Welfare (about the children in their care) and various local and government organisations;*
- *Coordinate a family fishing trip in a single vehicle with five seats, meaning that at most three of the 8 children in their care will be legally allowed to participate; adjudicate squabbles arising when half the children in their care are inevitably left out;*

- *Field calls about a son's latest imprisonment, desperately make arrangements for the interim care of his three young children several hundred kilometres away;*
- *Catch fish, ensure young children fishing at the river bank are not taken by crocodiles;*
- *Return to camp, ensure infants and toddlers are well-fed;*
- *Attempt to intervene in domestic violence matters arising at camp;*
- *Put down infant and toddler for the night; lose sleep when they inevitably wake up through the night;*
- *Repeat.*

During periods when the incarceration of their grown children was particularly concentrated, the capacities of the elderly couple at this camp were stretched to the limit on a daily basis. Providing for their grandchildren became a full-time job, and they were on call 24 hours a day. A great proportion of each day was spent ensuring bare necessities were available, or grabbing some rest (snoozing in the shade, retreating into a quiet room) when possible for in preparation for whatever the next flare-up would. On a near-permanent basis the grandparents at this camp were the catch-all for everything in the lives of their grandchildren: food, shelter, intimate care, facilitators of hunting and fishing trips, and the first port of call for cash, treats and gifts. The demographic make-up of their camp meant that they were the only people (apart from the anthropologist) who received a monetary income (Centrelink and pensioner payments), and conflicting demands from all their grandchildren for any resources that might be available amounted to extraneous social pressure.

I perceived this elderly couple what I termed in my fieldnotes as a pervasive world-weariness. In addition to the material impoverishment which is a persistent standard for many remote-living Aboriginal families and the social pressures that were the subject of much of their everyday concerns, both seemed to end up completely worn out by the end of each overwhelming day. While food, shelter and other bare necessities of life are provided for young people in these contexts, they are sustained by a generally weakened ensemble of older kin, dwindling in numbers, availability and energy. The reality is that, due to the hyperincarceration of their own children, they were vastly outnumbered and overwhelmed by the grandchildren in their care. Plainly, it was all too much them to handle.

During my fieldwork stress was an omniscient theme. Again it is analytically difficult to sift through particular examples of stress or poor health in a context where these are a norm and to state with confidence that 'this is a result of hyperincarceration'. However, in her ethnographic exploration of the social determinants of health in south-east Arnhem land, Belinda Burbank (2011) emphasises the roles that stress has in diminishing individual, collective and intergenerational health. Burbank describes how not only physical stressors but also the emotional and psychological burdens of radical and racial inequality are causally associated with poor health, lower quality of life, and reduced life expectancies. While Burbank's focus is not on the relationship between carceral dynamics and health, those elevated levels of stress I have described so far align with her assertions. Further, a developing global scholarship on more generalised patterns of parental absence emphasises the financial, physical and psychological impacts on both younger and older generations (Burnette, et al. 2013; Dolbin-MacNab and Yancura 2019; Mtshali 2015; Mtshali 2016; Silverstein, et al. 2006).

Briefly, the literature demonstrates that when critical kin networks are absent, the remaining relational infrastructure bears the brunt. Parental absence and 'surrogate parenting' is a global phenomenon: one in ten American children live in the care of their grandparents rather than their parents (Burnette, et al. 2013), and in rural China the prevalence of children residing with grandparents while parents migrate domestically for labour is so widespread that the latter have earned the title 'The Left Behind Generation' (Dolbin-MacNab and Yancura 2019). One of the ongoing impacts of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in southern African nations is the decimation of parent-aged men and women whose orphaned children live with the parents of deceased victims of the virus (Mtshali 2015; 2016). What all these contexts have in common are the widespread impacts on elderly carers charged with bringing up young and teenage children: across the board they experience poverty, malnutrition, psychological distress (including depression and anxiety), high blood pressure, joint paint, and other destructive health conditions. Although medical diagnoses were beyond my capacity and the scope of my fieldwork, many of these conditions were empirically present in Victoria River households, particularly those headed by grandparents caring for grandchildren due to parental carceral absence.

Following the logic of structural violence (for example Farmer 2009) we can understand the ongoing stress, sore joints, physical exhaustion, hunger and empty bank accounts experienced in these households not merely as 'collateral consequences' (Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999) but as forms of suffering produced, directly and indirectly, by the carceral system. These impacts shorten and diminish the quality of lives. Elderly people with existing health conditions would not be getting any healthier with added responsibilities and household stress. Nor would they be able to more adequately provide nutritional intake, assist with education, or provide a nurturing home than the absent middle generation. I should also note that carers in this context do not perceive these extraneous duties as a burden, and fully embrace surrogate nurturing roles to the best of their ability (see also Mtshali 2015). What I can say with certainty is that hyperincarceration compounds the chronic health problems already inherent to contemporary remote Aboriginal life.

One of the most prominent issues contributing to the poor health of remote-living Aboriginal people is household overcrowding (Lea and Pholeros 2010). It might be posited that incarcerating multiple members of an extended family could inadvertently ease the conditions of overcrowding in the affected households. Paying attention to household composition across carceral trajectories, however, I found that the imprisonment of key people – parent-aged men and women – often led to the functional collapse and abandonment of their household: spouses, children and other dependents usually migrated to other households where more kin – and more resources – were present. While these tendencies are grounded in a logic of relatedness (Musharbash 2008b), the physical infrastructure lodging its expression is most often not up to the task. The Camp at Red House, for instance, consisted of two bedrooms, an outdoor kitchen and an external shower and toilet block shared by two other households. As Tess Lea among others demonstrates (2008b; 2020a; Lea and Pholeros 2010), the overcrowding of remote Aboriginal housing yields widespread poor hygiene, mental and physical health, nutrition, education, employment and other indicators which all in turn contribute to high mortality rates, hospitalisation and indeed higher rates of incarceration.

This section has demonstrated how hyperincarceration contributes to the financial stress and poor health and other repercussions experienced by those left in its wake. As Burbank observes (2011) these factors also culminate in an awareness that one holds an inferior position, which itself is a source of physical and psychological harm contributing to poor health and premature death. For both children and adults who experience these conditions, these are also key statistical indicators generating probability of future incarceration (2007; Clear 2008; Clear and Rose 1998). In this sense the transgenerational impacts of hyperincarceration have the effect of a structural feedback loop which ensures the projected regeneration of impoverishment, poor standards of health and living, and greater rates of hyperincarceration.

Relational impacts of hyperincarceration

This section approaches the impacts of hyperincarceration on expressions of relatedness and the field of social reproduction. I begin by describing practices and circumstances which ensure the capacity to care for, nurture and positively enculturate children and young people, and to cultivate a social universe where relations can be meaningfully maintained.

Relatedness: the foundation of Victoria River personhood

Fundamental to social life in many Aboriginal societies is the notion of relatedness (Martin 1993; Musharbash 2008b; Myers 1991). Knowing who one's relations are, and how one relates to them, are fundamental to the social development of a Victoria River child, and it is the obligation of a child's older kin to make sure this occurs. A great proportion of the intentional and unconscious childrearing practices are oriented precisely to developing this capacity from the earliest stages of life, and the maintenance of relations is a primary theme of childhood and more so in adult life. While these may be features of any society, it should be emphasised that relatedness is the central feature of local Aboriginal social life. In a context where close kin are removed for long periods at a time, a lot of this work is undone.

As is the case elsewhere in Aboriginal Australia, raising Victoria River infants and toddlers involves concentrated efforts to imbue them with awareness and active knowledge of their relational surroundings. Close relations focus a young child's attention to other kin as they

come and go, uttering their name but emphasising their relational classification (mother's brother, father's mother, sister's daughter, etc). Anybody paying attention will watch closely for indications that the baby recognises of their kin – smiling, locking eye contact, reaching out – while furrowing a brow, sharply turning away or (most dramatically) bursting into tears are taken as an infant's *not knowing* their kin. Whatever the child's response, surrounding relations laugh affectionately and respond with indulgent sing-song baby talk: "ooohh you know me ay!", or alternatively "ayyy what wrong, you don't know me?!". Older children pass time by inciting toddler relations to respond to short-fire question-answer volleys about their relations ("James!" – "jaju! [maternal grandfather!]"; "Nambijin!" – "sister!"; "Belinda!" – "'abaju! [paternal grandmother])"). Correct answers are rewarded with more and more interrogation and incorrect answers evoke riotous laughter from any children or adults within earshot.

Un-making relations

Hyperincarceration makes strangers out of close kin. When close kin exist only as a distant memory or a disembodied voice on a crackling, monitored phone line, relationships are made unstable, fragile, conceptual. From a child's perspective the social universe shrinks to one where fathers, brothers, uncles and grandfathers and other kin lie beyond reach and become impossible to *know*. The carceral state ensures such rupture occurs on a permanent basis within families and across generations. The effect is an imposition of subtle yet concrete relational distance between close kin. I suggest that carceral absence disrupts networks of relatedness in several ways: during imprisonment, after return from prison and more broadly by shifting a paradigm focussed on relatedness to one where *not knowing kin* becomes an acceptable norm.

Someone gets a phone call from James, who's been locked up for about nine months. His mother and his nephews yell over each other trying to get a word in. Towards the end of the timed phone call he asks after his little nephew. His grandmother encourages the four-year-old to say hello to his uncle but the toddler is shy and 'shame', refusing to say a word.
//

Leonard has recently returned to his wife and infant daughter after a six-month stint in prison. He comments that even now, a few weeks after coming out, his daughter still wriggles out of his lap when he tries to embrace her and "keep look at me gotta question mark": "I been locked up too long!".

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Darren arrives home after a few months' imprisonment in Darwin. Everybody welcomes him home, even his infant sisters and niece, but his three-year-old brother seems shy and keeps hiding behind other relatives. Their sister encourages the toddler to come out of his shell, "Hey, that's your baba [brother] there, say hello!". When Darren bends to try to pick him up he squeals and runs away behind his grandparents.

These scenes briefly demonstrate how in a context of hyperincarceration *relational intimacy* is supplanted by *relational distance*. The tension produced in these circumstances is expressed by sympathetic laughter and cries of '*ah, yakurra*!' by anybody present, indexing the young child as a 'poor thing' for the reason they don't know or recognise their own close relations. Each instance – uncle-nephew, father-daughter, older brother-younger brother – illustrates a singular example of a close relationship that has become unmade through the distance of carceral absence. If I had encountered this only once I wouldn't look into it too much, but the recurrence of the same trope in countless different families and contexts indicates that hyperincarceration concretely undermines these relational structures. Before carceral intervention all these same relationships above were very close, produced and maintained over time through intimate engagement. All of this is readily undone by even a few short months of imprisonment: the young children in these case studies instead shy away and pivot to the security of their more established kin. In other words they exhibit the kind of body language typically reserved for strangers and, notably, *gardiya*. Relations, very materially, are being un-made.

What is most significant here is the repeated inversion of an absolute standard of local Aboriginal life, which is knowing, depending on and relating to kin. Hyperincarceration produces circumstances which make these processes impossible to sustain, and in doing so destabilises the foundations of family life. Each of these examples represents an opening being closed off in a child's relational field, their awareness about who is, and who is not, a

known relation. For a father, an uncle or a brother to not be recognised, to be the subject of hesitancy rather than intimacy, marks the concrete un-doing of relatedness.

