

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Captive Christmas: Unwrapping the third space

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Abstract

Every year, millions of people spend Christmas behind bars, yet very little scholarship examines the carceral Christmas. This research attempts to add to the literature by using over 70 years of prisoners' writings to describe how this holiday season is physically and psychologically experienced by convicts. Drawing on third space scholarship, we argue that prisoners use the manifestations of the holiday season to temporarily 'escape' the carceral milieu. More specifically, we contend that the dominant discourses, while not completely refuted, become redefined and reconstituted during the celebratory period. The typical binaries found within the prison (free/captive, inside/outside, keeper/kept), are blurred as a more liminal space emerges. Ultimately, this new imagined space provides a mechanism through which prisoners survive a carceral Christmas.

KEYWORDS

Christmas, penal press, prison, prisoners, resistance, third space

1 | INTRODUCTION

What can one think of when away from home, dressed in denim brown, and entombed in stone? Thoughts may wander to many cheerful things, but not for long. There are too many reminders that these are but thoughts, and to dwell on them is to invite the blues. Perhaps most of my thoughts will be directed not around this Christmas at all but around the one when I shall be free. (Chabot 1957, p.30)¹

In Western societies, Christmas is one of the most anticipated holidays of the year. Special effort is made to gather, give gifts, eat once-a-year delicacies, and reminisce fondly about Christmases past (Hirschman & LaBarbera, 1989). How then, does a prisoner 'celebrate' from their cell when the usual markers and festivities are not available to them?

This seemingly straightforward question finds little response in the extant literature. To be sure, there is a substantial body of research from a variety of disciplines that considers both the history and significance of Christmas and seasonal rituals to help us better understand the gendered nature and power of gift-giving, holiday-based consumerism, the secular and sacred variations in seasonal iconography and accepted forms of behaviour and sociability during the holidays (see Barnett, 1954; Belk, 1979; Caplow, 1982, 1984; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Hirschman & LaBarbera, 1989; Marling, 2000; Moschetti, 1979; Mutz, 2016; Paez et al., 2011; Pollay, 1986; Sansone & Sansone, 2011; Sinardet & Mortelmans, 2009). Unfortunately, criminological texts are rather silent. While some ethnographic accounts mention Christmas in relation to other issues (e.g., gender, mental health, parole, prison reform, racism, solitary confinement) (see Acoose, 2011; Hassine, 1997; McMaster, 1999; Rothwell, 2010; Stewart, 1997; Withrow, 1933), none provides a comprehensive analysis; we are left wondering what the Christmas season looks, sounds, and feels like for the carceral subject. Save for one lengthy personal account of carceral Christmases by Kenneth Hartman (2014), and a study of one Texas prison's celebrations (Marquart & Roebuck, 1987), there is a lacuna of information.

Given that the Canadian government only acknowledges two faith-based holidays (Christmas and Easter) as statutory,² this is a notable absence. While Easter has retained much of its religious origins, Christmas has become more secular over time, enabling the holiday to expand its reach to Christians and non-Christians alike. Indeed, Caplow (1984) argued that Christmas 'mobilizes almost the entire population for several weeks ... and takes precedence over ordinary forms of work and leisure' (pp.1306–1307). Christmas has achieved a 'seasonal cult status' which is linked 'to an individual psychological experience rooted in cultural attitudes and practices' during the holidays (Barnett, 1946, p.51). As such, examining how the presence of prison bars condition the holidays – in both material and non-material ways – is an important facet to understanding the whole carceral experience.

2 | METHODS

The penal press began in Canada in 1950 and since then, there have been over 200 distinct publications (Clarkson & Munn, 2021) targeted at both an incarcerated and a public audience. Of the content of the penal press, Russell Baird (1967) wrote:

most of the attention of a prison newspaper is devoted to inmate activities: sports events, movies and other entertainment, personal items, blood banks, school and organizational activities, hobbies, and the like. (p.71)

These prisoner-written and produced newsletters not only provided a first-hand account of the carceral experience but, as Clarkson & Munn (2021) demonstrated, the medium was also used to advocate for some, and resist other, penal reforms. A piece in the July 1955 *CB Diamond* newsletter summarised the role of the press:

I am the Penal Press. I attempt to speak to the masses on behalf of the man and the youth locked up in prison. I am their appointed agent. I am their messenger. ... and it is my duty to percolate, to infiltrate, to exhort, to improve, to impart, and to deprecate. I am the servant of the prisoner. I am his mouthpiece. (p.4)

Gaucher (1999) argued that the press served a larger purpose. He contended that these primary source documents are reflections of both the social world and 'the confining carceral culture that frames their production and against and through which they are written' (p.14).

