

'I'd make some bloody changes': A Bird's Eye View of Women's Incarceration

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Figure 1. Cockatoos on fence. Photo by Nichole Taylor

'Time does weird things in a place like this.' 'Sometimes it feels like it's rushing, like you're on drugs, you don't notice the days are just passing by. But then, if you concentrate, on certain times and days, it just drags.' Locked up in Sector 4 at Darwin Correctional Centre, time is future-oriented, unfolding toward the completion of a sentence – getting out. But doing time is cyclical, repetitive, marked out.

7am: still asleep; still laying there, watching the clock; have four Weet-Bix and two bananas if I got them; do a bin run and do my hygienes; cleaning my

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room, ready for unlock.

8am: already up, dressed, and have had my breakfast, waiting for muster; having coffee; standing at the back of my cell, shirt tucked in; ready to go up to industry for work.

9am: I ring mum as soon as I get unlocked; go work, headset; go to my program, Cert. 1 business program; listen for my name to be called out for visitor.

10am: loading all the equipment in the truck; work or in bed; drinking tea; morning tea; crocheting blankets for the cancer victims.

11am: scrubbing someone else's shit out of the toilet; still at work; still doing the program; at the buys; toilet, drink water, go back in the classroom; still crocheting, waiting for lunch.

12pm: muster; we eat lunch; pushing the trolley; usually a soggy sandwich and a piece of fruit.

1pm: back to our pods; laughing; at work or in bed; go back in the classroom; sometimes I rest.

2pm: go and rest myself, lie down, watch TV, do my washing; still in the classroom, work or in bed; having a coffee; listen to the music, country music: Lee Kernaghan, Keith Urban, Cliff Richard.

3pm: head back to our block; go in our room, have a nap; call my family, talk to them; sitting in the pod, waiting for the wings to be opened; having a wander around the yard.

4pm: walking circles around the prison; library; getting buys, biscuits, coffees, chocolate, and if we could we'd buy a dildo, but we can't.

5pm: pushing the trolley - muster up for meal issue.

6pm: walking back to the pod; standing in my cell waiting for the screws to lock us up; watching the news; watching *Home & Away*.

7pm: watch the sunset; having a shower; settling in; reading; tell stories and just laugh.

8pm: sometimes I'm asleep, if not listening to all the girls yelling out; yell out to my boyfriend; watching TV; play around in my iPod, listening to music; ready to sleep.

9pm: watching TV, still watching TV; lay in my bed; turn my TV off, go to sleep.

10pm: watching TV; go to toilet; farting, I fart a lot - the food here.

11pm: a bit bored, on my bed, legs up on the wall, counting the bricks, looking at the TV upside down, wishing there was something else to do; get tired, go to sleep; sleep.

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2am: still asleep; sleep; sleep; probably spinning around on my bed again, being bored, watching TV upside down.

3am: get up again to have another wee, go out the back and check in the wire cage to see whether it's a full moon or not; sleep; starting to stir.

This passage combines women's descriptions of daily activity at Darwin Correctional Centre. Drawn from a more complex collage in Episode 6, 'Fractures', of the podcast *Birds Eye View*, their accounts are cut up and recomposed (Vincent 2019). Together, they form an abridged depiction of diverse activity organised to shared rhythms. The timetable, Michel Foucault (1995) writes, is an old inheritance, establishing rhythms, imposing particular occupations, and regulating the cycles of repetition. Unlike the workhouses of seventeenth century France, inmates here are not required to 'wash their hands, offer up their work to God and make the sign of the cross' (149). But a system of petty penalty and reward prevails. Appear at muster three times a day, prepare your cell for a hygiene check, perform your work orders. 'Time penetrates the body', but despite myriad constraints and demands for hard labour, discipline's principle of exhaustive use has never properly colonised Australian prisons. Idle time abounds, and time served is filled with banal activities resembling everyday life outside: waiting, working, TV, eating, cleaning, shitting, sleeping.

'Did you know that we keep time in prison using hotdogs? Like when I've got six weeks to get out, I've got six hotdogs to go, because we get a hotdog every Saturday.'

'I don't eat hot dogs. I hate hot dogs.'

