Editorial

Prison Writing / Writing Prison in Canada

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My prison window is not large
Five inches high, six inches wide,
Perhaps seven.
Yet it is large enough to show
The whole unfettered to and fro
Of heaven. How high, how wide is heaven?
Five inches high, six inches wide,
Perhaps seven.
—Joe Wallace,"How High, How Wide?"

One of the few traits of prison writing that critics consistently agree upon is that it both inscribes confinement and also writes beyond it, at times in a liberatory gesture. Yet as Joe Wallace, a political activist, shows in the poem above, which was written after twenty-eight days of solitary confinement in Canada's Petawawa Prison in 1941, prison has a way of foreclosing on concrete and imaginative space, even for the most transcendent of spirits.[1] The following collection unfolds several approaches to prison as both metaphor and experience: French discourse analysis of scripted confinement and subversion of the law of silence in writings by the Marquis de Sade and Hubert Aquin (Marion); a riveting interview with anthropologist Hugh Brody on his strategies of filming First Nations carceral subjects involved in self-harm and healing (Rymhs); a feminist reading of prison space and generic diversity in Margaret Atwood's postmodern novel *Alias Grace* (Toron); and a contextualization of "imaginative emancipation" and mythic structures in previously unpublished prison notes by the Inuit author known as "Thrasher, Skid Row Eskimo" (Martin and McKegney). Having neither style, nor context, nor implied audience, nor ideology in common,

these varied critical responses to an even more diverse corpus do meet, nonetheless, around the scripting of prison. They speak to and about confinement, expose the carceral state, trouble the prisoner's identity and voice, and invoke pertinent space and collectivities beyond as well as within prison walls.

Prisoners are not as isolated from literary cultures in this country as much as one might believe; it is literary criticism that has yet to catch up with these rich cross-pollinations. The critical neglect of writing by and about prisoners in Canada is all the more perplexing if one considers that internationally one of the most frequently cited sources on prison writing is *Writers in Prison* (1990) by Canadian sociologist Ioan Davies. Focusing on the significance of utterance among prisoners, although largely limiting his corpus to famous imprisoned writers, Davies provides a sustained and theoretically dense reflection on rhetorical and aesthetic strategies that has not yet been surpassed. Davies recognizes that the study of prison writing should entail the study of many minority languages outside dominant discourse and the translation of prison experience between the lines and through recurring tropes and discursive strategies. Besides using the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin and Pierre Bourdieu, Davies also draws on the pragmatic insight of the Canadian criminologist and editor of a prison journal, Robert Gaucher. Gaucher's approach to reading and writing confinement is a response to the problems of actually living in prison. Recent interdisciplinary work by Jason Haslam in Canada on "fitting sentences" and "captivating subjects" has successfully combined formal concerns to give a global overview of prison writing with a critique of nationhood and citizenship. A recent turn toward more sustained analyses of the narrative techniques of writing prison in Canadian literary studies has been influenced by a cross-fertilization from the fields of postcolonial, gender, and Indigenous studies. Deena Rymhs' *From the Iron House* (2008) pioneered the analysis of Indigenous subjects writing the carceral subject from a place of disproportionate representation in Canadian prisons and from residential schools as well, preceded in 2007 by Sam McKegney's reflections on incarceration in residential schools, cultural genocide, and community healing in *Magic Weapons*. Yet the critical responses to prison writing and writing prison in Canada are relatively few given the corpus.

Despite an insistent outpouring of writing by Canadian prisoners, few readers in Canada know about the voluminous body of writing published in prison serials and "joint magazines." Active since the 1950s, the penal

press continues to publish prisoners' work in the face of severe funding limitations and the constant shuffling of inmates.[2] In addition to magazines and newsletters published directly from prison, publications like *Words from Inside* (an annual anthology published by the Prison Arts Foundation), *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* (a peer-reviewed journal published from the University of Ottawa), and *Prison Journal* (a periodical jointly published by the Institute for the Humanities and the Prison Education Program at Simon Fraser University)[3] have sought to bridge imprisoned and non-imprisoned readerships. While the prison and the outlaw have been a fascination for many of Canada's major authors, the writing of prisoners is almost entirely absent from the literary archives that we construct. This paucity of criticism is curious given the number of major Canadian authors who have corresponded or collaborated with men and women serving time in Canadian prisons. Roch Carrier, Lorna Crozier, Timothy Findley, Robert Kroetsch, Patrick Lane, Evelyn Lau, Margaret Laurence, Hugh MacLennan, Susan Musgrave, and Sharon Pollock are but a few of the authors who have worked with or published their writing alongside prisoners.

While our hope with this issue is to generate greater critical interest in prison literature in Canada, there exists a rich dialogue between Canadian prison writing and prison writing internationally—a dialogue that points to the transnational currents of prison literature. Letters from prisoners in well-known US prisons such as Attica, Marion, and Leavenworth, as well as from places as far away as Northern Ireland, appear in the newsletters published from Canadian prisons. August 10 marks Prison Justice Day, a now internationally observed memorial for Eddie Nalon, who bled to death in 1974 in his segregation cell in Millhaven, a maximum-security prison in Ontario. On this day, prisoners in Canada, United States, England, France, and Germany commemorate Nalon's death by fasting and refusing to work. This sense of an expanded political community emerges in writing by Indigenous prisoners as well. Since the 1960s, Indigenous prisoners in Canada have used the penal press to raise the intellectual and political consciousness of other prisoners, organizing letter-writing campaigns for the release of Leonard Peltier,[4] or supporting Indigenous land claims in Brazil. Their writings suggest a political imaginary that exceeds the boundaries of the nation-state. The 1969 occupation of Alcatraz—a structure that stood as a symbol of colonial oppression—represented a pan-indigenous struggle for sovereignty.[5] The prison is a place that seems to dissolve political geographies as they are conventionally conceived.

