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## Carceral atmospheres on Manus Island: Listening to how are you today

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### Abstract

This paper develops a conception of 'carceral atmospheres' as a way of framing our encounter with the sound art and archive *how are you today*, created by the Manus Recording Project Collective (MRPC). This 2018 work involved the creation and collection of 84 field recordings by six asylum seekers and refugees indefinitely detained on Manus Island by the Australian government. I argue that a proper engagement with the medium and mode of production of *how are you today* – that is, offshore detention and transborder solidarity – requires a sensory politics that is attuned to the dynamic and increasingly diffuse nature of carceral power. The paper explores the tension between the tangible and intangible nature of carceral space, the heterogeneity of prison soundscapes and the significance of time to experiences of punishment. Complicating the presumption of sound as object of analysis, I consider how field recordings both convey and create atmospheres.

## **Carceral atmospheres on Manus Island: Listening to how are you today\***

**Emma K. Russell**

This paper develops a conception of ‘carceral atmospheres’ as a way of framing our encounter with the sound art and archive *how are you today*, created by the Manus Recording Project Collective (MRPC).<sup>1</sup> Over a period of fourteen weeks in 2018, this work involved the creation and collection of 84 field recordings by six men indefinitely detained on Manus Island by the Australian government. Highlighting the mobile qualities of sound, each 10-minute field recording was sent from Manus to Melbourne and uploaded for playback as part of the *Eavesdropping* exhibition, originally staged at the Ian Potter Museum of Art in Melbourne in 2018 and later at City Gallery in Wellington in 2019. Following its temporary staging in the gallery – each day of the exhibition featuring a new recording, played on loop – *how are you today* was developed into an online archive. In this digital archive, the recordings can be played and paused as the listener pleases, but not otherwise controlled through rewinding or fast-forwarding. Each field recording is accompanied by a date, the name of the creator, and a brief textual description of the soundscape it captures.<sup>2</sup>

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\* This essay is one of six pieces in this special issue dedicated to the work of the Manus Recording Project Collective, which you may therefore like to read together. For a general introduction and the curatorial history of the work, start with Parker and Stern (2020). The collection also includes essays by Poppy de Souza, Andrew Brooks and André Dao, along with a conversation between André Dao and Behrouz Boochani.

Through the creation of *how are you today*, MRPC takes up the task of conveying some of the day-to-day rhythms of detainees' experiences through sound. When the recordings were made, refugees and asylum seekers on Manus Island were spread amongst five small camps or so-called 'open' facilities in the major town of Lorengau (Giannacopoulos and Loughnan 2019). Subject to surveillance, curfews and control over movement, the dispersal of detainees followed the forced closure of the Manus Regional Processing Centre in October 2017 after the Papua New Guinea Supreme Court found that the camp was unconstitutional.<sup>3</sup> *how are you today* thus records a particular historical moment in Australia's imperialist and punitive offshore detention regime; a moment of reformation, consolidation and expansion of the 'carceral archipelago' as envisioned by Foucault (1991: 297) several decades ago: a 'subtle, graduated carceral net with compact institutions, but also separate and diffused methods' of control.

Perhaps by virtue of these reconfigurations of offshore detention and the open, unedited format of the recordings that comprise the artwork itself, the carceral soundscapes of *how are you today* did not sound like I expected them to sound. I had engaged with MRPC members' prior writing and creative projects, which provide vivid accounts of the brutality of offshore detention, such as Behrouz Boochani's (2018) powerful book, *No Friend But the Mountains*, and the award-winning podcast, *The Messenger*. In the latter, a curated selection of voice messages shared between asylum seeker Abdul Aziz Muhamat and journalist Michael Green via WhatsApp are crafted into a political narrative that reveals the pain and futility of indefinite detention on Manus Island (Rae et al 2019; Russell and Rae 2019). Following such explicit exposés by members of MRPC, the recordings that make up *how are you today* are decidedly more quotidian; unremarkable, even. For instance, when I listen to *03.08.19 Behrouz, the night before last, sitting by the fence near the jungle*, I hear the sounds of the jungle – frogs and insects thrumming and chirping, echoing outwards – some muffled voices talking quietly in the background and a dog barking in the distance. But I do not hear the compound fence.