Over the course of a child's lifetime the impact of prolonged and repeated carceral absences is cumulative. I know many children who grow up in circumstances where not just one relative but the entire contingent of (classificatory) fathers and uncles is incarcerated more often than not. From their perspective the social roles that these particular relations play is muted if not wholly diminished: their childhood is one where grandparents, (classificatory) mothers, aunts and older siblings are in abundance but fathers, uncles and older (cousin-)brothers are largely absent. As they grow older many of their kin continue to cycle in and out of prison, and the potential for these relations to be realised fizzles out. Children grow up unsure how to relate to people who would otherwise be close kin. Dispossessed of a context for social reproduction, without a model for how these relations should function, they are less likely to form these attachments, and less likely to grow into adults who will transmit them.

The production of relational distance rather than intimacy has implications beyond these individual case studies. While each relationship may readily be repaired as infants and young children are refamiliarised with their returned kin over time, a tendency emerges where *not* knowing kin becomes normal rather than anomalous. Undermining the social infrastructure erodes the experiential basis for relationality. Yasmine Musharbash (2007; 2011) describes a tendency to emphasise the 'immediate present' in the Warlpiri context, and this is particularly the case when it comes to the state of relations. A person may be classified as very close kin, but the bare facts of imprisonment make it practically impossible to express relatedness in any meaningful way. Untethered from social interaction, there is no material basis for the continuity of relatedness, and the social person is reduced to concept. What underpins these individual instances is the entire network of relations that are annexed by one person's imprisonment. The effect of this process in families and settlements saturated by carcerality is exponential.

In contemporary circumstances hyperincarceration renders an entire generation periodically absent, and with absence the relational void expands. An increasing body of literature

continues to demonstrate that ex-prisoners invariably experience difficulties readjusting to the 'free world' after release which contribute to recidivism (eg. Kohl, et al. 2016; Wilson 2019). The scenes I describe here show that not just imprisonment but carceral saturation, the constant churn of imprisonment and release particularly among young and middle-aged men, influences the ways relationships are built, and the ways children perceive, experience and reproduce their relational world.

The effect is the unmooring of a child's social field. For each family member incarcerated there is one less bearing by which to navigate and interpret the relational universe. The depopulation of a family unit destabilises the social environment that children are raised in, inhibiting the capacity to develop as a social person. Relatedness – the foundation of local Aboriginal personhood – is undermined, disrupted and eroded in the process. Collectively, the implication is that a tightly bound collective where everyone is intimately involved in the raising of children, and children *know* all their close kin, becomes one where relatedness is suspended and relations become strangers. The 'universe of kin' becomes an unstable relational environment in which categories of father, uncle and brother become blurred, unfamiliar and depersonalised. The un-making of relations in a society premised on relationality poses an implicit, destabilising effect to the foundations of social life.

Nurturance and social reproduction

A central value of Victoria River social life, particularly in the context of childrearing, is caring, nurturing and 'looking after'. In the Pintupi and Puntu contexts of the Western Desert and southern Kimberley respectively, the term *kanyirninpa* is a semantic cluster entailing 'holding', including caring, protecting and nurturing (McCoy 2008; Myers 1991). In his extended study of this concept in the south Kimberley, and among Puntu men in particular, Brian McCoy elaborates on Myers' use of the term in the Pintupi context:

> Kanyininpa [sic] provided a critically important social context for young people to experience autonomy with responsibility, nurturance with authority. The values that link- ed walytja (family), ngurra (land) and tjukurrpa (dreaming) were deeply reinforced as older people inducted a younger generation into a cosmic and meaningful world. Pintupi society promoted individual autonomy, attentive care for

> members of one's walytja and respect for the authority of elders. Kanyininpa *ensured that this society would be reproduced from one generation to the next* (2008:20, my emphasis)

In desert societies such as the Pintupi and Puntu, *kanyirninpa* is a praxis entailing intergenerational nurturance and ensuring social reproduction. While I do not know of any such overarching terminology in Victoria River languages, today the Aboriginal English and Kriol terms 'lookin after' and especially 'growin up' are used frequently and prolifically in everyday discourse to the same effect. Both women and men use these terms to describe their roles in the raising, socialising and enculturation of children who grow up in their close proximity and the very active duties that this entails. When Victoria River people state with pride "I bin growim up this youngfella" or "all that lot kid I bin growem up", the term glosses the same sense as *kanyirninpa:* that of caring, 'learning' (teaching), providing for and nurturing younger kin with an eye to both individual social development and intergenerational reproduction. Here is an example of this process in action:

Late into the evening we are still sitting around the fire in the yard: myself, Annette, her sister, and two elderly couples in their 70s comprising Annette's classificatory mothers and fathers. At the centre of attention is Annette's toddler, Hudson. Hudson has been 'acting spoilt' and the surrounding adults pivot the evening's conversation to curb his conduct. Annette calls out the name of an ancestral Debil-Debil, a malevolent and menacing monster, speaking to him in sing-song mixture of Kriol and local dialect. She infers that the Debil-Debil is watching Hudson, can smell him, knows he is misbehaving, and wants to come to take him away. The adults play along, jovially and faux-sternly embellishing the scene: 'look, what's that over there?', 'did you hear that?', 'must be that Debil-Debil now!'. Although everyone is smiling, including Hudson, the toddler's disposition becomes vulnerable and he snuggles in closer to his mother. Once it's clear Hudson is becoming more settled and cooperative, one of the old men calls out in language to the Debil-Debil and Annette translates, telling Hudson his classificatory grandfather 'bin huntim away' [has dispelled] the monster.

This scene illustrates several aspects of transgenerational nurturance in the Victoria River context. Interactions like the one between Hudson and his older relations are a commonplace event in homes and families in Aboriginal communities across the Top End

(Eickelkamp 2013; Hamilton 1981; Musharbash 2016a) and occur on an everyday basis in Victoria River camps. Fundamentally, what is being transmitted and reproduced in this context is the presentation of 'meaningful world' that McCoy (2008) describes as being produced through nurturing practices. The happenings at Annette's camp demonstrate how Victoria River people utilise the omnipresence of ancestral force to socialise young children in terms of their familial as well as totemic surroundings – that is, through casual yet formulaic interactions which evoke kin and Country. In the Warlpiri context Yasmine Musharbash refers to this practice as *lani-mani*, to frighten (2016a:172), and suggests the production of (playful) terror and its quelling by grown-up relatives "can be seen as one of a multitude of practices habituating gerontocracy" (2016a:176). In particular, she asserts that only *close relations* of infants indulge them in this kind of play (2016a:175). What is impressed on Hudson through this process, then, apart from fear of debil-debil and the importance of listening to his elders, is the knowledge that older kin will nurture and protect him. For Hudson, a doting body of maternal kin provides an extended yet close network who collectively nurture and enculturate the toddler and his developing personhood.

This case study represents a more or less idealised model for Victoria River care and enculturation. Unbeknownst to Hudson the instructive play that his surrounding relations engaged in is a form of interaction which has animated the camps of Victoria River people for a very long time. His adoring elder kin replicate the linguistic and affective context of the bush and station camps in which they themselves were raised, and one can assume pre-colonial practices, in which subtle and specific forms of cultural data are imprinted and encoded in everyday speech and action across generations. The ideal role of grandparents is realised in this context: they complement the collective effort involved in raising a child in Aboriginal societies.

On another level, this scene also demonstrates the marked difference between *incarceration* and *hyperincarceration.* At the time of this scene 'only' one person was imprisoned: Duncan's father. One man's imprisonment for a year or two may not fundamentally alter the dynamics of a camp when there are ample adults and grandparents to socialise a child. Although one critical family member is missing, there is more than enough relational infrastructure for processes of nurturance and enculturation.

Hyperincarceration, however, combined with other stark realities of contemporary Aboriginal life, produces a social environment in which children and young people radically outnumber old people. These circumstances have nuanced and at times conspicuous impacts on the structure of relations between children and older people, and the functioning of everyday life.

Social insecurity

The erosion of relational infrastructure destabilises processes of nurturance and regulation that produce and maintain a sense of social security. In a Central Australian context, Marika Moisseeff (2011) describes the notion of a 'filiative function' in Aboriginal systems of social reproduction. This refers to "the transmission of the capacity to perpetuate the cultural specificity of a given population" (2011:260) in which parent-child relations are critical. What Moisseeff calls the 'cultural specificity' of an Aboriginal society correlates with aspects of the 'national pattern' to which Lemkin (1944) referred. In this system parents pass on cultural norms, social roles and practices and, critically, the capacity for younger generations to transmit these features of cultural identity to their own progeny (2011:259). Moisseeff's observations are the product of long-term engagement with a Central Australian society where the social roles of adults and particularly men have been systematically eroded by dependence on the benevolence of a state which treats Aboriginal people as a 'society of children'. I have noticed similar dynamics in the context of hyperincarceration.

In families where an entire generation is locked up, the capacity of relations 'left behind' to provide meaningful care is radically diminished. The implications are twofold: children in these circumstances are less likely to receive adequate nurturing care; and young people socialised in such an environment are unlikely to maintain those models of nurturance which reproduce society. Instead, a depopulated social universe reproduces conditions of insecurity at the individual and collective level.

It's well past bedtime for the two old people heading the household but the camp is still abuzz. A toddler wanders from the room where he is supposed to be asleep to another room then the next where he comes across a group of teenage girls socialising and playing cards. They tell him to go back to his grandparents but he wants to join the fun, and after a back

and forth between the toddler and the group he begins to cry. Their laughter prompts a tantrum which culminates in him throwing himself to the ground, inconsolable, his little belly and lungs heaving with moans of anguish. The teenagers turn back to their card game.

This case study is a striking contrast to the scene of evening play I described earlier. Although his father was incarcerated, Hudson was immersed in a constellation of older nurturing kin. The toddler in the scene just described was in the care of his grandparents while critical middle-generation carers – his mother, his father and others – were in some form of custody. He is instead surrounded by preoccupied teenagers who aren't really supposed to be responsible for him, while his grandparents are either fast asleep or too weary from another strenuous day to immediately console him. This is far from the ideal of an infant surrounded by nurturing older kin, inscribing intimate knowledge and familiarity with kin, language and ancestral forces. There is no generous play embedding the toddler in a dense and intimate network of kin, no laps to be bounced on, nobody to entertain, feed or nurture a curious infant mind. Instead there is a group of slightly older kin who care enough to try to send him back to bed but not enough to console him when breaks down.

What I seek to emphasise here is the weakened relational infrastructure that the circumstances of hyperincarceration amplify and perpetuate. The interaction between the crying toddler and the teenage girls demonstrates this obtuse sense of lack in two ways. The toddler is without a fully-grown and fully-responsible carer, and the girls watching on are without somebody to correct their 'neglect'. When the toddler's mother *is* there, she either grabs him herself or barks at her daughters and nieces to look after him. In her absence the toddler goes without, and the girls have nobody to 'tell them proper way'. In other words, there is no model or compulsion to cultivate culturally appropriate forms of social responsibility or nurturance. A domain overpopulated by a stunted youthful demographic becomes subject to the whims and ways of children and young people; with old people overwhelmed and middle-aged people missing altogether the capacity for nurturant sociality and socialisation – the filiative function (Moisseeff 2011) – is radically diminished.