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Figure 2. Ladies only. Photo by Nichole Taylor

If I were you and you were me
My complaints would not fall upon deaf ears
If I were you and you were me
This mental abuse wouldn't have gone on for years

The opening lines to Renae 'Rocket' Bretherton's (2019) poem 'If I Were You', published in the *Australian Poetry Journal*, indicate why she is 'so passionate about speaking up for the women who won't speak for themselves'. Women comprise eight per cent of Australia's prison population, but this demographic expanded by 64 per cent between 2009 and 2019, compared with 45 per cent for men (AIHW 2020). Thirty-three per cent of incarcerated women are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, while in the Northern Territory (NT) this proportion is about 84 per cent (ABS 2020). Increasingly punitive sentencing for non-violent offences, mandatory sentencing, and more stringent bail laws have disproportionately impacted women, and women arrive at prison having disproportionately experienced poverty, insecure housing, domestic violence,

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and childhood trauma (Segrave and Carlton 2010). An Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2020) survey found that only 17 per cent of women entering prison had completed high school and only 15 per cent were employed in full- or part-time work or undertaking study. Call it punishment, warehousing, hyperincarceration, or the creation and reproduction of a delinquent class – the prison is a violent institution that compounds prior disadvantage.

Birds Eye View involves incarcerated women as more than statistics or the numbers assigned at admission – 'I'm not just a number, I'm more than a number.' Episode 1, 'Making HERstory', includes women voicing stereotypes that have been levelled at them: 'shit, damaged, junkie, stupid, bad mother, scum, disrespectful, a burden, uneducated, dysfunctional, animals, tainted, low lives.' 'But what about the real us? What about our stories?', they respond. This is the basis of the podcast series, executive produced by Johanna Bell of StoryProjects and co-created with women from Sector 4 of Darwin Correctional Centre – Sylvia, Noelene, Kay, Aimee, Kelly-Anne, Bianca, Trisha, Kiara, Brooklyn, Taise, Rocket, Deanne, Jessica, Naomi, Serafina, Julie, Tegan, Joan, Philomena, Yasmin, Sofi, Jessie, Kirsty-Louise, Beccy, Karen, Kym, Tara, and Ashley, among others.

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Figure 3. Ryn Wilson, *Items missed 1*, (2019) archival inkjet print, 45.7 x 45.7 cm for *Mixed Media: Incarceration Issue*. Source: Artist

Darwin Correctional Centre is not a women's prison, though about 80 of its 1160 prisoners are women. In recent years, the gendered aspects of incarceration have become an increasing concern of scholarship, policy, and advocacy (Davis 2011). Working with formerly incarcerated people in New Orleans, Louisiana, artist Ryn Wilson represents women's responses to the question: 'What items did you miss most while incarcerated?' (Mixed Media 2019). From an early description of 'a prison bra, so tight it nearly cut me in half', *Birds Eye View* pays close attention to these quotidian gendered inequities. 'It sucks being a woman in a man's prison.' Once a week, women in Sector 4 are granted access to a razor.

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Women at Darwin Correctional Centre are constantly delayed in their movement, requiring an escort through men's sections of the prison to get anywhere, including family visits - 'they walk us right through a whole lot of the men like we're on parade, it's like walking through a meat factory.' Tampons and pads are free, but you cannot choose your size. In the former prison at Berrimah, mattresses converted to sex toys were redeployed from the men's section for the women to use. Mothers with newborn babies, including on the inside, are unable to have photographs taken together. All the while, incarcerated women are likely to be organising their children's ongoing care, battling Territory Families for custody, and negotiating family visits - 'I want to visit mummy in the policeman's cupboard.' And because men would block and repeatedly flush their toilets to move cells, medium and high security prisoners in Sector 4 have restrictions on showers and toilet flushes - 'water is a privilege around here. And so are fans.'

'If I were you,' Rocket writes, 'I'd make some bloody changes.'



Figure 4. Listening back. Photo by Nichole Taylor

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Birds Eye View provides intimate access to the women at Darwin Correctional Centre, their experiences of incarceration, the events that have brought them there, and their aspirations upon release. Media precedents include *Ear Hustle* (2017-), Radiotopia's podcast from San Quentin prison, and *Beyond the Bars* (2002-), 3CR's annual week of radio broadcasts in Melbourne. But *Birds Eye View* is unique in centring long-form stories of incarcerated women. Following Russell and Carlton (2018), we understand the podcast as a 'counter-carceral acoustemology' that provides sonic 'ways of knowing and sharing knowledge about carceral existence and resistance, which challenge the dehumanization and normalization of the former' (298). The stories overlay a soundscape collaged from ambient field recordings – loudspeaker announcements, doors closing, keys jangling, inmate chatter – and are augmented by original theme music and a soundtrack of women artists from the Northern Territory of Australia. It is a magazine podcast narrated by a chorus of characters in prison and about prison, produced over two years.