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Initially, I was unsettled by the presumed inability to hear the violent infrastructure that secures the men's captivity, since the very silence of the fence threatens to undermine our capacity to listen 'back to power' (Dao 2020). However, the title of the recording reminds us that sound – and silence, for that matter – is always socially embedded, produced and mediated by relations of power (Parker 2020). The fence 'haunts' the field recording (Gordon 1997; Mountz 2011), even if it cannot be physically registered by the human ear. Attuning to the fence's presence thus requires reflection upon the medium and condition of possibility of the artwork, which is not sound, but 'offshore detention itself', as the *Eavesdropping* curators explain (Parker and Stern 2019: 24). We cannot divorce *how are you today* from its context of border violence. *Behrouz, the night before last*, is not simply an atmospheric nature recording, for there is nothing 'natural' about the fence that borders the jungle, nor the regime of offshore detention that it serves. Fences, walls, boundaries and borders are enduring constructions and key technologies of carceral and imperial power, enacting violence upon racialised and gendered bodies deemed 'disposable' or 'surplus' to neoliberal capitalism (Gilmore 2007; Perera and Pugliese 2018; Palombo 2009). The atmospheric qualities of *Behrouz, the night before last*, are as much carceral and colonial as they are 'natural', insofar as the soundscape is structured by the imperialism of Australian border policies and the social conditions of unfreedom, abandonment and coerced (im)mobility that they engender.

This paper argues that a proper engagement with the medium and mode of production of *how are you today* requires a sensory politics that is attuned to the dynamic and increasingly diffuse nature of carceral power. In order to advance this claim, I outline a theoretical framework for interpreting carceral atmospheres, drawing upon critical thinking on the sensory dimensions of carceral spaces and on the relationship between sound, affect and the atmospheric. Through analysis of the sonic art and archive *how are you today*, I show how attention to the embodied aspects of detention through the medium of sound reveals particular workings of carceral power that might otherwise be left unexamined. I explore the tension between the tangible and intangible

nature of carceral space in *how are you today*, which highlights the heterogeneity of prison soundscapes and the significance of time to experiences of punishment. Complicating the presumption of sound as object of analysis, I consider how *how are you today* both conveys and creates atmospheres. Rather than acting simply as a sonic portal into detainees' experiences on Manus, the work generates new spaces of intensity shaped by the space and time of its playback. Lastly, I reflect on the work as an archive of creative practices of transborder solidarity, which might undermine some of the sustaining logics of Australia's punitive immigration system.

### **Carceral atmospheres, and the limits of listening**

The idea that spaces of detention have a particular 'feel' to them – that their hostile architecture and disciplinary regimes produce climates of fear, deprivation and more – is not new (Crewe 2011; Carlton 2007; Hancock and Jewkes 2011). There is a growing body of work by prison sociologists, cultural criminologists and carceral geographers that explores the multi-sensory nature of experiences of incarceration and the liminal, 'transcarceral spaces' that extend beyond the physical confines of the prison (Crewe et al 2013; Herrity 2020; Moran 2014; Russell et al 2020). For example, Hemsworth (2016) notices the disorienting effects of the reverberation created by the aural architecture of Kingston Penitentiary in Canada; and Young (2019: 773) intuitively 'an atmosphere of dispossession and disappearance' in Japan's Kyoto prison that is produced by the control of prisoners' sonic outputs. While carceral spaces and soundscapes vary and diverge in multiple ways, as I discuss further below, these important recent contributions nonetheless highlight that sound 'demarcates, patterns and disrupts carceral space' (Russell and Carlton 2018:300). Sound, in carceral contexts, is thus immanently worthy of further investigation.

