

Idle Hands and The Long Hours:  
The BC Penitentiary and its Place in BC Labour History

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Canada has long been viewed as a land of freedom and a haven from slavery. Much of the history that is taught in Canada emphasises its role as a liberator, exalting Canadian abolitionists involved in the American Underground Railroad and focusing on examples of the “Canadian dream” of (mainly white) immigrants arriving penniless on this fertile land and establishing themselves as members of a proto-middle class. For most Canadians, the only stories of this nation’s use of incarceration for profit comes from reading between the lines of the accounts from residential schools which stole thousands of Indigenous children from their families and native lands as part of a mission of assimilation (read: ethnic cleansing) and economic development (read: profit-mongering by way of child labour).

However, surprising to many Canadians is the fact that our history of imprisonment predates even the founding of our country. Kingston Penitentiary, known as British North America’s first penitentiary, was built through 1833 and 1834 which is a full 33 years before Confederation established the identity of a united country called Canada.<sup>1</sup> The length and relative obscurity of this history begins to suggest the focus of this article: incarceration is never simply about punishment for a crime, and has been co-opted by the capitalist state to serve as a captive labour force. The main lens through which this article will explore Canada’s forced prison labour is through the history of the BC Penitentiary.

The idea of a large swath of the Canadian population being held in bondage for the purposes of profit (on an average day in 2016 there were 40,147 adults in custody)<sup>2</sup> seems inherently antithetical to the “Canada the liberator” model described above, however Canada itself has acknowledge, perhaps unintentionally how its prisons contribute to the problem of

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<sup>1</sup> Johann W. Mohr and Mona T. Duckett, “Prison,” The Canadian Encyclopedia, February 7, 2006, accessed June 22, 2018, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/prison/>.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada, "Adult Correctional Statistics in Canada, 2013/2014," Average Counts of Offenders in Federal Programs, Canada and Regions, March 19, 2018, , accessed August 26, 2018, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2015001/article/14163-eng.htm>.

forced labour.<sup>3</sup> The International Labour Organization (ILO) has two conventions on forced or compulsory labour, which are among the most highly ratified ILO conventions.<sup>4</sup> Article 1(1) of the *Forced Labour Convention No. 29* ratified in 1930 requires each of the 163 signatory countries, including Canada, “to suppress the use of forced or compulsory labour in all its forms,” meaning that “all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily” taking place within Canada violates international human rights conventions.<sup>5</sup> To ensure there was no confusion amongst the signatory nations as to where forced labour was most often found within their countries, the Director-General of the ILO explained in a report in 2001 that “prison labour and rehabilitation through work” fit the model of forced labour.<sup>6</sup>

What forced labour in Canadian prisons looks like in practice, particularly in a historical context is somewhat difficult to ascertain. Many of Canada’s prisons are as old or older than the country, and so in many places the historical record is incomplete. What is known is that in the earliest days of Canada’s correctional system in the 19th century, prisons were little more than detention centres attached to courthouses and they were used mostly for “holding debtors for the civil process” as well as some accused persons awaiting trial.<sup>7</sup> As previously mentioned, the first large prison opened in Kingston, Upper Canada in June 1835 and was “designated to serve Upper and Lower Canada by the Act of Union in 1840.”<sup>8</sup> By 1867 Saint John, New Brunswick and Halifax, Nova Scotia also had penitentiaries, and in 1880 Dorchester penitentiary was built in the Maritimes.<sup>9</sup> The penitentiaries of Saint-Vincent-de-Paul in Québec

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<sup>3</sup> Julie Reitano, "Adult Correctional Statistics in Canada, 2015/2016 Adult Correctional Statistics in Canada, 2015/2016," Average Counts of Offenders in Federal Programs, Canada and Regions, March 01, 2017, accessed July 22, 2018, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2017001/article/14700-eng.htm#n7>.

<sup>4</sup> ILO, Stopping Forced Labour: Global Report under the Follow-up to the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, Report 1 (B), ILC, 89th Sess. (2001) [Report ILO Stopping Forced Labour].

