

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

McCoy, Ted. *Four Unruly Women: Stories of Incarceration and Resistance from Canada's Most Notorious Prison*. Vancouver, BC, Canada: UBC Press 2019, 148 pages, paper (9780774838887).

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In the months following the spring 2020 police shooting of George Floyd, an unarmed African-American man from Minneapolis, issues of institutional racism and mass-incarceration within both the American and Canadian criminal justice systems received renewed attention in the consciousness of the mainstream public. Critical interrogations of police forces and prisons, namely the harms caused by these institutions and their function in Western societies, has led to increased calls for decarceration and/or their abolition. One aspect of prison abolitionist discourse is the inherent dehumanizing effects of incarceration. Here, Ted McCoy's *Four Unruly Women: Stories of Incarceration and Resistance from Canada's most Notorious Prison* becomes relevant. Using four biographies of women who were incarcerated in Canada's Kingston Penitentiary between the years of 1835 and 1935, McCoy examines the poor conditions and inhumane treatment of prisoners living under disciplinary authority. He uses an impressive mix of records, case studies, and biographical methods in order to bring to life these four women's carceral experiences.

Each chapter of McCoy's book is dedicated to reconstructing and describing the prison experiences of four women: Bridget Donnelly, Charlotte Reveille, Kate Slattery, and Emily Boyle. However, these four women were not "typical" prisoners—they were constructed by prison staff as unruly women as they attempted to assert some form of agency within an institutional setting that aimed to control them through brutal means. It is precisely this unruliness that led McCoy to focus on the experiences of these four women as they represented "...the personification of conflict" (25) within the walls of Kingston Pen.

Throughout the book, McCoy describes each woman's experience with poverty, conflict with the law, time in prison, and the extreme punishments they faced while incarcerated. He discusses how paternal authority, a concept McCoy describes as the amalgamation of patriarchy and class under the governing Tory elites at the time and that

manifested itself in micro ways through the "...decisions, actions, and words" (12) of prison officials, was often carried out by the matrons of the prisons. Matrons, in this context, were women who were intended to be maternal allies to incarcerated women but who often became the personification of paternal authority itself through their disciplinary roles. Some of the (brutal) disciplinary punishments these women were subjected to include lashes, confinement in an upright coffin known as "the box", extended periods of isolation in the dungeon, and sexual assaults by prison staff. The book also discusses historical reform efforts during the time of incarceration of Bridget, Charlotte, Kate, and Emily Boyle, interweaving reform efforts and changes in punishment norms into the lived experiences of these women. McCoy ultimately seeks to connect the structural inequalities of the time to both social experience and women's entanglement within the penitentiary.

McCoy ends his book by connecting its content back to the 21<sup>st</sup> century through the case of Ashley Smith, a young white woman routinely held in solitary isolation for conduct issues who, in 2007, took her own life while prison guards watched. This connection is perhaps the book's most compelling argument. While forms of punishment within carceral institutions in Canada have evolved and have been reformed from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, they are not as far in the past as many Canadians would like to believe. Like the women in McCoy's book who suffered de facto sanctions of sexual assault by prison guards, similar allegations in contemporary Canadian corrections are not unheard of. For example, in May of 2019, three formerly incarcerated women at Nova Scotia's Institution for Women filed a civil suit that alleged sexual assault by a correctional officer during their incarcerations (Paynter 2019). These allegations signify that correctional officers committing sexual assault against prisoners is not solely an issue of the past. Appallingly, the parallel between women's incarceration experiences more than 100 years ago and the experiences of women incarcerated today, make the issues discussed in McCoy's book still relevant to the Canadian correctional context in its present form.

One limitation of McCoy's book is the lack of a distinct theoretical framework, particularly as it pertains to capitalism and the prison. In a book that highlights forced prison labour during the time of modern industrial capitalism to the benefit of the state, it is perhaps a missed opportunity by McCoy to not incorporate the notion of the prison industrial complex within his analysis. In her book *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Angela Y. Davis (2003) describes the prison industrial complex as the exploitation of prison labour by private corporations for profit, labour that is often enacted through the bodies of poor and/or racialized people. Incor-

porating such an explanatory viewpoint into his analysis of prison labour would have made for a compelling and unique opportunity to apply this concept to the Canadian context of imprisonment at the time, particularly regarding the *governmental* exploitation of prison labour through the servitude of poor incarcerated women.

Lastly, while McCoy pays close attention to gender and class, race is almost non-existent in his analysis. While this may be a function of McCoy's methodology—i.e. he selected unique cases of “unruly” women who all happened to be white—at the very least, the racial and colonial context of Canada in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries should have been incorporated into his book, particularly as it pertains to the institution of the prison. Indeed, prisons in Canada are the result of settler colonialism. One purpose of the creation of Canadian prisons was to act as a tool for the assimilation of Indigenous people. This history is still reflected in Canadian corrections today, with Indigenous women comprising up to 42 percent of those in federal custody (Office of the Correctional Investigator 2020). Ignoring this historically rooted reality and ignoring the colonial origins of Canada's prison system ultimately weakens McCoy's analysis by failing to paint a complete contextual portrait of prisons during the time period he writes about.

Despite its faults, McCoy's *Four Unruly Women* does a commendable job of centering the distinct experiences of the four women it profiles. In reconstructing these four women's experiences of incarceration, McCoy signifies to the reader that their lived experiences at Kingston Penitentiary mattered and continue to matter. This book is not always easy to read, nor should it be. Learning about the inhumane treatment of people is not a comfortable task, but it is necessary in order to remind us of the inhumane nature of imprisonment that has been all too often ignored in broader Canadian society. While the book describes women's experiences of incarceration more than 100 years ago, these experiences remain relevant today as “...the power imbalance inherent in penal institutions, combined with the marginalized status of certain prisoners, makes abuse and suffering an absolute inevitability” (McCoy 2019, 15). Perhaps it is only once we bear witness to the abuse and suffering inherent to penal institutions that we can begin to foster compassion for the incarcerated and move towards greater support for decarceration efforts in Canada.

## References

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