Projected into the future, the implications of these circumstances are bleak. All too often in these circumstances, elderly grandparents are the last layer of social infrastructure

remaining for young people in their care. This is most clearly demonstrated by how it was put to me by Gloria, a widowed woman in her 70s who spoke quite frankly about the circumstances of life for her grandchildren. Since their mother's death her two youngest grandsons (aged eight and 10) have been inseparable from her side. Too young to join the peer-group of their older male kin, they eat, sleep and play in her proximity almost all of the time. The old woman worries about her own ill-health and the fact that two of her three sons (grandsons' mother's brothers) are locked up or in 'dry-out': "if I finish [die] well that's it, nobody gonna look after that two lil kid, they just gonna be *lost*, poor bugger'.

For the two children in her care, Gloria very materially represents the single shred of social infrastructure between them and a lifetime of radical structural insecurity. In Kriol somebody who is 'lost' is facing a desperate, hopeless situation. Gloria's use of this term also evokes the relational aspects of the term 'lonely' (Myers 1979; 2011) implying an orphan or one who is otherwise without relations. For these two children the possibilities are few and demoralizing: they could be taken in by classificatory grandparents nearby already in a similar situation to Gloria; or more likely by distant family living in a nearby community; and most likely of all become wards of the state, which itself only promises a lifetime of custody.

Reduced authoritative roles

A relational network radically dispossessed of critical social infrastructure has implications for the structure and functioning of everyday life. This is particularly the case when classificatory parents as central disciplinary figures are absent during childhood. When asked about present levels of state intervention in their lives Victoria River people often cite a general contemporary lack of discipline for young people. Members of older generations subscribe to a version of the age-old proverbial lament about 'young people these days': they don't want to work, they don't want to learn, they don't want to listen. Primary influences in the Victoria River are said to be the rise of hip-hop music and associated cultural influences (consumption of *grog* and *ganja*, glorification of swear words, 'immoral' conduct and disposition), and the diminishing threat posed by routinised exposure to the carceral state ("young people not even frightened for police!"). There is a sense of resignation about disciplinary intervention by older kin in the lives of children and young

people: “We can’t do anything about that. Old days we used to properly discipline our kids, these days can’t do nothing; now if we do something welfare gonna take em away”. Equally common is the associated perception that children may alert authorities to cases of corporal punishment: “can’t even lay one finger if they run amok, they gonna call policeman!”. These observations point to generalised external influences which diminish disciplinary capacities within families and settlements.

I suggest that the demographic imbalance caused by hyperincarceration further destabilises internal capacities for regulation within Victoria River society. Classificatory parents play a focal role in socialising children particularly when it comes to everyday matters of discipline.[62] While *indulgence* is a well-known characteristic of Top End Aboriginal childrearing (see for example Hamilton 1981), parents and their classificatory equivalents are the primary mediators of disciplinary intervention in children. This has been observed in south-east Arnhem Land (Burbank 2011) and Central Australia (Meggitt 1962) and is certainly the case in the Victoria River context. Further, David Martin (1993:24-25) has observed that within peer groups children and teenagers regulate behaviour of younger kin through negative expressions of teasing and shame rather than supportive modes more conducive to positive development. A context depopulated of middle-generation kin and where grandparents and peers are the primary, sometimes only, demographics present in a child’s life has substantial implications for the regulation of behaviour (see also Mtshali 2016).

One issue which Victoria River ceremonial authorities often lament is that ‘traditional’ forms of regulation and discipline have been diminished by ongoing occupation. Such men contend that the settler legal system undermines the capacity for ‘traditional punishment’: imprisonment subverts local authority as well as the capacity for ‘payback’ and other ways of holding perpetrators accountable, while some suggest that particular aspects of some ceremonies are or would be deemed illegal by police and the legal apparatus. In a more quotidian sense, the depopulation of middle generation relations is a void left unfilled.

[62] Related to but beyond this particular point, it is important to note that even the most errant young men nevertheless maintain a distinct if tacit form of respect exclusively reserved for senior male ceremonial authorities.

When there is nobody to directly oversee the development of children and young people, the shaping of individuals is left to the broad social environment.

Ruby (15) has recently started smoking, unbeknownst to her father who has been imprisoned for the past 18 months. He's coming out soon and she laughs that "he don't know I'm smoking yet, I don't know what he gonna say".

Ruby articulates something about the lapse in structures of restraint that becomes characteristic in families and communities affected by hyperincarceration. Here I am less concerned with one teenager's smoking habit than the broader structural arrangement of relations in the lives of young people. Because of incarceration and her consequent relocation, Ruby's parents were not presently actively involved in her life, and over the past few years she has grown up in a context depopulated of her other (classificatory) fathers and uncles. The implication is the unhindered expansion of her sense of individual autonomy, which she knows will confront her father upon his return from prison. The demographic imbalance caused by a depopulated relational universe has deep social effects for the internal regulation of conduct, as the following suggests:

Gerald (19) has been drinking heavily and his wife (18) has too. It's late and everybody can sense that an event of domestic violence is about to occur. The only other people at the camp are an elderly couple and a gaggle of children and young teenagers. There are no male relatives of appropriate age, relation classification or disposition present to step in so it comes down to the anthropologist.

One of the invisible impacts of hyperincarceration, manifest in this potential instance of gendered interpersonal violence, is the unravelling of individual autonomy, unpegged from structures of relatedness which modulate social action (Myers 1991). With parent-aged paternal figures largely absent, there is nobody to actively curb Gerald's conduct. The irony is that his absent incarcerated maternal uncles, one of whom was then serving a sentence for domestic violence against his own partner, would never permit their nephew to behave

in this way.[63] All his older and younger relatives can do is to beg Gerald to stop, or call the police. The latter is a desperate act of last recourse: the only possible outcome from that option, everybody knows, is another family member going to jail. The product is a volatile social environment emptied of individuals and demographics – critical relational infrastructure – who can meaningfully intervene.

When young people already outnumber older generations, and when nurturing social roles are few, social resources become diminished or depleted. The impacts of these circumstances on children are immeasurable, although empirically a social field depopulated of middle-generation men, and to a lesser degree of women, leaves young people to grow up with fewer people in their lives to nurture, protect, and otherwise shape the trajectory of their lives. These dynamics exacerbate the conditions which produce an already prolific level of carceral intervention in Aboriginal life.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have illustrated how various aspects of Victoria River life and social reproduction – finances, health and structures of relatedness, nurturance and social control – are destabilised by an intensifying carceral regime concentrated on middle generations and particularly men. When families and communities are depopulated of critical social infrastructure, relations become strangers, remaining networks are weakened, and structures integral to the continuity of social life are disintegrated. As Donald Braman has aptly stated, "incarceration not only provides offenders with an excuse for not contributing to the welfare of their families and communities, but it practically enforces their non-contribution" (Braman 2002:14).

[63] Gary Robinson (1995:343, fn 33) observes in the context of Tiwi interpersonal violence implicit "negotiated or elicited levels of restraint" between perpetrator and witnessing kin which "may allow conflict to continue with reduced risk". Such violence becomes "a kind of acted out moral argument about culpability, excess and restraint". Robinson's point is relevant to those previously discussed dynamics of blame and appeals to the aggregate, but also instances like Gerald on the brink: there is a fragile balance between on one hand a cultural tendency eschewing intervention when conflict or violence is determined to be 'rown problem', and on the other a moral compulsion to restrain kin when their actions clearly comprise unacceptable transgression. This implicit communicative negotiation is present when, say, a man makes to deliver a brutal attack on a partner but first declares "I been to prison before I don't give a fuck", signalling the threshold of crisis and a *call to intervene*. Crucially, such intervention is impossible in a 'mob' devoid of those with intermediary means.

It is important to note that all those dynamics I describe here readily comprise justification for further carceral intervention in Aboriginal life. When carers cannot provide for young people in their care, welfare authorities take them away. When the internal regulation of conduct becomes impossible, police and the legal apparatus arrest and lock up the offenders. There is a fatalistic circularity here: the only surety is more intensified punitive and custodial intervention. This is the violence of the settler liberal carceral state writ large: individuals are punished for the impacts of structural abandonment, and this effects households and extended families "across, between and beyond generations" (Atkinson 2003). To conclude I turn to a local metaphor of social cohesion and reproduction.

Victoria River conceptions about kin and Country are termed in arborical metaphors. Trees are said to be ecological expressions of regional character: the people of a neighbouring region, for example, are 'long bony one' (tall and skinny) as are their trees, while on Victoria River both trees and people are (said to be) shorter and squatter. Particular tree species are painted on men's bodies during initiation ceremonies, and certain trees out of the thousands dotting the landscape are the embodiment of the creative ancestral force glossed as 'Dreamin'. The generic concept of the 'family tree' resonates with local conceptions of kinship. Like the inverted tree structures of genealogies, the idiom renders grandfathers as "like roots", while father-child relations are categorised as *marnaru-jawaku* – trunks and branches (McConvell 1998:187-188). The same terms also differentiate older and younger generations (ibid.).

This arborical metaphor equates to the structure of a cohesive and stable society. The root-trunk-branch paradigm expresses both material and relational dynamics, reflecting the patrilineal inheritance of particular tracts of Country as well as of the reproduction of Victoria River society as a whole. Firmly rooted, trees stay in place. A tree's structure emanates from its subterranean foundation at the root, and from the earth's surface the trunk reaches towards the sky, supporting branches which extend from it. These connections between generations can be figured spatially, extending from earth to sky (see also Morton 1987; Morton 1989) and relationally, mutually constituted and supported. This

patrilineal emphasis is particularly pertinent in contemporary circumstance where men – sons, fathers and grandfathers – are imprisoned at radical rates.

As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, this prolific relational absence has wide-ranging impacts in everyday life and in the context of social reproduction. We can understand the fatigue, stress, chronic health, hunger and material lack experienced in the wake of hyperincarceration as consequences of an overburdened relational infrastructure: too many branches grow heavier as the trunk is worn away. Processes of relatedness, nurturance and social reproduction, fundamental to Victoria River life, depend on a stable social structure. The depopulation of the middle generation – an unstable 'trunk' and weakened 'roots' – equates to the erosion and obliteration social networks that support the 'branches' which nevertheless reach upwards, projecting into the future. The youngest generation is left without a foundation to support, hold, nurture, know or enculturate. In particular, the coerced removal of the 'trunk' – of so many Victoria River men of the middle generations – entrenches the social structure in disarray. The carceral absence of critical relational infrastructure weakens the social body from the ground up. Life goes on, albeit uprooted, unsupported and displaced.