The origins of the word 'carceral' ('carcer') can be traced to both the ancient state prison of Rome and one of the geomantic signs in occult divination that signifies 'an enclosure' or 'prison cell' (Moran et al 2017). However, the disciplinary mechanisms of law, power and

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surveillance that intentionally and detrimentally contain bodies within space and time do not *require* the static and impermeable structure of a cell. Carceral boundaries are not always ‘solid’, nor are they fixed or entirely ‘cut off’ from the ‘outside’ world (Gilmore 2007). As products of social relations, these arbitrary boundaries are always porous, fluid and contingent (Turner 2016). Technologies of confinement exceed the conventional spatial infrastructure of the prison or camp (such as razor wire, cement walls, guards patrolling the perimeter) to encompass temporal forms of restriction (such as curfews, sentence length, or the absence of one) and the inscription of incarceration upon bodies. Underwritten by practices of racialisation, gendering and classing, these ‘transcarceral spaces’ – the widened webs of social control that exist ‘beyond’ the prison or camp – reinforce social marginality and challenge the assumption that confinement is achieved merely through penal architecture (Allspach 2010; Moran 2014; Story 2019). Shifting our attention to the embodied aspects of confinement, beyond what we can ‘see’, enables deeper appreciation of the functions and effects of carceral power and the profoundly sensory nature of carceral experiences (Herrity 2020). To advance this line of inquiry, this paper develops a conception of ‘carceral atmospheres’ that can enrich our critical engagement with the soundscapes of detention in *how are you today*.

Combining theorising on carceral spatialities (Moran et al 2017) with sonic thinking on affective atmospheres (Anderson 2009; Gallagher et al 2016), I conceptualise *carceral atmospheres* as the spatialisation of affect through technologies of confinement. ‘Atmospheres’ are notoriously difficult to define, since they are both tangible and intangible, and arguably everywhere. Anderson (2009: 78, 80) conceives of atmospheres as ‘spatially discharged affective qualities’ that ‘envelop’ and press upon us ‘with a certain force’. For Anderson, atmospheres are ultimately autonomous, even though they ‘emerge from, enable and perish’ with bodies, environments and the relations between them. As spaces of affective intensity, atmospheres are challenging to translate through text, imagery or sound; even though the latter has many ‘atmospheric’ properties. Sound is particularly evocative and resonant; it also has fluid, diffusive and immersive

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tendencies. Unsurprisingly, then, sound is deemed ‘integral to the formation of atmospheres in spaces’ (Gallagher et al 2016: 626) and ‘a vital tool of spatial knowledge’ (Hemsworth 2016: 90).

Sound is both product and producer of space (Gallagher 2015; Gallagher et al 2016). It is thus a crucial medium for interrogating and understanding the spatialisation of affect *and* carceral power. However, as a method of social inquiry, sound is also limited. McFarlane (2020: 304) argues that, ‘space, sonic or otherwise, is never truly what it appears to the researcher’; there are always silences or ‘negative geographies’ that resist ‘sonic detection’, such as the camp’s fence in Boochani’s recording described above. Silence, then, can never be taken at face value. For example, Paglen (2006: 56) sought to investigate ‘the core of the prison-industrial complex’ by recording the silence that pervades ‘one of the most brutal prisons in the California system’: the Secure Housing Unit at Pelican Bay. But, Paglan realised that, in order to thoroughly understand the logics and mechanics of carceral expansion, ‘would have to look far beyond the state’s prisons and seek out their social, economic and cultural architects’ (2006; see also Story 2019). Like all modes of knowledge production, sound provides only a partial ‘picture’ of the workings of power. Listening to *how are you today* to learn more about the workings and logics of offshore detention therefore requires an expanded capacity to *hear* the negative geographies that haunt each recording: the carceral atmospheres.

### What does a checkpoint sound like?

Attending to the carceral atmospheres in *how are you today* allows us to gain a ‘thicker’ and more ‘immersive sense’ (Adey 2014: 838) of the techniques of confinement and control deployed at and through national borders. Sound recording captures some of the textures, rhythms and intensities of life in limbo, that we might not grasp through text or imagery alone. As Boochani (with Dao, 2020) explains, the work can surpass some of the limitations of ‘journalistic language’ precisely because it is a work of sound art: ‘it takes the audience inside the prison camp, just to live with them for a while’ and ‘to witness



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their lives'. In eschewing the sensationalism of short bursts and cycles of dramatic reporting, *how are you today* prompts us to instead attune to the 'slow violence' (Nixon 2011) of indefinite detention (De Souza 2020), and to the oppressive pacing of curtailed, corralled and disciplined movement.