The prison has captured the imagination of Canadian writers, but perhaps the prison may too easily lend itself to metaphor at the expense of that literature written by individuals who have lived the experience of incarceration. Prisoners' writing performs a crucial role in exposing state mechanisms of control and in disentangling practices of punishment from values of justice and benevolent society by which they are often promoted. The value of this writing is more than symbolic, however. We need further discussion of the rhetorical and aesthetic strategies prison authors employ, the juridical and legal interventions they effect through their writing, and the material and social contexts of this literature's production and distribution. Despite, if not because of, the tenuous conditions of their production and dissemination, these texts also serve as important testimonies to life in prison—testimonies whose very publication is a wonder given the control of governments and prison administrations over what happens behind the prison's walls.

This writing also raises issues of literacy and the prison narrative as a site of an unfolding literate self. While existing scholarship on prison writing has been largely interested in prison authors who are intellectuals or members of revolutionary movements, most of Canada's prison authors are "common criminals" who become writers during their imprisonment. The class politics of this writing are an inextricable part of its discursive character and the radical consciousness often found within these texts. Approximately fifty-five percent of individuals entering Canadian federal prisons test below Grade Ten literacy levels. The rate of illiteracy in the prison creates further barriers to publishing, while it perhaps explains why a great deal of prison writing tends to be collaborative. In "Can the Penitentiary Teach the Academy How to Read?" H. Bruce Franklin makes the case that American prison writing forces us to view not just "incarceration, social justice, and literacy" but also "fundamental questions about literature itself . . . from the bottom up instead of from the top down" (648). In making this claim, Franklin interrogates ideas of "good literature" and argues the connection between "aesthetic standards" and "class, gender, and ethnic values" (648). Avery Gordon pushes this argument further by underlining the obvious (but downplayed) complicity of critical discourses with institutions of privilege—a complicity that makes it necessary to reflect on the ways in which critical discourse cedes to the legitimacy of imprisonment, "the rule of law," and the "morality of innocence" (653). Michael Feith makes these complicities even clearer when he observes: "The penal system as we know it is based on a spatial dichotomy, which in turn expresses a moral one" (665).

As Canada continues to incarcerate people at higher rates than ever before—particularly women,[6] racial minorities, and the poor—prison writing will have an even more vital role to play in our discourses of nation. The literature coming from prisons has much to tell us about the experience of incarceration and the changing identity of the prison author. These works testify to the privatization of prison labour, the "warehousing" of prisoners, the lack of drug treatment programs, inadequate medical care, and extended periods in solitary confinement. The prison today is different from the prison as Foucault theorized it in 1975. Prisoners' lives—as their writing extensively attests—are today characterized by idleness, unstructured time, and neglect. "Not only is prison no panopticon," observes C. Fred Alford, "but it is in many ways its opposite, a nonopticon" (131), a place where "hold[ing] the body" (133) has become the prison's reduced function. In an era of transnational capitalism, approaching prison writing from a transnational framework might also reveal the ways in which prison systems are being transformed by global capitalism. Moreover, recent amendments to the Canadian Criminal Code reflect a changing prison system that is beginning to resemble an American one. Reduced funding for prison educational programs and an attenuated focus on rehabilitation pose increasing challenges to prison writing—challenges that make prison literature all the more important for thinking about human rights and the nations that vouch to protect them, both within and beyond the wall.

NOTES

1 Joe Wallace was jailed in Canada as a communist under the Defence of Canada Regulations during WWII. His transcendent perspective of heaven in this poem derives, no doubt, from his faith in both communist and Catholic utopias.

2 See Robert Gaucher's "The Canadian Penal Press: A Documentation and Analysis" for further discussion of the history of the penal press in Canada.

3 *Prison Journal* ceased publication in 1997.

4 The occupation drew its strength from inter-tribal collaboration. The group claiming the island named themselves "Indians of All Tribes" and identified as their spokesperson Richard Oakes, a Mohawk man from St. Regis Reserve in New York. The occupation also formulated an Indigenous rights movement within the context of global colonialisms, drawing attention to the Vietnam War while this conflict was at its crest.

5 According to Lisa Neve and Kim Pate, "[w]omen are the fastest-growing prison population worldwide" (27). Neve and Pate attribute this growth to "[t]he neoliberal deconstruction of social safety nets—from social and health services to economic and education standards and availability" (27).

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As well as four articles on prison writing, this issue includes an essay by Stephanie Oliver on Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* and one by Douglas Ivison on Lynne Coady's *Saints of Big Harbour.* Oliver's article analyses *Salt Fish Girl* by focusing on the sense of smell, a sense that she demonstrates can provide an illuminating approach to the understanding of postcolonial subjectivities represented in fiction. Ivison argues that Coady's novel shows how globalization has disrupted traditional identifications for Atlantic Canadians and suggests that this disruption means that traditional concepts of regional writing should be rethought. —Margery Fee