<sup>5</sup> Convention No. 29, supra note 14.

<sup>6</sup> Report ILO, Stopping Forced Labour, supra note 59.

<sup>7</sup> Mohr and Duckett, “Prisons,” The Canadian Encyclopedia.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

(1873), Stony Mountain in Manitoba (1874), the BC Penitentiary in New Westminster, BC (1878), alongside Prince Albert in Saskatchewan (1911), completed a chain of fortresslike prisons across Canada.<sup>10</sup> What historical record does exist in places like Kingston shows that debates about prisons and their role as either punishers or rehabilitators has been continuously argued since the opening of Canada's prisons.

According to French philosopher and intellectual historian Michel Foucault, prisons originated partly as a result of public abhorrence to the infliction of bodily pain (read: torture and public executions) and the exposure of offenders to public ridicule and shame. Penitentiaries were meant to lead the offender to penitence through isolation, silence and religious instruction and as such were meant to reflect the values of Canadian society. Work followed penitence as the major condition for salvation, but it was the work regime, often involving meaningless tasks and submission to rules, that was important.<sup>11</sup>

This disquieting theory is part of the larger idea of the prison industrial complex (PIC) and what Katherine Beckett and Naomi Murakawa call the 'shadow carceral state'. The term "prison industrial complex", derived from the "military industrial complex" of the 1950s,<sup>12</sup> is used to describe the attribution of the rapid expansion of the inmate population to the political influence of private prison companies such as Correctional Services Canada's CORCAN program which "[operates] in a business-like manner while respecting government policies and regulations" like ILO *Convention No.29* by forcibly employing inmates in manufacturing, textiles, construction, and other services.<sup>13</sup> The shadow carceral state refers to a collaboration of state institutions that operate alongside and often serve as entry points into the penal system

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, "Discipline & Punish - Panopticism," Foucault, Info., accessed July 22, 2018, <https://foucault.info/documents/foucault.disciplineAndPunish.panOpticism/>.

<sup>12</sup> Alex Friedmann, "The Societal Impact of the Prison Industrial Complex, or Incarceration for Fun and Profit—Mostly Profit", *Prison Legal New*, 15 January 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Correctional Service of Canada, Communications, "CORCAN - Overview," Correctional Service Canada / Service Correctionnel Canada, January 15, 2013, , accessed July 25, 2018, <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/corcan/002005-0001-eng.shtml>.

at the heart of the PIC.<sup>14</sup> The lack of reliable information about the going-ons of places like the BC Penitentiary can be attributed to the shadow carceral state as an effort to create a sense of complacency in punishment and labour historians researching the scope of Canada's prison labour, and such complacency in turn diverts attention away from the dawning of the PIC in Canadian penal history which is an imperative part of the story when examining the history of the BC Penitentiary (known as the BC Pen) and its associations with prison labour as well as with inmate arts and craftsmanship

As a way to more fully explore these themes, we will examine the evidence available regarding labor and production at the British Columbia Penitentiary. This institution opened in 1878 and closed in 1980. It was the Canadian government's first federal penitentiary west of Manitoba and was a maximum security facility.<sup>15</sup> During the 102 years of the BC Pen's operation, many changes came and went in regards to how prisons were conceptualized and run and the BC Pen experienced those changes along with the other federal penitentiaries in Canada. As mentioned previously, prior to 1920, corrections in Canada were far less regulated and punishments were often harsh, public, and involved physical punishments like whipping, branding, etc. It was in 1789 that the concept of the penitentiary was introduced by Quaker groups in the United States. An article written by the Government of Canada on the history of Canadian corrections states that,

*“They [Quakers] felt it was possible to make offenders “penitent” and put them back on the straight and narrow by segregating them through imprisonment and offering them opportunities for labour and reflection.”<sup>16</sup>*

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<sup>14</sup> Katherine Beckett and Naomi Murakawa, "Mapping the Shadow Carceral State: Toward an Institutionally Capacious Approach to Punishment," *Theoretical Criminology* 16, no. 2 (2012), doi:10.1177/1362480612442113.