Chapter 7 – Country

In the Northern Territory there are three key legislations which mediate Aboriginal people, the(ir) use of their Country, and parties with material interests in land and resources it may contain. These are the federal *Aboriginal Land Rights Act (1976)* (ALRA) and *Native Title Act (1993)* (NTA), and the *Northern Territory Aboriginal Sacred Sites Act (1989)* (ASSANT). They all revolve around the demonstration of 'traditional' patterns of use and association: if land or native title is to be claimed, negotiations about land use are to occur, or if sacred sites are to be registered or protected, Aboriginal people must prove that their claims of connection are rooted in 'traditions' which predate settlement (for an exploration of the settler colonial 'cunning' of these processes, see for example Povinelli 2002). Recent events like those at Bootu Creek Mine, McArthur River Mine, and Juukan Gorge (Bardon 2022; Knowles 2022; Murphy-Oates 2013) demonstrate how the interests of Aboriginal owners and custodians of a particular tract of land may differ from those of, for example, a mining company pursuing resources beneath it. Although "Aboriginal ways of being, and ways of seeing the Country, are rendered potentially commensurate with commodified relations with land" (Vincent and Neale 2018:302), the settler state, heavily dependent as it is on revenue generated by the extraction of 'natural resources', has interests which often align more with the extractive or agricultural capitalist than the traditional owner.[64]

It was under the auspices of one of these Acts that several years ago I found myself meeting with Sunny, a middle-aged Victoria River man, within the confines of a correctional facility. There was a proposal for resource extraction on his Country, and it was my job to consult traditional owners about the application. Sunny was the most senior owner and knowledge-holder who could speak for it but, because a judge issued a custodial sentence for his (repeated) drink driving, he was incarcerated hundreds of kilometres from his Country while consultations were being held about extracting resources from it. Regardless, the 'consultations' mandated by the state had to proceed. I visited the captive Sunny and

[64] I do not presume an exhaustive or exclusive Aboriginal/capitalist binary, but the Victoria River context is one where such differentiation is quite apparent.

brought with me his oldest son and a grandson, who along with other kin would engage in consultations on his behalf.

This situation would not be unusual to anyone familiar with the operations of these Acts, but I open with it to emphasise the notion that the carceral settler state and extractive capital are intimately linked. I return to this point at the end of this chapter, which is concerned with Aboriginal relations to Country under ongoing settler colonial occupation and a regime of hyperincarceration. I first outline what the expression 'relations to Country' entails in the Victoria River context, then describe how processes of relating to and caring for Country are disrupted, prohibited and erased by the carceral regime. As I have made clear throughout this thesis the impacts of pervasive carcerality reverberate from imprisoned individuals to their relations, and Country as a relational entity is no different. Hyperincarceration disrupts processes of relating to Country in the immediate present, and among other consequences this has implications for the transgenerational reproduction of emplaced forms of knowledge and enculturation. I return to Sunny's situation as a paradigm to understand the relationships between settler colonial statehood, extractive capital and Aboriginal connections to Country. In a nutshell, the first two are structured toward and benefit from the collapse of the third.

Relations to Country on the Victoria River

The Victoria River intersects the *ngurra* (Country) of a number of language groups, from its headwaters (Gurindji, Mudburra, Bilinarra, southern Ngarinyman) through terrain characterised by rugged limestone escarpment (Wardaman, Ngali, Ngaliwurru), towards the saltwater section which ebbs and flows tidally to the river's mouth (Jaminjung, northern Ngarinyman, Gadjirrabeng). Each of these groups is comprised of several of clans or 'estate groups', and each clan group presides over its own geographical jurisdiction comprising hunting and foraging and fishing areas, camps, ceremonial grounds and water sources.[65]

[65] Genocidal frontier violence from the late 19th and early 20th centuries wiped out an indeterminate number of language and clan groups in this region. Rose (1981) and Lewis (2012) suggest that groups with Country primarily focussed on open plains, 'cattle country', bore the brunt of these events, while those more oriented to gorges and escarpment were less readily chased down on horseback and more geographically equipped to defend themselves and seek shelter. I mention this because complex succession arrangements for Country alienated by these genocides still seek resolution in the present.

Each also has its own localised ‘Dreamings’ as well as custodianship of major travelling Dreamings which cover enormous distances.

Totemic ancestral forces, glossed in Aboriginal English as ‘Dreamin[g]’ or ‘Dreamtime’ figures, left traces or are physically manifest in dramatic as well as in unremarkable geographical features. An ancestral reptile species, for instance, created a particular section of creek and discrete features of the surrounding flood plain. The brackish water in a swamp is his urine, a stand of trees marks where he camped. A set of sisters of a bird species travelled to this location from the coast several hundred kilometres to the north, singing the creation of flora species all the way, until they reached (created) a particular hill range: one of them sat down here and is still sitting there today in the form of a dramatic bluff, while the others split off and continued to travel and produce the landscape, imbuing it with their essence, doing everything that humans do along the way: eating, drinking, pissing, shitting, fucking, fighting, dying. Most Dreaming sites have names – some Dreamings are associated with hundreds of discrete toponyms – many of them derived from ‘song lines’ which link individual sites along intricate and opaque narratives of ancestral travels celebrated in ‘open’ (public) and restricted ceremonial activity. It is said that ‘every hill has a story’ (Bowman 2015) and so does every river, tree, gorge, cave, plain and waterhole. Beth Povinelli demonstrates how from a particular Aboriginal perspective “all matter (human and animal bodies, objects, and environments) is conceived of as the congealed labor of ancestral Dreaming beings” (1993a:509), and Petronella Vaarzon-Morel (2022:3) asserts that such cosmological bearings are “the foundation of Aboriginal sovereignty and law” which persists in the face of ongoing settler colonial occupation.

The concept of ‘Country’ is not just about totemic affiliation (Dreamings, personal names, conception totems etc): Country is also, and more prominently in everyday life, about intimate personal associations with particular terrains. Franca Tamisari (1998) suggests that Yolngu personhood is composed and reproduced by ‘imprinting’ oneself in the landscape in the same way as ancestral totems did (or do), and Basil Sansom (2002) refers to the ‘sedimenting’ of self in Country in allyship with ancestral presence and power. When Victoria River people travel to or pass by sites of quotidian social significance, where memories have been made, events are nearly always recounted by anybody who was there:

here is where we broke down and had to camp overnight; here is where we shot a big fat 'killer' (bullock) and skinned it on the spot; here is where so-and-so bumped a turkey with his car; this spot on the river is where we dragged out in an enormous estuary shark. Such 'mnemonic benchmarks' (Kenny 1999:436) are present wherever countrymen have travelled, fished, hunted, camped, worked, lived and died. In broader terms, Victoria River people often assert "my little track everywhere through here", describing the cumulative vestigial embedded self in social memory and ancestral Country. In this form of social action there is a sense of contemporary articulation and reproduction of those mythical-ancestral travels which are abstracted in song and ceremony: 'we have always been, and remain, in this place'.

Briefly stated, 'Country' entails the relational in the ancestral (past) and the immediate (present) sense (Munn 1970; Stanner 2014), and as a container for all facets of human life and memory it can evoke joy, pain and everything in between.[66] From an Aboriginal perspective, self and Country are mutually constituted: you are a part of your Country and your Country is a part of you. When Country or sacred sites are damaged, and Aboriginal people assert that the harm is physical and personal, the assertion is literal not metaphorical. None of what I have outlined here is unique to the Victoria River context and has been explored in far more detail elsewhere (e.g. Keen 2011; Myers 1991; Pleshet 2018; Redmond 2001). My contribution to this discussion is a focus on how hyperincarceration structures experiences of and relations to Country on the Victoria River.

On a hot, clear day in December we make our way in a three-car convoy across a dried black soil plain to a favoured turtle spot. There are around a dozen of us – old men and women, a gaggle of children and teenagers, and two married couples, including Leonard (41). It's the first time Leonard has been back to this place for a very long time. A couple of hefty, back-to-back prison sentences mean he hasn't returned to his own home, let alone his favourite hunting spots, for more than five years in his estimation. Leonard is renowned as a prolific

[66] On pain: any remote highway in Northern Australia bears the evidence of tragic vehicle deaths. The Victoria River highway is dotted with countless crosses and markers, decorated with Aboriginal flags, football team emblems and other personal associations of deceased countrymen. Whenever Victoria River people drive past these sites they call out ("good night", "love you aunty", etc.) to their relations. These sites and interactions can be a source of immense distress.

hunter, and on the way everybody tells me that he will yield the fattest turtles and the most in number out of anybody here. After quite a while hunting in the dense undergrowth Leonard gives up; he declares "nothing [no luck], I don't know what wrong" as he re-joins the rest of the group, relaxing, preparing fire and fanning sleeping infants in the shade. The kids eventually return with plastic bags full of fat kwalamballa *[short-necked turtle]. Just as these turtles are being prepared and placed on the coals of the fire somebody notices a gloomy raincloud emerging between the treetops and the bright blue sky. There is a scramble to pack up and return to camp before the approaching rain makes the black soil plains impassable, but we're too slow. A drizzle turns into a downpour and the torrents make the small creeks in our path overflow. Soon Leonard's four-wheel drive is impossibly bogged, and we spend most of the night trying to extract it and get back home. Hours later, while we are sitting around the fire, filling empty stomachs with fat, well-salted turtle and damper, Leonard's brother says to him with a laugh: "I know why that rain bin come. Same reason you never get no turtle – you never go back la that place for long time". Grinning, he raises and makes a cross with his forearms in the hand sign that means 'police' or 'locked up'. "Dijan [this one] too much!".*

These events encapsulate much of what can be said about everyday interactions with ancestral Country on the Victoria River. The landscape is something travelled over, hunted and gathered upon, and interacted with: immediate and distant relations remain embedded within it after they die, and their essence is habitually called upon to yield positive outcomes for hunting and fishing trips. Deborah Bird Rose (1996) asserted that Country in the Victoria River sense refers to an animate system that thinks, feels, senses and responds to the people and events that occupy it. Country contains both immediate relational and deep totemic essence, which is demonstrably responsive to human presence, conduct and, prominently, sweat: in this sense the landscape is *sentient* (Povinelli 1993b; Sansom 2002). According to Leonard's brother and those who laughed in agreement, Leonard's absence of several years provoked a dramatic response from the Country he returned to. His unsuccessful turtle hunt was not because he was lazy or out of practice, and the bogged car was not the result of careless driving. Rather, these were outcomes of ancestral relations turned bad by years of carceral absence.

There are several ways to interpret this event. One is that, made 'jealous' by years of neglect and incensed by the abrupt return, the sentient ancestral essence embedded in the landscape we were hunting on responded proportionally. Another is that Leonard's Country had actually forgotten him altogether, and reacted dramatically to confront, punish and expel the 'stranger'. The upshot of both is that when Victoria River people are absent from Country for prolonged periods, Country takes note. Country doesn't care if you have a good enough excuse – being locked up for years on end makes it physically impossible to attend even basic relational functions like caring for kin, let alone maintaining ambiguous and intangible relations to ancestral Country. In Australia this is a unique feature, and one of the fundamental harms, of Aboriginal hyperincarceration.

Absence from Country

Country has a primary significance to Victoria River people, collectively and individually, and is one of the things people miss most while imprisoned. For one man in his 40s, the stark environmental difference between Darwin prison and outstation life was one the most dreadful things about being incarcerated: "nothing there, only wake up every day and look wall, fence, concrete, rubbish little grass … no tree, no open country, nothing". A young man who turned 16 during his months at Don Dale composed a song about his homeland outstation and Country, half in language and half in Kriol, which he would sing loudly to "make myself happy" during the day and more quietly at night when he couldn't sleep. The chorus repeated the name of his homeland camp and the stanza "that's my home". Belinda, who has been to prison a handful of times, said that upon release, "when you come for country, homeland, he feel 'gree [it feels welcoming], feel your old people [ancestors] calling you: you home now". Connections to Country are painfully suspended during imprisonment. In this section I consider three facets of this experience: how carceral absence affects relations left at home; how incarceration generates an amnesiac relation to Country; and how these notions disrupt transgenerational processes of knowledge transmission and enculturation.