Rocket: The first time we met I was a bit cagey, I went up to the library because it was something to do in jail. I walked in there and there's Yo [Johanna Bell] and [Producer] Leah [Sanderson] and I'm like what are these chicks doing? And then they're talking about recording us, and I'm thinking, what could they possibly bring me unstuck for? So my first impression of Yo was a little untrusting and she seemed like a real dork.

Liam: When did that change?

Johanna: Was it outside when I started paying you to work on the podcast?

Rocket: It was about my first pay cheque, that's exactly right. I'm like, oh yeah, I gotta keep this chick around [laughing].

Johanna: There was a real motley group of people who came on the first day, which I was really pleased about, because I had been worried that maybe it would just be all the outgoing, articulate, educated prisoners who were going to turn up. I think Rocket was one of the people who stood out immediately because she's loud and she speaks her mind and she's got lots of energy. And you were kind of bouncing around the library.

The first test that Leah and I were given was, in the early days, arms crossed, leaning back on the wall, "Are you going to bring biscuits?" And I was like, "What are they talking about? Is that code? Are we getting hit up to bring drugs into the prison?" And they're like, "The other programs bring biscuits."

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Liam: Actually I brought biscuits today.

Rocket: Get them out, come on. What'd you bring? . . . Shortbread . . .

Liam: Oh, sorry. What should I bring next time?

Rocket: Drugs! . . . [laughing] That would have been my answer a couple of years ago. But snakes would be good next time.

Johanna: We did something quite unusual, which was have an open door policy, which meant that women could come and go from the program whenever they wanted. And the idea was that because we were in there for two years, it would allow women on shorter sentences to join and leave. And it also meant that if women had other priorities, like going to clinic visits or work, that they wouldn't be cut out. It did make it difficult sometimes because when a new person entered the group, it changed the dynamic. And it sometimes stalled things like who was happy sharing.

Johanna: When we started the project we thought that it would be a collection of long personal audio essays. But because the women had landed on these two questions - who are we really, and how did we get here - we found when we did the audio essays, because women have had really complex lives and often experienced trauma, the audio essay format didn't bust through stereotypes and remind people of all the other stuff that exists - the experiences of resilience, survival, and humour.

Rocket: I actually use humour for anything . . . it's my coping mechanism for everyday life. Prison's a pretty shit place. You have to use humour there to break it up. [But] it's a pretty serious fucking place too and there's a lot of screws who you cannot have a joke with . . . I mean, you go jumping for joy and shit, and you're going to get a drug test because you're too happy. If you're a little bit depressed and you're crying - maybe you found out someone died or whatever - you can't show the guards because they'll be like "Are you OK? Do you want to hurt yourself?" And they'll put you "at risk".

And when you go "at risk", when you're feeling your worst of the worst, they put you in a little tiny glass box, not even three by two. And you're in that glass box and you're watched 24/7 on camera. You're watched to go to the toilet, you're watched, you don't even have a shower. Even if you're in there for a week, you don't have a shower.

Like you can't be too happy - you get a drug test. You can't be too sad - you go at risk. You just got to be at this level. And I'm ADHD - like boo da ba doo

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boo, running everywhere.

Johanna: Maximising women's control over their stories was difficult inside the correctional system which is designed to strip autonomy at every level.

Prisoners don't have control over what they wear, what they eat, where they sleep, who they share a cell with, how fast they walk, how loud they speak, how long they shower for, how many toilet flushes they get a day. . . So creating an empowered storytelling process and convincing women they would have a say over how their stories sounded took some time.

The thing that sets this project apart from other podcasts that I've worked on was that it was a very slow storytelling method. And by that I mean excruciatingly slow at times. Lewis Raven-Wallace (2020) calls it "Going at the speed of trust". And because people take a long time to trust in prisons, the speed was extra slow.

So it was at least eight weeks of building relationships before we brought a mic in. And then there was four weeks of mucking around with one mic. And then we got the kit. And that was when there was a really steep learning curve in the group. So going out into the yard to take field recordings and women interviewing each other. Prior to that we hadn't had the opportunity for two women to be in conversation with each other while recording. Once that came in, we started to see the potential for all these different directions that the podcast could go in. And they were being dictated by the women's interest and their desire to muck around and have fun on the mics.