<sup>15</sup> Jack David Scott, *Four Walls in the West: The Story of the British Columbia Penitentiary*. Retired Federal Prison Officers' Association of British Columbia, 1984.

<sup>16</sup> Government of Canada, "History of the Canadian Correctional System," <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/educational-resources/092/ha-student-etudiant-eng.pdf>

Penitentiaries established in Canada, were places where “inmates were subjected to a strict regime of forced labour during the day and confinement at night and during “leisure” times, with food often limited to bread and water.”<sup>17</sup>

From the 1920s to the 1960s, correctional philosophy slowly shifted towards a more sympathetic model which “emphasize[d] crime prevention and offender rehabilitation.”<sup>18</sup> During this period, the prevailing belief was that criminality could be “diagnosed” and “treated” just as any other kind of illness could be. This medical model was “referred to as the “rehabilitative ideal,” a correctional philosophy deeply rooted in the idea that prison inmates could be reformed and returned to the free world as law-abiding citizens.”<sup>19</sup> It is during this period of time that most of the evidence (both objects and written sources) that we have from the BC Pen, originates.

There were two sides to production at the BC Pen. One was the mandatory labour required of the inmates in the prison’s various workshops. The other is the production of hobby craft items which the inmates did voluntarily in their spare time.

The mandatory labour was required of all inmates, and before January 1, 1935, it was completely unpaid. Inmates were not given any compensation for their work; they were simply expected to do it. Not only to keep busy but also because the prison system could benefit from their labour. Inmates knew and felt that they were being exploited and on several occasions refused to work at all, a behaviour which was treated with severity. In March 1933 some inmates refused to work and The Columbian newspaper reported that “they were taken in hand by Warden, H.W. Coop, and dealt with.”<sup>20</sup> In another incident in September 1934 seven inmates who were assigned to the mail bag room refused to work and were taken back to their

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<sup>17</sup>Government of Canada, “History of the Canadian Correctional System,”<http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/educational-resources/092/ha-student-etudiant-eng.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Phelps, Michelle S. “Rehabilitation in the Punitive Era: The Gap between Rhetoric and Reality in U.S. Prison Programs.” *Law & society review* 45.1 (2011): 33–68. *PMC*. Web. 25 Aug. 2018.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Scott, 63.

cells. Just over a week later they were joined by 78 other inmates who also refused to work. The warden at the time reported that the reason for the 'strike' was that the prisoners wanted better living conditions, however the press reported that the prisoners had been shouting "wages, wages, wages" from their cells and that the real reason was that they simply wanted to be paid for their work.<sup>21</sup> In 1935 the government decided that inmates should receive 5 cents a day as compensation for their work. Even this wage was far below the average and meant that the government was able to take advantage of an extremely cheap, captive labour force.

Inmates did a variety of different work for the Pen. Firstly, they did all of the manual labour necessary to keep a building of the Penitentiary's size running. This included building maintenance, repairs and construction (there is evidence that they may have made their own construction materials like bricks), as well as garden and farm work. They did all the cooking and cleaning. Prisoners also worked in the production of finer goods including all the furnishings of the Penitentiary itself such as chairs, tables, and the wardens' desks. There was also a blacksmith shops, tailor's shop and a machine shop. There was even an inmate-run barbershop. Inmates, not just at the BC Pen, but all over Canada, produced goods and food for the government during WWII. They participated in fire protection programs and in blood donation clinics. No inmate got away without being assigned a job. Tom Hall, who was the warden during this time is quoted as saying "You could not teach all of them a trade but you had to see that they were employed. Hands not being used are troublesome hands." This however, blatantly leaves out the fact that the Pen, and the Canadian government, profited from the work done by the inmates. And not just the work, but the general time and service, if we consider the service rendered with regard to the donation of blood or fighting of fires.