A haunted landscape

In Victoria River everyday practice, particular places can be said to be haunted. These are places which are specifically and intentionally not visited or passed through: mothers-in-laws to be avoided; sacred sites restricted to men or to women only; roads temporarily closed due to ceremonial activity; camps and communities and urban streets to be avoided due to conflicts with other social groups. All of these comprise what Munn labels 'excluded spaces', "space[s] of deletions or of delimitations constraining one's presence at particular locales" (1996).[67] The strength of these attachments to Country is no more pronounced than when kin have passed away. The embedded self in Country is made explicit when close kin avoid places bearing that association; simply being at a place where the departed has spent a lot of time makes one "too sorry".[68] Houses are abandoned, places of death detoured around, favourite fishing or swimming spots of the deceased completely 'left alone'.[69] It might be the case that that person's spirit is still present at these places, and that by showing up there one is liable to being "humbugged"; more consistently, however, is the pronouncement that there are "too many memory la that place". Everywhere you look you see that person, you remember too much, you get too sorry.

Victoria River people consciously describe everyday social action as "makin' memory". When a tyre goes flat, or a car gets bogged or when plans run afoul – situations which non-Aboriginal people often experience as frustrating or cause for despair – Victoria River people shrug and laugh. "Oh well, time to make a memory la this place" is the attitude, getting to work or otherwise engaging in something else while the necessary work is being done (see Poirier 2000). Such events live on in social memory: "that's the place Patrick bin get a flat tyre", "that's where we bin get bog". These are the products of quotidian social action, and cumulatively index both individual and group identity (Mullins 2007; Sansom 1980). These

[67] Other 'excluded spaces' come to mind: the cattle stations where many Victoria River residents were born, raised and worked for decades in a past era which are now much less welcoming, or openly hostile, to (unannounced) Aboriginal presence; 'gardiya house(s)' in and near Victoria River communities; the clinic carpark which many Aboriginal residents of Timber Creek assert is 'not for blackfella' or 'blackfella not 'lowed to park there'; anywhere in the hinterland that 'gardiya' or tourists have set up an informal camp, including at sacred sites, hunting and fishing spots.

[68] In Aboriginal English, regional dialects of Kriol and the Victoria River context, the term 'sorry' refers to a state of upset or grief rather than apology.

[69] Basil Sansom (2002:174) observes that a "feature of this religion born of nomadism" is that certain places are "fated to a structured and required loneliness that is made their lot".

same sites are cause for reminder, upset, and if possible avoidance, when a member of the party passes away. No such practice has emerged for the slow, invisible anguish of a relative's incarceration.

We are driving to the old outstation in an overloaded Toyota: Peter (71) and Molly (65), a swarm of young and teenage children, and myself. For a couple of decades the outstation was fully functional: a handful of houses, a stable generator, telephone and water pump and all the space and resources one could ever need. Peter and Molly lived here year-round with their extended family: two sons, two daughters, their spouses and children, and a rotating crew of relations. Now the outstation is defunded and derelict, and both of these sons are locked up. As we approach everybody is talking over each other telling stories and laughing about particular things that happened, fond memories of hunting, fishing, living. We draw closer to the crumbling houses and Molly mutters "oh, my son[s]", the heartache visible on her face.

Here Molly articulates a spectral encounter with the unresolved anguish of carcerality. The embedded social memory of this place harkens her sons, once happily living right here and now both unhappily incarcerated far away. I encountered instances like this constantly during my fieldwork. Empty rooms, empty houses with long grass in yards, favoured hunting spots, locations of vehicle bogs and break-downs, all associated consciously and verbally with absent, incarcerated kin. The cultural emphases on 'makin memory' and 'embedding' oneself in Country have a particular salience not only in death, but for the 'social death' (Elliott 2016; Price 2015) of carceral absence. Victoria River people articulate feelings of ambiguity, sadness and joy when they cross them: they stimulate happy memories but also recall their absent, incarcerated relations.

I use the term 'haunted landscape' to describe these spectral affects. Through vestiges and remnants of relational essence, Victoria River people perpetually re-encounter the anguish of separation and, implicitly, the disappearing power of the carceral state (Gordon 2008a). Frantz Fanon identifies "tinctures of decay" in the social remnants of imperial power (1963:249), while Allison Formanack asserts that ruins in the wake of displacement yield a potent and "tangible force" (2018:295). Decay is the theme here too, not moral or emotive

but material and relational. Following Gordon (2008a), Eve Tuck and C. Ree (2013:642) observe that

> Haunting lies precisely in its refusal to stop … Social life, settler colonialism, and haunting are inextricably bound; each ensures there are always more ghosts to return

These notions underpin the mostly unspoken anguish which Molly experienced as we approached that old camp. While over time and through 'routinisation' (Green 1999) the emotional torment of having a loved one imprisoned grows numb, but not forgotten, haunting reminders repeatedly emerge from the landscape.

Amnesiac relations to Country

One of the most fundamental harms of the hyperincarceration of Aboriginal people is the interruption of relations to Country.[70] Being on and interacting with the ancestral landscape is an intrinsic characteristic of local Aboriginal life. Ben, a middle-aged ceremonial authority who has never been imprisoned, asserted that deprivation of this capacity alters the state of personhood: "[prisoners] feel like they're losing out on it all that time: that connection to culture, country, language… knowing who they are and where they come from". For many Aboriginal people, 'who you are' and 'where you come from' are functionally synonymous (Austin-Broos 2009). Losing grip on that aspect of self is both intangible and irredeemable.

When I ask whether being imprisoned erodes a person's connection to and memory of Country, Victoria River people shake their head firmly: "You can't forget! It's in your mind right from little one, from law: you can't forget!" Places, Dreaming tracks, Country and site names and experiences, skills and practices that have been imprinted into individual and collective memory through lifetimes of moving through the landscape, hunting, fishing, participating in ceremony and otherwise being in place are unique and irreplaceable. Empirically, however, this assertion – 'you can't forget!' – is more imperative than fact:

[70] Darwin's Holtze Correctional Facility occupies land claimed by both Larrakia and Wulna-Limilngan people, for whom imprisonment does not necessarily mean being 'taken away' from their Country but rather being incarcerated on it. This is the same for those belonging to and incarcerated on land anywhere on this continent.

wasted years in prison can and do degrade an individual's knowledge of Country, as the following case study demonstrates.

It's night time. There are no lights on at the camp, just the warm glow of the fire radiating against the nocturnal 'cold weather' (dry season) chill. We're sitting around it, relaxed, content: myself, Peter (71), his grandson Blaise (19) and Peter's son, James (38). James has been back home for a couple of weeks now after a lengthy prison sentence, and he talks about it a lot: the boredom, the casual violence, the camaraderie and hostility of the world inside. While James and Blaise reminisce Peter interjects, kicking off a playful, competitive game. He calls the names of places in his paternal estate – the 'blackfella' names of creeks, rivers, billabongs, plains and hills that make up their Country. He starts off with his own Dreaming, calling the name of the place where it starts, and prods his son and grandson to recall where the Dreaming travels next. "Come on, you know", he tells them, a sly smile spreading beneath his cowboy hat. James and Blaise have each spent a lifetime travelling with Peter, hunting, gradually learning the places, names and cosmic significance of these sites. Blaise is eager to one-up his uncle, who's a little rusty – James hasn't heard many of these words said out loud for years. Blaise waits, letting his uncle pass before happily and in quick succession calling the name of that spring, that hill, that river bank, that distinctive outcrop created by that ancestral figure. James laughs and says "ah I forget na … wait first [hold on], I know that name, I bin walk alla round there, wait first!". He names a few of the places off the top of his head but has to be reminded of most of them, admitting defeat: "ah leave im na". Peter laughs throughout – laughing at the gentle embarrassment of his son and with pride at the proficiency of his grandson – and when that cycle has been completed he announces "ma [alright], nother side na" and starts peeling off names of his mother's father's Country, a couple hundred kilometres from his paternal estate. The game goes on for another half hour or so until the fire burns down. The cold takes over and we call it a night.

Before his return from prison, before I met him, James was spoken of as something of a prodigy. He had grown up at his family's outstation and spent his formative years in the company of his father and grandfather, masters of their craft. The impression I got from his family was that after his father he was 'number one' in terms of 'traditional' knowledge

about their ancestral Country. His mother spoke with fervent pride about how he was able to sit blindfolded in a moving vehicle and identify where he was simply by the bends and bumps in the road. Upon his return from prison, however, degrees of this intimate connection were demonstrably lost. This case study illustrates how imprisonment degrades the deeply embodied and emplaced knowledge that is an essential element of Victoria River personhood. This is also precisely the kind of material which the settler state legislatively demands for the demonstration of 'traditional' connections to Country.

One of the subtle effects of hyperincarceration is an amnesiac relation to Country. The names of places which were previously for James the subject of imminent and spontaneous recall were now on, or beyond, the tip of his tongue. This was certainly a source of shame for James, his wounded pride compounded no doubt by being one-upped by his nephew, barely in his teens before James' incarceration and now a fully-fledged young man. I want to suggest, however, that this is a matter not just of being 'rusty' or temporarily forgetting a handful of names which may readily be recovered. This case study speaks to the disintegration of something constitutive ('you *can't* forget!'). The things that were forgotten are fragments of deeply-rooted connection accrued over decades of moving through and interacting with inherited ancestral terrain. Such items are embodied relations of invaluable significance, both ancestral and personal. 'Forgetting' amounts to rupture in these connections, diminishing the individual and collective attachment to Country. The impacts of this rupture reverberate within family groups and across generations.

Transgenerational impacts: emptying the landscape of meaning

There is a vast and unquantifiable void left where hyperincarceration removes and displaces people. The context for moving through Country, embedding oneself within it, is effaced when key knowledge holders are incarcerated. I have demonstrated how individual connections to Country are unmade by prolonged incarceration. In what follows I suggest that the incarceration of key relations inhibits the creation of such connections for future generations, their potential for movement in the landscape, for embedding self within it. In short, emptying Country of meaning and memory.

Intimate connections to ancestral Country are fundamental to contemporary Victoria River life, and begin in early childhood. Classificatory parents, particularly 'full' mothers and fathers, are traditionally and ideally the primary catalysts when it comes to possessing, maintaining and transmitting particular ways of knowing and doing (Hamilton 1981). Critically, as is the case in many hunter-gatherer societies, Victoria River children are encouraged to 'learn by doing' rather than through direct, intentional instruction (see for example Hewlett and Roulette 2016). This is to say that incidental and repeated embodied and emplaced enculturation, rather than formal pedagogy, is the context for developing and attuning individuals to the intricacies of their social and cultural environment. For enculturation to occur, people need to be in place.