Rocket: The whole time it was going on, the story, they're saying, you'll get a final say, you'll get a final say. I was like yeah whatever sure. Later, Leah brought me a piece of paper, seven hundred pieces of paper [laughs], and it was a transcribed version of my story.

I wanted a lot of edits and I didn't think any of them were going to happen. But seventeen edits later, Yo's like, "Rocket, this is your last edit." And I'm like, "Yo, I need a final edit, I made a mistake." And Yo said, "It doesn't matter, no one will mind." "But it matters to me." And she's like "I'll do this one."

Johanna: It was also complicated by the fact that prior to leaving prison Rocket was put into high security, which gave us limited access to her.

Rocket: I was locked up in a bloody pod for twenty three hours and forty five minutes a day, allowed out for one fifteen minute call. If that call didn't answer, I got put straight back into high security.

Johanna: We're laughing about it now, but the burden of some of that

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responsibility, for your story and for every other woman's story, was a very heavy load. There were heavy moments too for the women involved because they needed to be quite brave and courageous and often talk about things they hadn't spoken about before.

Rocket: I hadn't spoken about a lot of what was in my story. I never voiced it out loud. I'd never told anyone. A lot of it I just completely blacked out of my life. And, you know, I was starting to tell my story and having memories and flashbacks and just a lot of shit came in storytelling.

I was actually seeing a psych at the time, which is really unheard of in Darwin Women's Correctional Centre. But I was seeing a psych, so I was able to unpack with her, why I was feeling these feelings. You know, I actually got to unpack a lot of my trauma, like a fuckload of my trauma, in like a little five-month period. And then they ripped the psych out because Don Dale [Youth Detention Centre] went mad. So Don Dale needed the psych.

Johanna: How important was it that the podcast was a public podcast, compared to one that was just for the women involved?

Rocket: That would be boring. . . I don't give a fuck what prisoners think of me. People in jail know a side of me, but the public don't know you from a fucking bar of soap. But they judge you as a prisoner, you know, you're a naughty person, you're society's scum, whatever.

I wanted the public to see me as a person. I made a lot of wrong choices in my life growing up, more than most. But I also wasn't given a lot of choices like other people were. You know, drugs were really really normalised in my family, very normalised. So to me, even now, I really have trouble processing drugs as a crime because to me it was so normal in my life for so long.

Johanna: I suppose the type of work that I'm drawn to is work that challenges voice poverty. And I think prison is one of the most under-represented spaces, for most people it's just an unheard and unseen space. . .

It was really hard making a podcast in prison. It was like a dance. A project in diplomacy. The longer the project went on, the greater the risk that somebody somewhere was going to push an alarm button and shut the whole thing down.

Rocket: I never believed it was coming out. I never thought it would get through Corrections.

Johanna: And there was a lot of stuff that was recorded which never made it into the podcast, things that were like clear human rights abuses or involved

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the misuse of power by prison staff were never going to get signed off on. And so as editors, there was always a decision of what do you leave out so that this podcast sees the light of day.

Early on, I hadn't ever thought of the legal implications. I realised partway through that I was going to need to employ a lawyer who specialised in defamation and contempt of court to go through every woman's story. And this was actually a sticking point for Rocket and I. We nearly came unstuck. Because in Rocket's story, she mentions – and this is the first time she's ever told this story – an incident that occurred when she was a teenager. An incident of physical abuse that involved a perpetrator. And she wanted the identity of the perpetrator to be known. So we went to great lengths to request documentation to try and find evidence of that, in foster care records and all sorts of things, and were unable to get it. So we had this very difficult conversation where we needed to ask Rocket whether she was OK changing her story. And she thought that we didn't believe her. And the idea that we needed to protect ourselves and her wasn't a priority [for Rocket]. So at that point, Rocket threatened to leave the project and pull her story entirely. And we were like, look, just let us cut it and you can have a listen and you can decide whether you want to go ahead with it.

Rocket: I was like "Nuh". I crossed my arms, and I was like "Fuck you". I was really going off, I was really angry at them. Then I heard my story. I heard what they had done. And I was like, "This might be OK." It still told my story. It was still my story.