Originally the work day for an inmate was 5 hours long, with lock up after 3pm. Meals at 4:00 pm were to be carried into cells, and inmates were not allowed to leave their cells after 7

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

pm, a period referred to as the “long hours”, during which many took up arts and crafts.<sup>22</sup> In the 1960s this changed to the seven-hour work day. Outside of normal work hours inmates, especially during the 1950s to 1970s at the height of the rehabilitation ideal era, inmates were encouraged to take up crafts or hobbies in their free time. These hobby crafts included needlepoint, knitting, painting, wood working and model building, furniture construction, and metal working. The BC Pen often lead the way in developing hobby related projects.

Hobby crafting allowed prisoners to pass the time but also to earn money. While there were strict regulations about the inmates time being used for the guards personal production, inmates could, and did, produce items which would be sold or given to guards and/or the public. In fact, as of April 1956, the sales of hobbycraft items made by the inmates at the BC Pen exceeded \$12,000 and portion of the penitentiary building was set aside for those hobbies which created a lot of disruptive noise. However, we were unable to determine with certainty if all the profits of the crafts were returned to their respective artists.<sup>23</sup> Different hobbies had their own studio or workshop. In his account accompanying his personal collection (now held in Kamloops, BC), former guard Anthony Martin states that he personally “bought these items [which make up the collection] from a convict named Meyer, nicknamed Frenchy Meyer, in the early 1960’s.”<sup>24</sup> This seems innocent enough until we consider that the guards and the government were given significantly cheaper or even free products from the prisoners. This inherently creates a power imbalance within the system. Moreover, one cannot look at the Canadian prison system without noting the historic and contemporary power dynamics; including the legacy of white supremacy and colonialism in Canada and the historical abuse found in federal prisons

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<sup>22</sup> P.J. Murphy, "The Anthony Martin BC Penitentiary Collection At the Old Courthouse, Kamloops, BC," Anthony Martin Archives, 2012, 23, accessed August 26, 2018, <https://anthonymartinarchive.files.wordpress.com/2016/08/the-anthony-martin-bc-penitentiary-collection-at-the-old-courthouse-kamloops-bc-complete.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> Scott, 63.

<sup>24</sup> Murphy, P. J. The Anthony Martin BC Penitentiary Collection at the Old Courthouse, Kamloops, BC. Kamloops, B.C.: Thompson Rivers University, 2012.



such as the BC Pen, which was once considered the most dangerous and violent federal penitentiaries in Canada.<sup>25</sup> We do not have solid figures for the number of racialized inmates in the BC Pen during its operating years, however we uncovered many examples of Indigenous and Asian artworks within the inmate collections.

Many more of these items have found their way into homes in New West, or have been sold across the world. With so much time on their hands, inmates could afford to hone their skills and many became very good at their chosen hobby. However despite this, it was never to be forgotten that the inmates were just that. Prisoners. Artistic works were often signed by the prisoner with their 4 digit number rather than their name, which in itself was a reminder of who the artist really was and of their place in society. This certainly suggests a sense of dehumanization of the inmates, as if they were simply cogs in a machine of production.

This problem of how people are kept busy in prison and the issues surrounding the fact that inmates are a captive workforce who cannot simply quit, continues to the present day. Only recently there have been news stories about how many of the individuals fighting fires which devastated the Canadian landscape every summer are inmates of various types of penal institutions.