In a recording titled, *06.10.18 Farhad, yesterday, following a group of friends visiting from East Lorengau camp as they're refused entry at Hillside House, then West Lorengau House, before being allowed to enter Hillside House*, we are moved to consider the ways that the checkpoint controls and redirects movements within carceral landscapes. At the level of text, the title of the recording indicates that checkpoints have the capacity to selectively and arbitrarily restrict physical mobilities, as the group of friends cycle back-and-forth between camps and detention centres. But how do the sounds in the field recording deepen or extend our understanding of the checkpoint's functions and power effects? Or more simply: what does a checkpoint on Manus sound like? I noted down the following description of *Farhad, yesterday, following a group of friends*, as I listened, paying attention to the way that 'sound produces affective atmospheres' that 'interface with bodies on auditory and other listening registers' (Gallagher et al 2016: 625):

Gravel crunches under rhythmic footsteps as Farhad and his friends move between the camps. The shrill song of insects gradually becomes louder as they continue to walk. Footsteps are halted. Voices emerge, initially faint in the recording, and I can (barely) make out words such as 'boys', 'immigration' and 'all good, guys?' as the Australian guard speaks. Then, the audio quality and clarity of the conversation improves, signaling a new proximity between the guard's voice and Farhad's audio recorder, as the guard initiates a brief conversation with Farhad about needing 'to get back into his art'. So, these are the sounds of negotiating with authority over one's freedom to move? Perhaps, this verbal exchange could be read as friendly, a 'softer' form of power. Although I think that is precisely what unnerves me about it, that a guard can express concern for someone's wellbeing at the same time as denying and corraling their movement; at the same time as carrying out 'violence work' (Seigel 2018) for the state. I think I hear tinges of

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condescension, hostility and paternalism in the guard's tone of voice. After the refusal of entry to Hillside, the footsteps on gravel resume. Several minutes later, the men attempt another negotiation with authority, much of which is inaudible. The Australian guard eventually concedes: "Well if you want, these guys can go back into Hillside... That's right, you can go to Hillside, that's fine, I've got permission." After re-asserting his authority over their movement (as he is permitted to do so), the guard stakes a claim for his innocence, justifying the exercise of control through a benevolent attempt at pacification: "All I was trying to do is to make it so that everyone wasn't angry". Soon after this second exchange, the recording ends.

This recording reminds us that the power and purpose of the checkpoint is not simply to confine and enclose, but to surveil and compel movement across arbitrary boundaries. The checkpoint is a tactic of biopolitical control (Puar 2018). Farhad's recording demonstrates that, at least in part, the checkpoint achieves this control *sonically*. In other words, the sounds captured in this recording do not simply emerge from the checkpoint, they also produce it. The guard's voice – ranging in tone from defensive to paternalistic – becomes a technology of spatial control (Kanngieser 2012) and the start-and-stop rhythm of the friend's footsteps embody and express disciplinary power. In this recording, we hear both the negotiations of authority over movement and sound *as* movement; each of these modalities of sound respatialise the carceral atmosphere. If, as Gallagher et al (2016: 625) explain, 'the affective aspect of sound comes precisely from the relations, exchanges and movements between bodies and environments', then the very coercive, unequal exchanges and stilted, scrutinised movements heard here reproduce 'the affective violence' of the border that 'manages asylum seekers' bodies, time and space' (Meier 2020). The checkpoint creates 'an assault on the senses' (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2016) that intensifies the policing of asylum seekers on Manus Island.

