

Carceral Literature from the Prison to the Residential School

From the Iron House: Imprisonment in First Nations Writing

Deena Rymhs

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In this book-length study, Deena Rymhs opens onto our purview a body of literature that, despite the “pervasive theme of imprisonment in Aboriginal literature” (8), has remained remarkably understudied: Aboriginal carceral writing in Canada. For Rymhs, carceral writing here encompasses both prison writing and works written about residential school experiences. To the extent that very little scholarship exists on the topic of prison writing in Canada, and even less on the subject of Aboriginal prison writing in particular, Rymhs’ book makes an important original contribution to these fields of study. Moreover, Rymhs’ reading of “imprisonment” across the institutional settings of the prison and the residential school offers a frame of analysis that promises, at once, institutional specificity and conceptual breadth. Drawing from theory and criticism on prison writing, resistance literature, and Aboriginal literature, as well as related theoretical sources on testimony, confession, memoir, and other life writing practices, Rymhs explores the prominent place of “carceral institutions in Aboriginal literature and history” (18), while foregrounding the question of how specific Aboriginal authors have employed discursive strategies of self-representation that defy oppressive representations “by legal, judicial, and penal institutions” (125). Aboriginal authors writing out of carceral contexts have, Rymhs argues, used their writing “as a form of defence” (20); *From the Iron House* interrogates “the serviceability of different genres for authors seeking to write against the institutional discourse authorizing their containment” (108). To this end, Rymhs’ study seeks out connections between a text’s carceral setting, and its often oppositional use of genre as a means to resist identities conferred by the legal-judicial or residential school systems. Ultimately, Rymhs argues that these carceral texts—from Leonard Peltier’s *Prison Writings* and Basil Johnston’s *Indian School Days*, to the lesser-known but significant body of work published in prison collections and periodicals—comprise an important corpus of “socially engaged art” (125) that both makes use of and transforms the Western literary traditions from which it often draws.

It is through the broad conceptualization of ‘carceral’ literary production, in both the prison and the residential school, that Rymhs establishes the organizing principle of her book: the first section investigates “Genre in the Institutional Setting of the Prison,” while the

second, shorter section takes up the matter of “Genre in the Institutional Setting of the Residential School.” However, the overarching metaphor of imprisonment informs not only the structure of this study—it also foregrounds Rymhs’ project of tracing, along a “carceral continuum” (83), the multiple and overlapping sites of disciplinary containment through which Aboriginal people have been subject to historical and ongoing “colonization, criminalization, and suppression” (2). Adapted from Michel Foucault’s concept of “the carceral” as outlined in *Discipline and Punish*, Rymhs’ mobilization of the carceral continuum hangs in part on a series of continuities she establishes between the prison and the residential school as “regulatory and punitive” institutions (2). In the introduction in particular, Rymhs notes several points of intersection between these carceral settings, including their shared use of surveillance as a mechanism of control, their production of “cultural rupture” or discontinuity among the members of Aboriginal communities (3), and their comparable allocation of preassigned and racialized guilt. These continuities inform Rymhs’ textual analyses as well. For example, in her chapter on Jane Willis’ residential school autobiography, *Geniesh: An Indian Girlhood*, Rymhs remarks on the assimilationist impetus of these institutions, as well as their capacity to generate internalized forms of oppression, stating “[t]he residential school operates much like a prison: in its endeavour of acculturating the girls, it breaks them into subservience and self-abasement” (118).

Thematically compelling as these continuities may be in the literary body of carceral writing taken up here, a more sustained and reflexive meditation on imprisonment—not only as a conceptual frame and material circumstance, but also as the principal framework of analysis—would lend this study greater theoretical weight. Because this study deploys imprisonment as a contiguous condition linking two historically and institutionally specific (though not dissimilar) sites of literary production, its fascinating opening out of the material and metaphorical resonances of ‘the carceral’ across multiple texts would be more thoroughly compelling if it was more rigorously theorized. The possibilities, and also the limits, of this frame of analysis are not self-evident—they call for the same degree of attentive nuance that characterizes some of Rymhs’ most cogent readings.

In her chapter on “Auto/biographical Jurisdictions: Collaboration, Self-Representation, and the Law in *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman*,” for instance, Rymhs ably draws from Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s critical work on trauma, witnessing, and testimony in order to show how, as a collaboratively-authored and highly mediated text, *Stolen Life* performs an instance of what Leigh Gilmore has called a “limit-case”—that is, writing that tests the limits of conventional autobiographical modes of self-representation. In a book so centrally concerned with carceral writing’s capacity to “speak back” (25), this chapter’s attention to literary resistance as a mediated process makes for a welcomed complicating counterpoint to readings that, at other points in

this study, perhaps too readily posit correlations between an author's strategic adaptation of genre, and his or her successful bid for an "alternative hearing" (65). While it is undoubtedly the case that many of the texts explored in this study do find ways to intervene in an oppressive historical or legal record, adapting modes of self-representation in ways that are resistive or even transformational, Rymhs' more effective analyses remind us of the importance of keeping these texts' mediated status at the fore.

From the Iron House constitutes a timely inaugural study on carceral writing in Canada, bringing into focus a number of important texts from both well-known and lesser-known Aboriginal authors alike. This title's contribution to literary studies will surely be of interest to anyone concerned with Aboriginal life writing, prison writing, and residential school literature.