At its core, prison labour is purely ideological under the notion of penitence through industry and hard work in order to prove one's worth in the fabric of society. Generally, the public views prisoners in an unsympathetic light, which encourages the government to capitalize on these "tough on crime" attitudes to transform prisons into industrial complexes. Hence, prison labour is an attractive alternative under the belief that labour is rehabilitative and it "builds character" to reintroduce incarcerated individuals into society. In other words, it fulfills society's ideals of punishment and rehabilitation, shunning any sense of culpability in exploiting those who were failed by the system. The stigma attached to incarcerated

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<sup>25</sup> Belyk, Robert. 2006. "Death Sentence: the New Westminster Penitentiary." *British Columbia History*.

individuals only serves to perpetuate and abuse these ideologies by having inmates work in physically and psychologically taxing conditions. Thus, labour becomes an oppressive tool to render inmates into docile and inexhaustible servants for private, industrial interests which damages not only those workers within prison walls but also anyone working in prison industries freely who are unable to compete with prison sweat labour prices. Especially, with the disproportionate amount of inmates are people of colour and the disenfranchised, the exploitation of their labour continues the colonial legacy of dehumanization and enslavement.<sup>26</sup>

### Theoretical Connections to Race - Historical and Contemporary

Race makes things difficult, especially in a system that is already inherently built in power differential. We cannot look at the prison system without noting the dynamic between inmate and guard, the historical abuse found in federal prisons such as the British Columbia Penitentiary (B.C. Pen) which was once considered the most dangerous and violent federal penitentiaries in Canada<sup>27</sup>. Add in the whitewashing of history and the racial dynamics that would have been running at an alarming rate that would translate into abuse.

Broadly speaking, it is no secret that people of colour are incarcerated at a higher rate than white people. Aboriginal people make up nearly one fourth of all Canadian inmates<sup>28</sup>. In a study that looked at incarceration rates from 2004 to 2010 noticed that while White incarnation dropped by five percent, the Black incarnation rate rose by 1.7% causing an overrepresentation in the Canadian prison system<sup>29</sup>. Part of the same study looked at where the highest rates of incarnation of people of colour and Aboriginal peoples were located; Black people were incarcerated often for robbery or sexual

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<sup>26</sup> Young, Cynthia. 2000. "Punishing Labor: Why Labor Should Oppose The Prison Industrial Complex". *New Labor Forum* No. 7 (Fall - Winter, 2000): 40-52.

<sup>27</sup> Belyk, Robert. 2006. "Death Sentence: the New Westminster Penitentiary." *British Columbia History*.

<sup>28</sup> Stats Canada. 2017. Admissions to adult correctional services, by characteristic of persons admitted, type of supervision and jurisdiction, 2015/2016. 01 03. Accessed 07 21, 2018. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2017001/article/14700/tbl/tbl05-eng.htm>.

<sup>29</sup> Douyon, Emerson . 2013. *Ethnocultural Minorities and the Canadian Correctional System*. Accessed 08 10, 2018. <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/about-us/006-4000-eng.shtml#c1>.

violence in Ontario, Quebec or Halifax at 60%<sup>30</sup>. In Quebec, Latin American or Hispanic people were mainly incarcerated for crimes including violence, murder and sexual crimes<sup>31</sup>. Asians, and Arabs are found in prisons in British Columbia or Ontario for crimes including violence, sex offenses and drug trafficking<sup>32</sup>. In comparison, white people were found guilty of all of the above crimes but faced quicker trial times and softer sentencing<sup>33</sup>.

Dr. Douyon who had authored the aforementioned study noted that “Prisoners insist that correctional officers punish Black prisoners, more frequently, more severely and for less reason than White prisoners. ...On the other hand, based on a small exploratory study, in punishing Black and White prisoners at selected Ontario institutions, staff used the power to punish differently against White and Black prisoners.”<sup>34</sup>

This leaves a very stark perspective, for all the progress that Canada has moved towards in our prison system, there is still a very strong bias towards White inmates. The race of prison guards in Canada is unknown, another statistic that is not given public release, though that could add to understanding. The differentiating power dynamics, as well as the overwhelming whiteness that gives privilege to a country that prides itself on multiculturalism. There is already an established racial dynamic with only 8.2 percent (in 2011 the latest data released) of police officers in Canada self-identifying as a visible minority<sup>35</sup>. If there is an overpopulation of visual minorities and Aboriginal peoples in our prison system, who have noted a preferential treatment towards White inmates and the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> Thomson Reuters. 2017. *Black people awaiting trial in Ontario jails spend longer in custody than white people*. 10 17. Accessed 07 31, 2018. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/race-ontario-jails-wait-trial-disparity-1.4364796>.