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Figure 5. Waiting in line. Photo by Nichole Taylor

Congruent with state statistics on recidivism, many of *Birds Eye View's* creators have been previously incarcerated. But the prison is only one of settler colonialism's infrastructures on a larger carceral continuum. Baldry and Cunneen (2014) describe how 'colonial patriarchy' inflects patterns of imprisonment for Indigenous women, effecting a transcarcerative shift to the prison from historical institutions of incarceration - the mission, the asylum, Aboriginal girls' homes - and contemporary ones - foster care, juvenile detention, family violence, alcohol mandatory treatment, night patrol (Porter 2016). The metaphor of the prison pipeline is too linear for settler colonialism, which is a spider, spinning and re-spinning its web - 'just like the good old days'.

Darwin Correctional Centre is located 30 kilometres from Darwin's CBD. Like most late modern prisons, it is hidden from sight and difficult to access. A bus stop at its entrance is not serviced. Larkin (2013) describes infrastructure as the networks that facilitate circulation across space and time and the grounds on which other objects operate, suggesting attention to both material and

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poetic components. The prison is the criminal justice system's chief infrastructure of containment, isolating surplus populations in rural and regional non-places. But it is also a node in larger networks of exchange and circulation: of capital, in government tenders for construction, management, recruitment, and ancillary services; of labour, for landscaping Darwin city and repairing Qantas headsets; and of people, for whom release is sometimes a step towards reincarceration, with many state failures in between. Inside the prison, various mobilities complement the experience of lock-down: between administrative classifications and their relative privileges; for work and study programs; back and forth to the office and around and around the yard. The prison is Ursula Le Guin's broom closet, and the suffering of life therein is the basis of the good life elsewhere (Povinelli 2011). But *Birds Eye View* resists late liberalism's demand to understand infrastructural containment as social solution, instead depicting the cultural life of the prison against the state's preference to invisibilise or abstract it.

In Episode 7, 'Love', 'prison psycho/psychic Tarot Taise' provides a tongue-in-cheek astrology reading. 'The sky's the limit', she says. 'Also, the fence is your limit. And no running, tuck your shirt in.' Though the prison isolates and contains, *Birds Eye View* describes numerous ways in which its borders are porous. Family visits are cause for apprehension and joy; mail deliveries are treasured (including from podcast fans - send to Birds Eye View, Sector 4, Darwin Correctional Centre, GPO Box 1066, Howard Springs, NT, 0835); and phone calls connect prisoners to friends and family elsewhere - go to the prisoner support officer, complete a form, enter your pin number, place a call, pay \$6.50 for 15 minutes, then wait one hour to call again. And birds, not the metaphorical kind, play a recurring role.

This is hell
what we eat in prison
In lunchtime - sandwich
soggy sandwich
Just carrot and cheese
little bit of lettuce
Just little lettuce, and
it's plastic cheese too
and plastic ham.

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Sometimes I give it to birds.

— Noelene

Eating leftovers, entering pods, squawking in the yard, and rooting in 'Plover porn', birds provide something more than the bland confines of the prison, a present reminder of a world beyond the fence.



Figure 6. Rocket at podcast launch. Photo by Nichole Taylor

Rocket: What changes would I make? A fuckload of changes. Today, I picked up someone from the Supreme Court and she was expected to report at Casuarina. She was in Darwin City - that's ten kilometres away. And she was released with not one cent to her name. She was released with no clothes, no I.D., nothing. Then on the way to Corrections, I rang the jail for her to try and organise picking up her money and they were like, "OK, just make sure you bring photo I.D." I'm like, "Mate, you've got everything she owns at jail. You

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didn't send it to court with her." And they're like, "That's our policy." I'm like, "What the fuck mate?"

There needs to be so much change in the reintegration of prisoners back into society. There needs to be so much change within prison. I can't stress enough that if you want people to stop offending, if you want people to help themselves, you have to help us. You have to put programs in place, like we really need a rehab inside the jail, at the very minimum. You need programs for women to do every day. So we're not sitting around for 12 hours a day doing nothing but twiddling our thumbs waiting. . . I done 18 months this time. All that time, I could have been doing programs, helping myself. There needs to be more mental health help in jail. I can't even give you a percentage of the women locked up in jail who don't get to see a mental health worker because they don't physically say the words, "I want to kill myself." There needs to be big changes. Jail should not be the first option, jail should be the last option. You know, there's so many different things you can do other than jail. Don't send people to jail, abolish the prisons.

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