This analysis included 169 newsletters issued between November 1950 and February 2021. We focused on issues immediately preceding 25 December and the two months following when reports of seasonal happenings were most likely to be included.³ Some editions were specifically Christmas-themed while others were punctuated by articles describing the season. This swath of material included newsletters up to 105 pages and covered 50 individual publications from 28 federal institutions across Canada (see Table 1 for details). These are largely from male prisons as up until 2000, there was only one institution for federally-sentenced women in Canada.

Materials were assigned 'interpretive tags' which were 'based on categories or themes relevant to the research' (Cope, 2003, p.445). At this level of analysis, our main objective was to attain a general understanding of what the prisoners said ('in vivo codes') and our own understanding of the ideas expressed ('constructed codes') (Jackson, 2001, p.202). We developed a coding manual that was augmented as new themes emerged, resulting in a guide with twelve distinct categories and 28 subcategories. Next, a 'horizontal' analysis (Pires, 1997) was conducted to examine the similarities and differences across the various publications. Using this process allowed us to:

identify the intentions and other characteristics of the communicator; ... reflect cultural patterns of groups, institutions, or societies; reveal the focus of individual, group, institutional, or societal attention; and describe trends in communication content. (Weber, 1990, p.9)

3 | ANALYSIS

Recollections and rich descriptions in the penal press transported its readership behind bars, offering a glimpse at the material and non-material aspects of Christmas in prison. Apparent in these newsletters was prisoners' creation of a space that was 'simultaneously real and imagined and more' (Soja, 1996, p.11). During the holidays, the carceral environment was transformed and a third space⁴ 'which gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation' (Bhaba, 1994, p.211) emerged. The Christmas season allowed prisoners to move beyond the free/captive binary and metaphorically and temporarily escape the penal space (Fleetwood, 2020). The pages of the penal press provided support for Crewe et al.'s (2014) assertion that in this liminal space:

the dominant institutional discourse is both 'recognised' and re-colonised, enabling prisoners to resist feelings of institutionalisation and retain (or regain) some sense of personhood. Prison rules and regulations are re-shaped, often with the collusion of staff, in ways that find creative solutions to everyday problems. The outcome is a figurative space ... whose carceral texture is somewhat diminished. (p.5)

TABLE 1 List of publications used in analysis, 1950–2020

Institution	Publication Name	Institution	Publication Name
Bath	<i>Bath Tymes</i>	Matsqui	<i>Tarpaper</i>
British Columbia	<i>Transition</i> <i>Open Doors</i>		<i>Catch 22</i>
Beaver Creek	<i>Lodestar</i>	Millhaven	<i>Odyssey</i>
Bowden	<i>Bowden Ghost Courier Partisan</i>		<i>Highwitness News</i>
Centre Federal de Formation	<i>Horizon</i>	Mission	<i>Mission Medium</i>
Collins Bay	<i>CB Diamond</i>		<i>Messenger</i>
	<i>Avatar</i>		<i>Mountain Echo</i>
	<i>Con.T.A.C.T.</i>		<i>Mission Rag</i>
	<i>Ice Carrier</i>		<i>Gabber Express</i>
	<i>Spiritual Newsletter</i>		<i>Mission Messenger</i>
	<i>Tocsin</i>	Mission Medium	<i>The Mallard</i>
	<i>Inside the Bay</i>	Mountain	<i>Mountain Echoes</i>
Dorchester	<i>Beacon Monthly</i>	Oakalla	<i>Oakalla Journal Review</i>
	<i>Echo</i>	Saskatchewan	<i>Off the Wall</i>
	<i>Prison Review</i>		<i>Vince MacLeod Communicator</i>
Drumheller	<i>The Issue</i>	Springhill	<i>Communicator</i>
	<i>Vision Quest</i>		
Grand Valley Institution for Women	<i>The Grapevine</i>	St Vincent de Paul	<i>Pen-o-Rama</i>
Joyceville	<i>Joyceville Journal</i>	Stony Mountain	<i>Terminator</i>
	<i>The Advance</i>		<i>Omega Newsletter</i>
	<i>Pendulum</i>		<i>S.M. Innovator</i>
Kent	<i>Kent Times</i>	Warkworth	<i>Outlook</i>
Kingston	<i>Tele-scope</i>	Westmorland	<i>Keep Chronicle</i>
Kingston Penitentiary for Women	<i>Tightwire</i>	William Head	<i>Out of Bounds</i>
Manitoba	<i>Mountain Echoes</i>		