When we intuit the carcerality that implicitly envelops the recordings of *how are you today*, we gain a new appreciation of the ways in which daily interactions between individuals, environments and (geo)politics reproduce conditions of confinement, even when the

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persistence of detention is disavowed (Parker and Stern 2020). Though it is undoubtedly material, carcerality is also distinctly atmospheric, which is to say that it is permeable and unstable, and that it is felt, much like an ‘aura’ or ‘mood’ (Anderson 2009). While the guard in the recording above eventually allows the friends to pass through the arbitrary boundary, the very need for permission to move is degrading and depleting. Carceral atmospheres emerge from unfree relations between people, things, and spaces, and through intimate and institutional experiences of restraint, domination and control.<sup>4</sup> Listening to Farhad and his friends negotiate with authority over the right to move offers a momentary portal into asylum seekers’ ongoing experiences of punishment and exclusion on Manus that are otherwise rendered invisible. It also deepens our understanding of the routine violence of the state. The reorganisation of offshore detention on Manus Island is not a progressive or humanitarian development, but an extension of Australia’s persistent settler colonial practices: occupying lands it deems ‘empty’ and using performances of institutional ‘closure’ as a guise for imperial expansion (Giannacopoulos and Loughnan 2019).<sup>5</sup>

### **The (in)tangibility of carceral space and time**

Through the accumulation of ‘everyday’ soundworlds on Manus Island, *how are you today* seeks to create a space for intimate and uncomfortable engagement with ‘the weight of the detainees’ limbo’, at a time when their ongoing abandonment had ‘lapsed from public attention’ (Green 2018). When the work was produced, the Manus-based members of MRPC were living in what Giannacopoulos and Loughnan (2019) describe as ‘an open air prison’. While detainees had the capacity to move around the island during the day, they remained subject to surveillance, checkpoints, curfews and unsafe conditions, while separated from family and kin and unable to work. *how are you today* contends with this uneasy relationship between lives ‘on hold’ and in (various stages of) motion. In one recording, *16.08.18*, we follow Kazem around the busy Lorengau market on a weekend, filled with the loud noises of a bustling site of local commerce, and in

another recording published two weeks' later, *30.08.18*, we pace with Kazem on a weeknight around the East Lorengau compound, quiet but for his footsteps and the echoes of insects and frogs. Presented with such contrasting and quotidian soundscapes, our capacity to 'earwitness detention' (Rae et al 2019) might be compromised, lest we embrace an expanded framework for understanding carceral spaces and experiences as embodied, affective and often diffuse.

At the time of writing, as I listen to this work in its online archive form, keeping track of the diffusion and the fate of those who have been aggressively denied the right to seek asylum in Australia is no simple task: they are dispersed across onshore and offshore immigration detention facilities; some are imprisoned in a suburban hotel in my home city of Melbourne. Two of the men, Abdul Aziz Muhamat and Behrouz Boochani, have been granted asylum in Switzerland and New Zealand, respectively. Far from making *how are you today* less relevant, the ongoing and tumultuous developments in immigration detention may make it more so, for the archive echoes the amorphous, mutating and expansive techniques of capture at the border. Attunement to the carceral atmospheres in *how are you today* opens up new avenues for exploring the tension between the concrete and the intangible nature of carceral space. The 'enforcement archipelago' (Mountz 2011) of the Australian border relies upon a shifting 'assemblage of actors, sites, relations, and strategies' (Balaguera 2018: 660). It is not dependent upon the 'bricks and mortar' of a modern prison nor the razor wire of a camp.

As noted above, incarceration does not necessarily involve fixed infrastructure or bodily stasis (Moran et al 2013; Jefferson et al 2019). Hotels and homes can be repurposed as prisons; detainee transfers involve buses, planes, cars, trucks and boats; and the growth in electronic monitoring and surveillance signals the emergence of 'e-carceration' (Kilgore 2017). Identifying these emergent spaces and technologies as *carceral* will require that we continually develop new conceptual tools to understand confinement in order to bear witness to it. How do 'we' listen well, so that we hear the enduring scene of carceral violence – often mundane, sometimes spectacular – at, within,

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beyond, and through the border? Detention impacts profoundly upon an individual's 'social and physical mobility', but it also restrains their 'current and future life choices and possibilities' (LeBaron and Roberts 2010: 20). For asylum seekers navigating the evolving (trans)carceral spaces on Manus – and indeed, 'onshore' in Australia – the pains of imprisonment are not simply a product of closed architecture, but are manifest through existential conditions of 'indefinite stuckness' (Russell and Rae 2019).