<sup>34</sup> Douyon, Emerson . 2013. *Ethnocultural Minorities and the Canadian Correctional System*. Accessed 08 10, 2018. <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/about-us/006-4000-eng.shtml#c1>.

<sup>35</sup> Stats Canada. 2018. "Visible minority police officers, by province and territories, Canada, 2016 and 2011." Statistic Canada. 03 08. Accessed 07 31, 2018. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2018001/article/54912/tbl/tbl01a-eng.htm>.

arresting officers are a majority White with the races of the guards' unknown-we can rightly assume there is a problem. One that has a long history within Canada.

The position of inmates while incarcerated in the B.C. Penitentiary was a precarious, letting race factor in makes situations that could make an already hard period of time in one's life nearly impossible. The power dynamic between guard and inmate historically led to abuse<sup>36</sup> ; while the factor race played into the severity of the abuse from the guards is unknown-recording keeping of that type was not well documented, and if the documentation existed, it would be hard to validate as punishment tended to be understated in records<sup>37</sup> . Historically and currently there is no official data from the Canadian government breaking down the races of inmates beyond if someone is Aboriginal or not<sup>38</sup> . This lack of official documentation has left a lot of researchers with anecdotal and sample size results limited to funding and resources. The government in order for transparency and to truly see the incarceration rates needs to record and release this series of data.

Douyon's work with a more contemporary inmate noticed that inmates who were not White understood quickly how acting "white" would improve their time in prison stating, "the behaviour "modifiers" relate in some way to these two main orientations, insofar as they are used exclusively on a proximal population (preferably a white, middle-class population). However, those who were trained in the "West" and who practise in other Ethnocultural contexts or on mixed-race, Diaspora populations, quickly understood the need to re-do their classes."<sup>39</sup>

What runs apparent throughout the history of Canadian prisons to modern day is the dynamics of power and race work to alienate Aboriginal and visible minority inmates; codeswitching to White

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<sup>36</sup> Public Affairs Division of the Canadian Penitentiary Service . 1975. *REPORT OF THE COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO EVENTS AT THE BRITISH COLUMBIA PENITENTIARY* . New Westminster: Public Affairs Division of the Canadian Penitentiary Service and the National Parole Service .

<sup>37</sup> Belyk, Robert. 2006. "Death Sentence: the New Westminster Penitentiary." *British Columbia History*., 9

<sup>38</sup> Douyon, Emerson . 2013. *Ethnocultural Minorities and the Canadian Correctional System*. Accessed 08 10, 2018. <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/about-us/006-4000-eng.shtml#c1>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

behaviour modifications to make a sentence easier. This runs into a further issue-what happens when an inmate is not heterosexual as assumed by all the statistical data released? How does this change treatment in prison and the power dynamics already in display?

### Potential/Theoretical Connecting Point to the Contemporary and Gender

At the core, prison labour is purely ideological under the notion of penitence through industry and hard work in order to prove one's worth in the fabric of society. Generally, the public views prisoners in an unsympathetic light, which encourages the government to capitalize on these "tough on crime" attitudes to transform prisons into industrial complexes. Hence, prison labour is an attractive alternative under the belief that labour is rehabilitative and it "builds character" to reintroduce incarcerated individuals into society. In other words, it fulfills society's ideals of punishment and rehabilitation, shunning any sense of culpability in exploiting those who were failed by the system. The stigma attached to incarcerated individuals only serves to perpetuate and abuse these ideologies by having inmates work in physically and psychologically taxing conditions. Thus, labour becomes an oppressive tool to render inmates into docile and inexhaustible servants for private, industrial interests. Especially, with the disproportionate amount of inmates are people of colour and the disenfranchised, the exploitation of their labour continues the colonial legacy of dehumanization and enslavement.<sup>40</sup>