Freyja is back from 'dry-out' (carceral rehabilitation), her husband has returned from prison, and we are out hunting: me driving, Freyja (34) in the back, her husband in front, her sons Joel (3) and Oliver (12) respectively on her lap and sitting beside her, and her oldest son Blaise (19) behind me. Freyja remarks that she hasn't been down this road for "long time", in her estimate over a year, in between stints in dry-out and living closer to where her husband was incarcerated. As we drive the men scan the road and scrub for turkey and kangaroo, and to pass the time Freyja conducts a running pop-quiz about the Country we are driving through. "That tree what you callim blackfella name", and Oliver responds correctly; she asks what about "that flower", and when Oliver says he doesn't know she tells him; "that little hill there what Dreamin", and Oliver replies correctly again. Freyja smiles with quiet satisfaction and Oliver brims with pride.

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In a rare occurrence, brothers Leonard (41) and James (39) are both 'out' and back at camp at the same time. In the afternoons they go on hunting expeditions with 'only boys and men', pursuing turkeys, wallabies and kangaroo in a tray-back ute. Everyone, including the kids, gets a turn handling and firing rifles on their Country. When they return Eric (11) excitedly tells everyone how he got to shoot a kangaroo for the very first time, his father laughing affectionately.

These scenes demonstrate the subtle yet productive transmission and maintenance of emplaced and embodied knowledge – practical and 'traditional' – from parents to children

in a mundane, quotidian context. Hunting trips like these are a fundamental aspect of Victoria River sociality, and beyond the nominal aim for attaining protein, hunting and fishing they are a primary leisure activity for Victoria River people. Implicitly, they are also an important context for the development and maintenance of relations between kin, and fundamental to the socialisation of children and young people. The subtle pedagogical and relational effects of stabilised family units, in which children are nurtured by parents as well as extended, multi-generational networks, ensure these forms of knowledge can be projected into the future with continuity.

During such multi-generational trips where people move across, hunt and fish on, and interact with their ancestral landscape, younger generations develop a sense of what it means to be a Victoria River person, and acquire particular ways of knowing and doing which are unique to local language, dialect and even clan groups. Again, in Lemkin's (1944) terms, these are components of the local 'national pattern'. A short list of such aspects of local Aboriginal life includes: language; ceremonial dance and attire (how they are made, fashioned and worn); the 'proper way' to prepare, cook, share and consume bush foods and to make by hand the equipment to acquire them; the names of localities, Dreamings, seasonal fishing and hunting spots; areas of significance to kin group including burial sites, conception and birthing sites; bush skills including hunting, fishing, attracting and dispelling particular species – desired such as bush turkey, turtles and particular fish, and undesired such as crocodiles and other fish species. These too are criteria crucial for claiming connection to land in the legislative context of the settler state.

The carceral absence of kin presents a radical challenge to the continuity and ongoing transmission of these forms of enculturation. When people are locked up, they cannot share, nurture or develop these dynamics for themselves or with younger generations. This is particularly the case for 'middle generation' men and women – parents and grandparents of the youngest generations – because they are most often vehicle owners as well as knowledge holders linking older and younger cohorts. Depriving social units of key people as well as the basic capacity for mobility has subtle yet dramatic impacts on these increasingly fragile systems and ways of knowing and relating to Country. The following is a case in point.

In Victoria River society, a personal name (termed *blackfella name* in Kriol) is given to each individual often shortly after birth, along with given English names and skin names (although the latter are in declining use and have been all but abandoned socially by many people below the age of say 40 years old). Personal names are usually derived from or actual terms referring to specific Dreaming sites, tracts of ancestral Country, and sometimes totemic species – although their primary reference is to the deceased ancestors who held the same name before they passed away (Dussart 1988). Françoise Dussart also notes that personal names are said to come directly from the Dreaming. This is to say that there are no novel or invented personal names (as opposed to the prolific creation and use of nick-names in contemporary Aboriginal societies): all personal names belonged to an ancestor, and all holders of a personal name – that is all Victoria River people – are a version of the person(s) who held that name before them.[71]

In this sense personal names are a fundamental particle of personhood in Victoria River society. Socially they are used practically interchangeably with given names for many Victoria River individuals, although there are some exceptions. Because some (men's) names are associated with ceremonial or secret phenomena they may be known but are not spoken by women or young men. All Victoria River people from the onset of adolescence observe the taboo on uttering the names – both given and personal – of their opposite-gender siblings. A trend among younger generations sees the prolific creation of inventive English given names for newborn children, some of which are unfamiliar and difficult for old people to pronounce. I know several such young people with tricky (English) names who are referred to almost exclusively by their (Aboriginal) personal name. With the exception of very young children, all Victoria River people I know are aware of their own personal name and that of their close kin. During my fieldwork, however, I observed two blips in this otherwise absolute standard, both in cases of parental incarceration.

The first blip relates to a teenage girl, Adrienne (15), whose father was incarcerated for the vast majority of my fieldwork. While I had jotted down her personal name when taking

[71] There are personal names in circulation among Victoria River people today which I have seen in records dating back to the early 1900s.

genealogies at the start of my fieldwork, it occurred to me at a certain point that I had never heard it uttered out loud in quotidian discourse. I realised this when Adrienne's father returned home, and he used it when speaking to or about her on an everyday basis. Although by this time I had spent nearly a year surrounded by her close kin, to my memory and according to my fieldnotes Adrienne's personal name had not been verbalised the entire time her father was locked up.

The second blip occurred when I was driving with a group of adults and children to a nearby settlement. I have made the same trip with various members of this extended family countless times, and the distance and time are always passed by recounting anecdotes or 'memories' made (happy, funny, tragic) relating to places along the road and off dirt tracks in the hinterland, and by articulating the different names of tracts of Country we pass through, some of which are the personal names of members of the family. On the afternoon in question, Eric (11) was in our party, whose father Leonard was incarcerated at this time and indeed for much of Eric's childhood. As we passed the geographic location that is Leonard's personal namesake Eric's uncle proclaimed the name of the place, along with a remark directed at Eric: "your dad indit? [isn't that so?]". Eric, nonplussed, asked "what?!", and the whole car repeated the name, telling him: "that's your daddy name!". It turned out that Eric had no idea about his father's personal name nor any meaningful recognition of the place we had just passed.

These instances demonstrate how the impacts of hyperincarceration are projected, subtly yet profoundly, on a transgenerational scale.[72] Personal names, as a fundamental particle of Victoria River personhood, locate an individual within a relational network, identify them with a particular site or tract of Country, and emplace a sense of dividual personhood in space and time. Fred Myers (2011:99) recognises such criteria as "the fundamental anchor of identity" of Pintupi life. Adrienne's and Leonard's personal names were for all intents and purposes forgotten by particularly close kin. Such disuse implies an affective distance not

[72] That these personal names were not known in the context of absent *paternal* relations is significant both in the context of a regime which hyperincarcerates men and in a society where affiliation to Country is emphatically organised around principles of patriliny. Eric and Leonard's case is also directly relevant to the father-son trajectory of social disappearance referred to in Chapter 5 of this thesis.

just between father and child but between children and their ancestral landscape: a rupture in the intimate relationships among kin not just in the here-and-now, but also connections projected from the past into the present and from the present into the future. In this sense carceral absence displaces not only imprisoned people but also, very concretely, relations whose personal, social and cultural development depends on their presence.

While the case study of James I raised earlier was concerned with individual forgetting, Eric's circumstances point to something broader and deeper. Taken on its own, Eric not knowing his father's personal name, nor where it is sited in his Country, is a sorrowful thing. As Craig Elliott (2016:114) describes in the case of an Alyawarr victim of the Stolen Generation:

> The lack of contact … with these relations interrupted the transmission of cultural knowledge… and, consequently, rendered his social identity ambiguous and circumscribed.

In a context of hyperincarceration, where multiple key people are absent for significant periods of time, this same effect is cumulative and perpetuates exponentially with every prison stint, each being a period when opportunities to be on Country with kin dwindle. When so many men are absent, possibilities for producing and reproducing such connections are decimated.

On a broad scale what I describe here is the gradual waning of widespread knowledge about and connection to Country. The hyperincarceration of key people amounts to turning the landscape upside down, emptying it of meaning. While the relations left behind go some way to filling this void in children's lives, the compounding conditions of contemporary Aboriginal life (impoverishment, sedentariness, carcerality) mean people can take children on Country less and less, and the forms of connections to Country described at the start of this chapter – embodied and emplaced relationships – are gradually terminated.

Elimination and extractive capital

Parties with interests in Aboriginal land, other than Aboriginal people, benefit materially and concretely from the various forms of disruption and erasure described in this chapter. Such

interests concern the land itself – pastoral activity, other agriculture and aquaculture ventures, and some of the largest military bases on the continent – as well as what lies beneath it – minerals, oils, gas, and water.[73] Jon Altman (2018) has recently drawn attention to the historical trajectory of policies targeting remote-living Aboriginal people on the one hand and prospects for extractive capital and 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey 2004) on the other. Altman asserts that a logic of (cultural) genocide structures this arrangement (2018). Here I apply this comparison to the regime of hyperincarceration, which quite uniquely features in the relationship between the settler state and the facilitation of resource extraction and the proliferation of capital.

When I visited the incarcerated Sunny to consult him about the proposal affecting his Country he exhibited a worn down manner. It could have just been the experience of incarceration itself, or exhaustion from a day toiling under the sun doing prison labour, but I think consultation fatigue was also a factor. In between several prison stints over the years, Sunny's Country had been subject to countless overlapping development proposals, big and small, and all of them required sustained attention, consultation, field trips, meetings public and private, and an unquantifiable amount of emotional and intellectual labour. Even in prison there was no escape. A Victoria River law man, whom I knew only briefly before he passed away, more than once offered his view of the endless consultation procedures which Aboriginal people endure, mandated by legislations ostensibly geared towards the protection of Aboriginal interests and rights regarding their Country. "They just keep coming back: even if we tell them no, they just keep coming back. Now they just waiting till we all finish [die]". What Sunny's experience demonstrates is that even such pernicious 'waiting' is not necessary to accomplish goals of 'development'.

It is convenient to the settler state and proponents of capital if those who can say yes or no to, or otherwise hinder, capital and colonial endeavours are locked up. Firstly, as Sunny's case demonstrates, hyperincarceration diminishes the capacity for Aboriginal nations, clan

[73] Recently a military expert cited the joint interests of military, agricultural and extractive capitalists as the rationale for funding an upgrade of the Tanami Highway which links Central Australia to the Kimberley region (O'Connor 2022). Framing these intersections as 'the national interest' neatly articulates the central role of the settler state in facilitating private 'development' in the name of capital.

groups and individuals to make informed, collective decisions about what happens to and on their Country. This is the case when senior traditional owners and knowledge holders are locked up, and also when younger people who assist, translate and otherwise participate in (and learn from) negotiations are similarly out of the picture. While meetings like the one I conducted with Sunny and his kin at the carceral facility are possible, they are far less equitable than full scale, uninhibited participation in meetings with proponents and organisations, site inspections and private intra-family and -clan group decisions which occur in place. Deborah Bird Rose (1991:46) observes, "to get in the way, all the native has to do is stay at home", and the carceral settler state is equipped with various – and increasing, intensifying – means by which to get the native out of that way.