The diverse field recordings produced for *how are you today* remind us that carceral spaces are not always fixed and totalising, nor are they monolithic. They are characterised by varied emotional topographies (Crewe et al 2013) and evolving regimes of discipline and control. Differences in target populations, surveillance techniques, administering agencies, geographical locations and more confound any attempt to generalise about the qualities of carceral space, sonic or otherwise. Accordingly, we must not speak of one, but myriad 'soundtracks of incarceration' (McKay 2019). For instance, in some carceral contexts, silence can offer a welcome reprieve, or even provide therapeutic benefits. Yet in others, it becomes an oppressive force, bearing 'down on the body as the final mark of the law' (Labelle 2010: 71). In the Syrian prison 'Saydnaya', sound artist Abu Hamdan (2019) forensically traces a torturous and deathly regime of silence (Parker 2020). Whereas in New South Wales, Australia, criminologist McKay (2019) documents how the soundscape of near-constant shouting, banging, loudspeaker announcements, buzzing and jangling keys invade and disrupt any semblance of 'private' or quiet space for those imprisoned. On Manus Island, the soundtrack of incarceration catalogued for *how are you today* varies widely: the rush and trickle of water in a shower, music playing through the speakers of a mobile phone, traffic noises from a balcony. Listening to these field recordings, we are struck by 'both the powerful normalcy of such activities and how radically their meaning is transformed by the violence of their setting' (Parker and Stern 2020).

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Despite their marked differences from the soundscapes catalogued by Abu Hamden or McKay above, these cannot be taken as auditory evidence of a non-violent or peaceful existence. As Boochani (with Dao 2020) highlights, when we listen to *how are you today*, we are hearing people ‘being tortured by time’, as they lose ‘their dreams’ and ‘their life’. Placing *how are you today*’s familiar and otherwise unremarkable sounds in their proper context of indefinite detention can thus help us to index the state’s weaponisation of time in carceral systems. The very structure of the work, its amassing of 14-hours’ worth of field recordings of life in limbo on Manus, reinforces the idea that carceral space is always bound up with time (Moran 2012). Temporal knowledge can help to make sense of incarceration – how long has one been detained, how much longer one will be detained, and so on—but in indefinite detention, time becomes a form of torture. Carceral atmospheres can also distort perceptions and experiences of time (Crewe 2011), as Green (2018) describes the intensity of the men’s ongoing entrapment: ‘it’s sort of this constant sense of crisis... but also this extraordinary sense of time not passing too’. These tensions between stasis and mobility, materiality and intangibility, and mundane and exceptional violence persist throughout *how are you today*. They prompt us to rethink not only our understandings of spaces of confinement, but also the ways that the spaces in which we listen to the work are altered and remade by the soundscapes of detention.

### Conveying and creating atmospheres

If an atmosphere is a ‘shared ground’ that is ‘located in between experiences and environments’ (Bille et al 2015: 32) and a carceral atmosphere is produced by technologies of confinement, then *how are you today* both conveys *and* creates atmospheres. Curated spaces such as the gallery, or an online archive, do not produce carceral atmospheres *per se*, but calculate and convey them through aesthetic objects, which in turn elicit feelings amongst spectators and listeners that generate *new* atmospheres. By engaging with *how are you today*, in the gallery or online, one can sense, reflect upon or consume a carceral atmosphere. For

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instance, Turner and Peters (2015) discuss how prison museums act as sites for the production and consumption of carceral atmospheres. For them, the term 'atmosphere' connotes the 'more pervasive, intangible and complex sensations designed, engineered, co-constituted and also arising unexpectedly' from particular sites (Turners and Peters 2015: 309). Through particular arrangements of sound, light, colour and text in the gallery (and the online archive), the producers and curators of *how are you today* attempt to create an atmosphere for listening that is reflexive and politically engaged with the ordinariness of border violence, as opposed to the 'quick' consumption of violent images or 'soundbites' of refugee displacement.