With that being said, there are a plethora of ethical issues concerning race and labour, as well as issues underlying criminalization. These issues are recognized through a study of writings by Canadian prisoners who have written about their identities as inmates and being employed by prisons under the federal prison employment agency, CORCAN. The writings

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<sup>40</sup> Young, Cynthia. 2000. "Punishing Labor: Why Labor Should Oppose The Prison Industrial Complex". *New Labor Forum* No. 7 (Fall - Winter, 2000): 40-52.

of these inmates also openly criticize capitalist exploitation of the working class and reflect on issues of emasculation, in which male inmates find that they are deeply entrenched in the notion that labour is a way of reclaiming their masculinity and self sufficiency<sup>41</sup>. These notions of masculinity are supposedly aligned with normative values of society, in which productivity and efficiency is expected of men. In fact, many inmates commit crimes due to unemployment to either support themselves or family members - to many male inmates, working in prisons allowed them to be the “breadwinners.” Although, in spite of the claims of regaining male validation through physical labour and monetary gain, these work programs ultimately exploit male labour for capital greed over irrelevant and meaningless work that has little to contribute to employment skills outside of prison.<sup>42</sup>

While the general focus on the prison environment being hypermasculine and violent, little is being addressed towards female inmates. Currently, with the disproportionate amount of Indigenous women in Canadian prisons, CORCAN has yet to develop employment programs for them. Thus many studies of prison labour are often gendered and the male narrative frequently represented. In addition, the focus on male narratives and lives are in favour of these prison employment programs, with the intention of restoring normative masculinity amongst male inmates. This blatantly demonstrates the gender biases in academia and in the federal government, favouring the restoration of society’s notion of masculine responsibility. In addition, with racial tensions, it adds further depth into the preferential treatment in whom is deserving of rehabilitation and redemption, of which in the end, is a tool for exploitative labour.

Essentially, prison labour is sweat labour under the premises of exploitation and dehumanization that these inmates endured due to their race, gender, and economic

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<sup>41</sup> Rymhs, Deena. 2009. “‘Docile Bodies Shuffling in Unison’: The Prisoner as Worker in Canadian Prison Writing.” *Life Writing* 6 (3): 313–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14484520903082967>.

<sup>42</sup> Parenti, Christian. 2001. “Rehabilitating Prison Labor: The Uses of Imprisoned Masculinity.” Essay. In *Prison Masculinities*, edited by Terry Kupers, 247–254. Philadelphia: Temple.

backgrounds. In fact, with the infringement on human rights, organized labour should be opposing prison labour in the basis of poor work conditions and the treatment of inmates. The opposition should also be in recognition of the lack of value and benefits for the inmates who are seen as expendable resources. Prison labour has been around since the 1800s, which marks the lack change in modernity regarding overall attitudes toward incarcerated individuals. Politicians continue to use the media to “paint criminals as incorrigible,” and use the “emotional tenor of crime issues to appeal to their voters” to reduce chances of parole in favour of stiffer penalties and eliminating conditional sentencing (Rymhs 2009, p. 323). Such perceptions go against the ideology of rehabilitation that the Canadian prison system supposedly operates under.

Interestingly enough, Rymh’s (2009) study of written work by inmates demonstrates such introspection of capitalist avarice governing the interests of those in power at the expense of other human beings. Inmates reflect on the idea that they are not separated from the rest of society, they still remain part of and it is not a matter of them losing their freedom, rather, it is they never had the freedom to begin with. The origin of these epiphanies come from the “mind-numbing” labour the inmates are subjected to through cold and calculative structures in place under the guise of rehabilitation and reclamation of one’s place in society. The collection of such reflections spurs the idea that people are complacent and willing in their participation in an economic system that continues to oppress those who are apparently “free” unlike the inmates. All in all, the desire for social change presents itself in the voices of these inmates who criticize a system that continues to disenfranchise, exploit, and oppress the marginalized.