On a societal scale, hyperincarceration reinforces powerful settler perspectives on Aboriginal populations. Labelling entire swathes of men and, increasingly, women as perpetrators of violence, as reckless, depraved alcoholics or simply as villains at large reinforces global stereotypes about Indigenous people more broadly. It is easier and more justifiable to hold these views when they are grounded in the material evidence of incarceration. This simultaneously undermines Aboriginal claims to and efforts for protection of land, and marks "the Indigenous body as one that is not up to the challenge of modern life, a condition that leaves the settler as legitimate heir" (Razack 2015:193) to the Aboriginal estate, and the resources beneath it. In the context of settler colonial hyperincarceration the relatively meagre amounts of royalty money reaching Aboriginal pockets are more readily associated with 'rivers of grog': Aboriginal people are routinely condemned for blowing royalties on destructive commodities. These stereotypes are convenient for settler state and populations alike, justifying the lamentable decay of Aboriginal life as a sad but inevitable fate for an already-dead-or-dying race (Mbembe 2003; Razack 2011). Even more so for proponents of extractive capital: the absence of so-called law men and knowledge holders who are in prison for drink driving or whatever else undermines the already precarious and unequal position of traditional owners, and haunts negotiations with international mining conglomerates and other 'developers'.

If Indigenous people represent an existential threat to settler statehood (Razack 2020; Wolfe 2006), that threat is amplified in the resource extraction sector. While Aboriginal

owners and native title holders have no property rights to anything – mineral, oil, gas – below their land's surface, ALRA offers them the rights to veto exploration, and NTA offers procedural rights of negotiation (Altman 2018). This threat is plainly expressed in the cartography of extractive capital facilitated by the settler state. Figure 5 is sourced from Northern Territory Government resource sector material (NTG 2022b). Here 'granted' and 'application' status of exploration licences are overlaid onto the massive tracts of land held by Aboriginal owners under ALRA and the NTA. This Figure also demonstrates how much land in the Northern Territory remains 'untapped', most of it "potentially affected by" the legislative recognition of Aboriginal life. [74]

Although settler colonialism continues to unfold, the extent of actual settlement in the North has largely reached its limit. The pastoral leases have already been mapped out, and aside from squatters, tourists, infrastructure workers and so on it is unlikely that settlers will continue to expand the frontier much further beyond the towns and cities already in place.[75] The (colonial tropes of a) vast, harsh, rugged landscape and its increasingly inhospitable climate, and life on that land, is undesirable for most apart from those Aboriginal populations who have always been there, as well as the service providers, pastoralists and mining contractors who revolve in their relatively fleeting placements. Beneath the land's surface is a different story. The overwhelming majority of extractive capital in the Northern Territory is sourced from underneath Aboriginal-controlled land, worth over a billion dollars every year (NLC 2022). At present Aboriginal people in remote

[74] Compared to other parts of the NT the Victoria River region is perhaps underrepresented in terms of titles presently granted or subject to application. When I glance at the NT local court appearance lists which are issued daily, Victoria River people are often similarly underrepresented compared to other regions where licences for extractive capital are more concentrated, like the hinterlands of Darwin, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs and anywhere the 'operating mine' or 'producing oi/gas field' symbols appear on Figure 5. Certainly relevant to my broader argument, but beyond the scope of this study, would be a statistical investigation into causal or correlative factors between policing and incarceration rates among Aboriginal demographics local to sites where extractive and other capital endeavours are more concentrated.

[75] This being said, in my experience Aboriginal people across the NT often perceive 'development' proposals on their Country specifically in terms of an ongoing and expanding colonialism. These proposals include: new or revised housing settlements on Larrakia land in the Darwin hinterland as well as other towns and settlements; the constant (re-)development of military land and related infrastructure all over the NT; and many other forms of infrastructure from road realignments and bridges to open cut mines. All of these projects depend on the perpetual extraction of 'natural resources', including the deceptively mundane but destructive proliferation of gravel pits (see Griffiths and Newry 2021; Howey 2020).

northern Australia “find themselves at the heart of ‘the race for what is left’” (Klein 2012 in Lea 2020b:20).

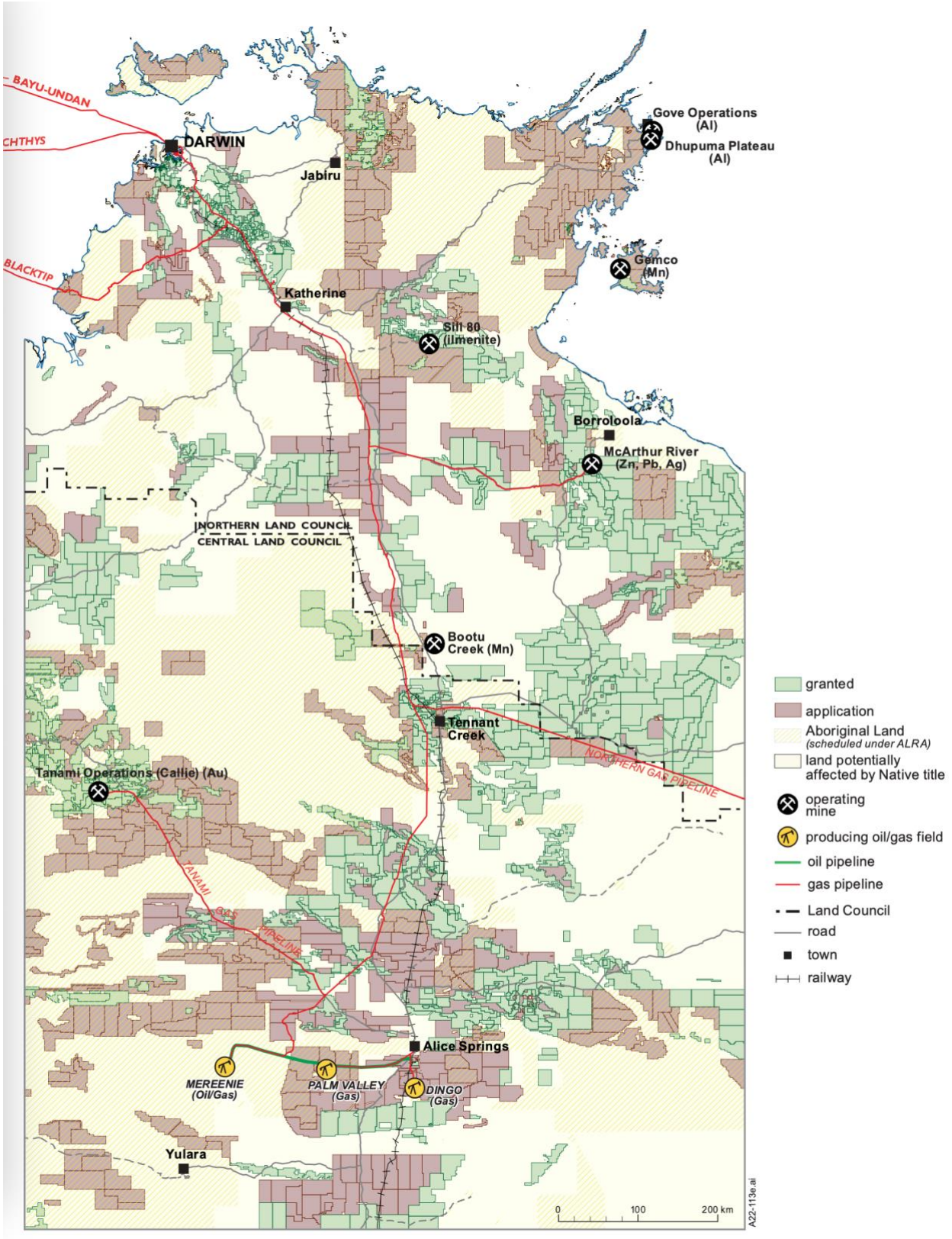

Figure 5. Northern Territory mineral exploration titles and land status (NTG 2022b)

The native element is a key obstacle in that 'race'. Aboriginal people do not inherently oppose development or extraction on their lands: in fact many welcome multinational conglomerate investment as a way to funnel services and resources to sites neglected or abandoned by the settler state (Scambary 2013; Vincent and Neale 2018). Yet their very existence as custodians of land on top of potential sources of extractive capital renders them in ontological opposition to both settler state and extractive capitalist. Eliminating native presence through a slow but steady – and intensifying – carceral genocide not only removes them spatially but facilitates and ensures the corrosion of the practices, values, ways of knowing and living which keep them in place. This is the case for incarcerated individuals (Sunny, incapacitated, and James, amnesiac) and more gradually on the generational scale of the 'free' (Eric, Adrienne). If you don't know your Country, you can't claim land or title or protect sacred sites which often contain valuable mineral deposits. Instead, people grow distant from Country, opening it up to exploration, exploitation and accumulation by dispossession. This is happening in real time.

Conclusion

In his investigation of the ontological and socio-political bearings of Anangu Country, Noah Pleshet concludes that:

> The greatest risk to 'country' is that it will cease to be 'country', that is, 'land already related to people' (Stanner 1965:14). Land unpeopled and therefore unknown becomes a dangerous space, to be avoided. It might then languish with no people to learn its stories, no one to 'look after' its places, abandoned, remote from the ordering powers of human social life (Pleshet 2018:197)

In this chapter, I have illustrated that the future tense 'risks' and 'mights' of this proposition are very much present realities, and the 'powers' which order domains of Aboriginal life are now and increasingly those wielded by the carceral settler state. Melinda Hinkson (2021:58-59) comes to a similar conclusion, asserting that these intensifying interventions destabilise those "place-based identities … that allow shared orientations between persons, their environments and the world at large". The immediate, cumulative and transgenerational impacts of this process empty the land of meaning, transforming a life-giving terrain charged with potent ancestral relations into a depopulated, anonymous landscape.

Such emptying out, making unfamiliar and anonymising are central to the logics of elimination and replacement at the heart of the settler colonial project (Wolfe 2006). Even as Aboriginal populations remain in place the intensification of an expanding liberal regime of which hyperincarceration is just a part offers more and more methods to get people out of "the way" (Rose 1991:46): adult and youth prisons, non-custodial sentences, mandated rehab, electronic monitoring, welfare and CDP obligations as well as the immobilising constraints of widespread impoverishment and chronic health, and the bureaucratic economies which perpetuate and depend on these emergencies (Lea 2008a; 2012; 2020b). Even while Victoria River people continue to move across and embed themselves in Country this process too yields more haunted spaces, spectral vestiges of the carceral state, its disappearing power and its unfinished business.

Yet as Country languishes, it also responds. Leonard's encounter – no turtle, big rain – demonstrates that these relations *do* persist despite carceral absence, just not in ways acknowledged by the 'cunning' of settler state and its liberal project of recognition (Povinelli 2002). Sunny's situation is emblematic of this cunning: the state recognises your position and rights as traditional owner and custodian, but if you do the wrong thing you must face consequences; anything collateral to those consequences – the disintegration of entire worlds of knowing, relating and being – is your own individual fault. Extractive capital and the settler state mutually benefit from this process which in Lemkin's (1944) terms accounts for the destruction of much of the Aboriginal 'national pattern' (Altman 2018).