When installed as an artwork in semi-public galleries, or when streamed from the online archive via the privatising medium of headphones, *how are you today* functions as a sonic archive of carceral atmospheres on Manus and generates new spaces of intensity. As Gallagher (2015: 560) argues, 'field recordings are both representational and performative, their playback doubling or hybridising space in the present through sound performed by an ensemble of audio machines'. A 'performative reiteration' of another soundworld (in the gallery, or in the online archive) can create new spatial and emotional intensities. Sound has the capacity to subtly or dramatically alter the mood of ambience of a space: 'pitches, tones, volumes, frequencies and rhythms... penetrate and travel through material and immaterial matter across distances, filling spaces within and between bodies' (Feigenbaum and Kanngieser 2015: 82). As it fills the space of a gallery with sound – or perhaps more accurately, as the sound produces the space – the field recordings that make up *how are you today* create a mood or ambience that is dependent upon but distinct from the carceral atmospheres conveyed in the recordings. However, galleries are far from neutral vessels. Historically, along with museums, art galleries have played important roles in shoring up the racial hierarchies that underpin settler colonialism (Kosasa 2011; Lynch and Alberti 2010); arbitrating cultural inclusion and exclusion along lines of class, gender and race (Coffee 2008); and reinforcing distance between spectators and those represented in such spaces (e.g. the punished, the expelled, and so on)

(Walby and Piché 2011). These exclusionary effects might not be able to be fully overcome, but they might be challenged through practices of creative and collaborative exchange across borders.

### **Archives of resistance and transborder solidarities**

In our quiet encounter with the acoustics of sustained exile, *how are you today* nudges or perhaps compels us to consider the flipside: what are the soundworlds that might weaken and denaturalise the violence of the border? Engaging with carceral atmospheres – as unfixed, evolving and interdependent – invites us to remember the contingency of the social-spatial power arrangements that (re)constitute detention and their potential for disruption. Indeed, *how are you today* is a sonic archive of both stuckness and activism, documenting various ways in which asylum seekers creatively and collaboratively challenge the violence of Australia's secretive border regime. For example, we bear earwitness to the digital activation of transborder solidarity and an act of speaking 'back to power' while exiled on Manus Island in *02.09.18 Aziz, last weekend, making a speech to a protest in Melbourne via phone*. Although physically absent and excluded from participating in public protest 'onshore', Aziz uses mobile phone technology to share his analysis of Australian politics from Manus Island in 'real-time'. His voice spreads and fills the space of protest, connecting 'onshore' protestors to those corralled 'offshore', challenging any preconceived notions of refugees as 'passive' victims and overcoming, at least in part, the isolating and exclusionary structure of offshore detention. It is also likely that Aziz's speech altered and remade the atmosphere of the protest and of detention on Manus, connecting them through an energised, audible exchange. Other field recordings remind us that carceral atmospheres are not overwhelmed by the repressive violence of the state but patterned and antagonised by daily acts of political resistance. In *28.08.18, Aziz speaks to a man on hunger strike*; in *14.09.18 Behrouz converses with a visiting refugee advocate from Australia*; Aziz convinces others to sign a petition in *25.09.18*; and organizes for sick people to see doctors in *18.09.18*. Text, sound and voice work together in these recordings to frame the critique and condemnation of immigration detention that



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is embedded in this project. In these ways, *how are you today* becomes an archive of the political and 'acoustical agency' (Rice 2016) of asylum seekers forcibly transferred to Manus Island. By capturing these daily practices of resistance, the work provides an historical record of cross-border campaigning against the secretive and unaccountable system of offshore detention.

Through its very means of production, *how are you today* illustrates the potentialities of transborder solidarity as a means of exposing the violence of border entrapment. The work is a product of sustained relationship-building amongst the collective that created it. As an installation, it is not 'self-enclosed', but dependent on relationships – political, material, technological, and emotional. These relationships signify resistance to the isolation and expulsion inherent to the regime of offshore detention, yet they aren't romanticised in the work. Instead, there is an attentiveness to the vast gap in conditions and worlds between 'onshore' and 'offshore' artists. This 'gap' is accentuated by the occurrence of lags and delays in the transmission of audio files between Manus and Melbourne, which give rise to titles in the archive with delayed temporal notations such as *29.07.18 Kazem, a couple of days ago, talking to Mansour in the East Lorengau camp* and *07.08.18 Samad, last week, listening to waves and trying to relax*. At times the lag may have challenged the project's aim of increasing the immediacy of sonic exchange through 'swift upload to the gallery' (Parker and Stern 2020). This aim is worthwhile, since the 'veracity gap' created by the prerecorded, highly curated and produced format of the podcast can inhibit the audience's capacity to form a connection with its creators, as Rae et al (2019) point out in an analysis of *The Messenger* podcast. However, in the minimally-edited *how are you today*, the uneven pacing of the flow of recordings, and the 'time lapse' that often emerges, allows for further reflection upon the many barriers to timely and efficient delivery of audio files from Manus – barriers that are technological, bureaucratic, systemic and personal. The order in which the recordings appear in *how are you today* is not consecutive, nor does it follow a clear pattern. Much like the carceral atmospheres the work conveys, the way it unfolds is somewhat unpredictable and inconsistent.

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Through an emphasis on atmospheres, I don't want to imply that carceral conditions are entirely immaterial or subjective – although they are these things, and more. Rather, I want to use *how are you today* as an opportunity to reflect on the aesthetic and sensorial dimensions of carceral spaces, to account for the ways in which 'infrastructures, bodies and events collide and fracture to engender particular affective environments and states' (Feigenbaum and Kanngieser 2015: 80) in carceral settings. The gradual and progressive cumulation of a carceral atmosphere through *how are you today* reinforces the proposition that carceral spaces are not static, fixed or immutable. They are shifting and relational; they are geographically specific and sutured to the local cultures and economies in which they are non-consensually sited; and they are continually remade and unmade through power negotiations waged on various scales (local, national, transnational). Developing an awareness of carceral spatial power as *in flux* can remind us of its impermanence and instability. *how are you today* allows us to listen for the everyday interactions that sustain the prison or the camp not as a concrete or wire-fence structure, but a set of social and political relations. The subtle, pervasive and permeable qualities of carceral power detected in these field recordings might render this power more insidious; but it also provides scope for resistance in everyday (and extraordinary) scenes of mutual support, creative exchange and cross-border solidarity. Much like atmospheres, the techniques of power involved in incarceration are continually ruptured and recuperated through reformation and expansion. Fracturing any preconceived notions of detention, *how are you today* provides but one opportunity to attune to this process of carceral contortion at the border and earwitness daily acts of survival.

## **Carceral atmospheres on Manus Island: Listening to how are you today**

### **Endnotes**

1. At the time of production of *how are you today*, this collective was comprised of six men confined to Manus Island by the Australian government: Abdul Aziz Muhumat, Samad Abdul, Shamindan Kanapathi, Kazem Kazemi, Farhad Bandesh and Behrouz Boochani. The artwork was commissioned by James Parker and Joel Stern for the *Eavesdropping* exhibition, held at the Ian Potter Museum of Art at the University of Melbourne between 24 July and 28 October 2018. The work was produced and mixed in Melbourne by André Dao, Michael Green and Jon Tjhia.
2. The archive is available and ordered chronologically at: <https://manusrecordingproject.com/how-are-you-today>
3. *Belden Norman Namah, MP Leader of the Opposition and Ors v The Independent State of Papua New Guinea* [2020] SC1998.
4. This framing suggests that carceral atmospheres might be a productive addition to anti-carceral feminist conceptualisations of a ‘carceral continuum’ of gender violence – whereby women and non-binary people experience forms of intimate violence in the home, on the street, and in the prison that are remarkably continuous or cyclical (though distinct). See: Carlton B and Russell EK (2018) *Resisting Carceral Violence* Palgrave Cham: 103-132, Harris AP (2011) ‘Heteropatriarchy kills: Challenging gender violence in a prison nation’ *Washington University Journal of Law & Policy* 37/1: 13-65.
5. The appropriation of islands for use as prisons is not new in Australia. The prototype has long been tested on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with horrific consequences: before Manus and Nauru, there was Palm Island, Rottneest Island, and more.

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