Conclusion

Since completing fieldwork at the start of 2020, I visit the Victoria River when I can and maintain contact with individuals and families involved in this project. Phone calls include mutual updates on personal and mundane affairs, demands for cash, anguishing calls that someone has passed away, excited video calls to introduce a newborn or to remind a toddler who and where uncle Patrick is. One of the persistent themes of these dispatches from the Victoria River is that someone has been locked up for the first time or for the hundredth time, or is still on remand or has now been sentenced: “nother little six month”; “two years!”. Recently on a phone call my niece told me her uncle, my brother, had been locked up again and he would not even be up for parole for three years, probably much longer. He is someone I have always known to pass in and out of jail, but once again I was stunned. To this news I simply replied, “what the fuck?”, and she responded “I know!”. We both paused, silent for a moment, and the conversation moved on. So it goes. There are so many affective dynamics expressed within moments like this that are impossible to put into words. In this thesis, I have tried to provide the scaffolding to make such moments legible. This entailed ethnographically contouring the profoundly saturating nature of the regime of hyperincarceration within this milieu of Australian life.

Along the Victoria River, carcerality is a normalised, routinised aspect of contemporary Aboriginal life. It haunts things which are said and left unsaid, influences daily social action and interaction on a minute and on a mammoth scale. The carceral state through its agents and spectres, and the carceral absence of relations, are omnipresent forces which thoroughly structure Aboriginal lives and ways of life. These dynamics are present in the consensus of social facts about bad events and matters of incarceration determined within kin groups. In turn, this intensifies dispute and conflict between groups: often one mob is incensed by their kin’s imprisonment and finds causal explanation further afield, while another mob waits bitterly for true justice to materialise once a prison sentence is fulfilled. While all of this occurs, the ritual dehumanisation of prisoners, and more broadly the lethal conditions and administration of Aboriginal life and death, quietly simmer just out of sight.

The carceral settler state is present before conception, during infancy and this presence only intensifies throughout childhood. It is an ongoing source of grief, anguish, animosity and trauma, and restructures how relations with close kin are organised, expressed, coded and embodied. While Victoria River people are still young, they remain witnesses to, and thereby accomplices of, the settler state in its perpetual incarceration of older kin.[77] In their play carceral forces emerge all at once as mundane, terrifying, humiliating and as a source of fleeting yet gratifying pleasure, the thrill of which fades as concrete futures materialise, children grow into adults, and have children of their own. The ongoing crisis of post-settlement Aboriginal masculinity is deeply inflected by these dynamics: fathers lose touch with children and particularly sons, reproducing and reinforcing intergenerational disconnect and perpetuating personal and relational traumas. More and more young men grow into a world possessed by the carceral state and the alternative expressions of masculinity which its captivity offers. On a transgenerational scale, models for relating are destabilised, ways of living and being stifled while impoverishment, poor health and the collapse of critical relational infrastructures consolidate the impossibilities of life. The most fundamental aspects of Aboriginal life, those oriented to Country, become more abstracted from everyday social action by the sudden and protracted disruptions of the carceral settler state which benefits materially from the process.

Among the techniques of genocide Raphael Lemkin includes the:

> disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups (1944:79)

Such disintegration has been elucidated throughout this thesis, comprising the palpable, ongoing destruction of the 'national pattern' still enduring on the Victoria River. This destruction is facilitated, perhaps knowingly, indifferently, unwittingly, or even nihilistically, by those whose daily work concerns the multifaceted apparatus of the carceral settler state: thousands of police officers, magistrates and other judicial staff, prison guards, welfare officers, those who win contracts for the construction of new prisons and new carceral

[77] I thank Ute Eickelkamp for pointing out this out in an earlier iteration of this work.

technologies, and the bureaucrats and public servants who make all this work legislatively and administratively possible. Such is the polycephalic destruction wrought by the 'Indigenous governance machine' (Kowal 2011).

While all this goes on, the same destruction is rendered directly and indisputably the fault of the collectively oppressed through the individualising logic of liberal culture and politics (Povinelli 2002; 2008; 2011). Emblematic here are the words of advice offered to prisoners by a former NT Minister for Corrections: "if a person wants to spend time with their family and they value their family time so much, don't commit crimes that see you go into a jail in the first place" (ABC 2016). There is no refuting such logic: appeals to the aggregate, relational responsibility, systematic disintegrations wrought by pervasive carcerality, or the life and death of a culture do not apply in the judicial, carceral, policing or legislative domain of the settler state. Rather, as Beth Povinelli (2008:515-516) observes, "state killing and its public sanction are transfigured into a more amorphous agreement that people are killing themselves … 'Are you killing yourself, yes, you are. And we will no longer help you do so'". This eliminatory logic permits the organised abandonment by the state of populations rendered surplus and subhuman. More relevant than ever is Joy James' (1996:34) assertion that "penal incarceration and executions are the state's procedures for discarding the unassimilable in an external inferno of non-existence".

What is to be done? Carceral abolitionists often emphasise the necessity of *imagination* in building worlds without prisons or policing (Kilroy 2018). I think refusing such imagination equates to refusing the possibility of a world where Indigenous life and death is no longer determined by the carceral settler state. Jackie Wang (2018:297) paraphrases the proposition popularised by Mark Fisher (2009) that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine a world without prisons". With this proposition in mind, towards the end of my fieldwork I put a question to a senior Victoria River law man: what would happen if, tomorrow for example, all the prisons were closed and all the police went home; what would happen if the carceral settler state withdrew altogether? After a reflective pause this man's response articulated, and was vested in, the restoration of Aboriginal sovereignty. He imagined the coming together of ceremonial authorities from all across the Top End. First one, then another, then a flood of them, all bringing with them those ritual

items and ephemera which assert the place of people and the laws which keep them in place: “They gonna make a big business that mob”.[78] Indigenous people the world over have already witnessed the ends of worlds and continue to endure the new ones built in their place (Gross 2014). When picturing what future worlds might be built, among those who know their place despite centuries of efforts towards its erasure, there are more difficult things to imagine.

Beyond those carceral spectres attended to in this thesis, the Victoria River hinterland is haunted by the presence or threat of many more ghosts, monsters and other malevolent entities. There are the spirits of deceased ancestors who manifest themselves anywhere and at any time, sometimes benevolently and sometimes malevolently; there are those totemic ancestors whose work produced and continues to characterise the landscape; there are *wurrkurru*, grotesque, humanoid monsters who dwell in caves and terrorise, attack, kill or eat whoever they come across; there are water-bound and seductively nymphal mermaids; there are ancestral *debil-debil* (devil) figures with rapacious appetites.

Among Victoria River people the most prominent fear is reserved for ‘bush blackfellas’ (*mayi* or *ngumpin* in local dialects): secluded populations of Aboriginal people indigenous to the region who never ‘came out of the bush’. Bush blackfellas are said to remain living across the enormous tracts of unoccupied Country remote from settlement, and live ‘traditionally’ – that is, their lifestyle is nearly identical to Aboriginal life in the region prior to colonisation. They wear little or no clothing, do not tame their hair, spend their days hunting and gathering, and speak only local dialects – no English. There are certain places, particularly perennial water sources and sacred sites, which are said to ‘always got bush blackfella hangin’ round’. They are sighted occasionally and leave traces of their occupation (abandoned camps, debris from tool and equipment manufacturing, fresh rock paintings) discernible to the trained eye. Usually they live and move around in small groups, but they have been sighted gathering in larger groups including small children and domesticated dingoes. They are terrified of whitefellas.

[78] ‘Business’ and ‘big business’ in Aboriginal English refer to secret, gender-restricted ceremonial activity, not economic activity.

Bush blackfellas have been a feature of Aboriginal life in this region since early settlement and throughout the mid-century pastoral regime. At the same time that pastoral station camps kept their sedentary slaves *in,* they were also structured to keep still-bush-dwelling Aboriginal people *out*. Victoria River people recall how station whites resented the presence of these itinerants, countrymen of their incarcerated station counterparts: they freeloaded food, tea, tobacco and other supplies, and in their unruly other-ness imposed ideologically and psychically on the pastoral settlers who would otherwise control and own the land and its people. Older Victoria River people recount frequent incidents when managers would invade Aboriginal station camps, banging on their tin humpy rooves and brandishing a rifle, searching for any concealed 'bush blacks' who would be shot on sight if discovered.

Today the potential presence of bush blackfellas is navigated as a matter of everyday life for Victoria River people, who speak about them with a mix of fear and reserved respect. They are capable of fierce warfare and powerful black magic, and they can appear in dreams, paralyse, or make people incurably sick.[79] Bush blackfellas are countrymen to Victoria River people – they come from the same land and speak the same languages – but they are distant and unknown relations, and they tend to avoid contact with the settlement-oriented people I know. Still, they lurk on the fringes of camps from time to time and are known to approach individuals or small groups with malicious intent, particularly at night. For a vehicle to break down while travelling a remote road at night prompts unspeakable fear: "bush blackfella comin'". When walking between camps at night, Victoria River people usually move in groups of at least two, preferably more (with the exceptions of drunk people and brazen teenagers), and nocturnal trips to outside toilet blocks are almost always made in company. As people retreat to bed, doors are locked and weapons (boomerangs, fighting sticks, baseball bats) are tucked under pillows and mattresses; when camping, fires are stoked until dawn and in settlements veranda lights are kept on all through the night – bush blackfellas are less likely to approach well-lit houses. When a bush blackfella is spotted the flurries of excited discussion last for days.

[79] I want to clearly distinguish the Victoria River 'bush blackfella' from the featherfoot, kurdaitcha and other malevolent humanoids prominent in other Aboriginal societies (see for example Eickelkamp 2014b; Musharbash 2010; Thurman 2020). Bush blackfellas are emphatically and unambiguously human.

In contrast to other malevolent entities which have their roots in deep ancestral time, bush blackfellas are a uniquely 'post-'colonial concern. A middle-aged man described an interaction he had with a bush blackfella when he had pulled up while driving along a highway at night: the figure tapped on his window, gestured at him to wind it down, and asked, laughing, incredulous, in language, what this (Aboriginal) man was doing driving a vehicle. On another occasion a teenage girl asked the group we were travelling with what bush blackfellas must think when "they see us, wearing clothes, driving round gotta motika [in a vehicle]", to which her older cousin-brother replied, "they probably wanna make us like them".

While the presence of bush blackfellas is an unquestioned aspect of everyday life on the Victoria River, the mere possibility of their existence is deeply confronting to the settler psyche. The suggestion that there could still be 'uncontacted tribes' on this long-colonised continent inverts the settler imaginary of absolute containment and challenges the foundation of contemporary settler subjectivity: surely by now the natives have all either been assimilated, killed, let die, or are being adequately contained and otherwise 'liberated' out of sight. The entire settler colonial project is vested in rendering Aboriginal life to the past tense.

On the anthropological significance of the monstrous, Yasmine Musharbash suggests that monsters are "always bound to specific socio-cultural contexts, and within them, signify the issue that most matters to the people they haunt" (2014:12). I think it is significant, perhaps demonstrative, that in a social context so saturated by carcerality, wielded by a settler colonial state which through an eliminatory logic dehumanises Aboriginal populations, renders them surplus and works to make their ways of life impossible, Victoria River people continue to look elsewhere: to possibilities of life drawn from the past, enduring in the present and rooted firmly in place.

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