Although the holiday season is not the only time in which a figurative space ‘positioned between prison and the outside world’ (Wilson, 2003, p.294) occurs, the particularities produced by relaxation of the routines of the total institution (Goffman, 1961) and special festivities paired with the exaggerated spectacle of Christmas render the third space more visible. In the following section, previous work on third space is used to create a more holistic understanding of Christmas in captivity. We detail seasonally specific activities with an eye to understanding how these concrete manifestations allow prisoners to momentarily fashion a new space that transcends the metal greyness. The discussion is then extended to consider the non-material aspects and the paradoxes of imprisonment during a time premised on togetherness and joyfulness.

3.1 | From now on our troubles will be out of sight⁵

Penal press materials indicated deviations from the day-to-day operations of prison during the holidays. There was more leniency with some prisoners allotted leaves to be home for the holidays (*Lodestar*, March 1972)⁶ or wry acknowledgements of ‘parties trying to imitate “Uncle Jed” with his still’ (Gabriel, 1983, p.10).⁷ This aligns with Goffman’s (1961) study of total institutions, wherein he noted that, at Christmas, ‘the rigors of institutional life for the inmates will be relaxed for a day’ (p.98). The guards and administration likely wanted to ensure that the prisoners were compliant despite the sourness of being incarcerated in a season designed elsewhere. Given the ‘singular importance’ (Marling, 2000, p.282) of Christmas in maintaining morale, increased latitude over the holidays may have assisted in preserving order by temporarily reducing some markers of carceral control, allowing a new space to be negotiated and experienced.

Seasonal rule variations took a multitude of forms. In the early years, prisoners were permitted to organise movie nights and tournaments awash with donated prizes. During the holidays, prisoners in the psychiatric ward at Kingston Penitentiary accessed a television loaned to the prison by a private company (*Tele-Scope*, January 1956a). While these occurrences were departures from normal operations, incarcerated writers suggested that they provided a glimpse of a more progressive system.⁸ However, contemporary writing has indicated that these gains, and the related third space, has eroded. In December 2019, a writer in *The Mallard* stated that:

... it feels like CSC has gone backwards in the little ways that don’t really cost anything. The kind of stuff that contributes to a sense of well-being, care, comradery, especially at the most difficult time of year for many prisoners. Look around. No tournaments are being held. No special activities ... (p.8)

Goffman (1961) contended that role-compliance also lessened during the holidays: ‘At such times staff and inmates will have license to “take liberties” across the caste line ...’ (p.98).

These role relaxations created new conditions that altered the production of meaning. Rather than the standardised ‘communication between the I and the You’ (Bhabha, 1994, p.36) (guard and prisoner), meaning is filtered through a third space wherein new discourses are constituted. An editor of the *CB Diamond* recognised this new space, opining that ‘Christmas is probably the time of closest understanding between the inmate and the prison officials’ (Madden, 1962, p.1). Additionally, a 1951 *Mountain Echoes* column written by Byron (1951) noted a ‘new atmosphere’ at Christmas where ‘the screws are now officers and mere numbers have become names’ (p.15). Kenneth Hartman, a former US prisoner writing for *Harper’s Magazine*, cautioned against romanticising the seasonal role relaxations. In his ethnographic essay, he reported an officer revelling in his traditional role by ranting over the prison-address system that he will be home celebrating with his family while ‘you motherfuckers ... [will] all be here, right where you belong’ (Hartman, 2014). A writer at Stony Mountain Institution echoed this sentiment:

There are instances of some prison staff going out of their way to make things rougher for some inmates. There are inmates going out of their way to make things more difficult for the staff, and, in the long run, more difficult for their ‘fellow inmates’. (Johnston, 1974, p.1)

It may be, as Marquart & Roebuck (1987) argued: 'rule-breaking license was granted as long as inmates kept their behavior within bounds and did not threaten the guards' control of the situation' (p.462). We see that control trumped celebration and reasserted the spatial binary.

3.2 | Rockin' around the Christmas tree: special events⁹

At Christmas many look forward to unwrapping presents, receiving Christmas cards, eating a special dinner, and participating in other seasonal festivities. This rings true even for those incarcerated. While few prisoners return home to participate, the many who remained behind bars found 'enjoyment' in the holidays by traversing the inside/outside binary.

A highlight for many prisoners were the Christmas parcels, which are paid for by prisoners, their families, or through assistance from the Inmate Welfare Fund. In other instances, private companies – like Coca-Cola and Pepsi – donated products for distribution (*Pen-O-Rama*, December 1955, 4(7)) and non-profits contributed financially to spread Christmas joy. While these parcels helped the prisoners mitigate the impact of life in a carceral space by providing treasured reminders of the free world, the by-product anchored them in their cells and created a tension in the third space. This tension is palpable in an excerpt from a long-term prisoner (Korner):

Had quite a talk with a 16 year old a few days ago. First time in prison he told me. ... He asked me what Xmas and new year was like in prison. Said he dreaded the thought of not being with his mom and dad at that time ... What really knocked the Korner out was the question, 'Can I have my people send me in some cake and cookies at Xmas time?' Poor kid, 16 years old and he wants cake and cookies for Christmas. Tried to explain why he couldn't have his goodies sent in. ... 'But don't you order a food parcel', he asked. ... Can only buy a standard parcel and the Korner didn't like 3/4 of the stuff. Too bad the citizens couldn't make up their own list of goodies. (Korner, 1957, pp.15, 19)

During the early decades, when correspondence was limited, prisoners were allowed to send an extra Christmas letter, although they were cautioned, without a stated rationale, to keep writing to a minimum (*Beacon Monthly*, November 1951). Some prisoners were able to sidestep these restrictions by publishing Christmas greetings to family and friends in the penal press (*Beacon Monthly*, December 1961; *Tele-Scope*, January 1957; *Transition*, December 1955, December 1956, December 1957b). Prisoners also delighted in receiving Christmas-themed greeting cards, which delivered the comfort of 'home' (Comfort, 2002). Posting these mementos in their cells transformed the physical space, providing a visual break from the norm, and acted as a way of communicating to others that someone cared about them (Windsor, 1956). The lack of cards carried its own psychological burden: 'Within these walls, there are men who never receive a letter from the outside. A Christmas card is something they receive only in their dreams' (*Pen-O-Rama*, December 1962, p.15).

Decorations extended into common spaces. While access to supplies was limited in the early years, by the 1980s, some convicts were allowed more freedom to decorate and transform the penal space. As researchers have demonstrated, the use of theatrical techniques aids in the creation of third spaces (Greenwood, 2005; Rodricks, 2015). Therefore, it is unsurprising that the prisoners at Williams Head Institution took advantage of their theatre programme to create a 'magical day' wherein:

hundreds of paper snowflakes were cut ... Costumes were rented. Special lighting equipment was ordered. The feather drop apparatus was revamped to drop fake snow and balloons for the kids. (*Out of Bounds*, 2017, 34(1), p.40)

The use of theatre in the physical transformation of these spaces helped to bridge the gap between inside and outside, allowing for a more authentic engagement with Christmas concerts or shows. While there were occasions when outside performers ventured inside, many prisoners wrote, produced and staged their own shows. Most spectacles were secular in nature and often-times even the musical selections were void of any seasonally-specific songs (*Avatar*, January 1975; Clarkson & Munn, 2021; *Tarpaper*, November/December 1979, 10(2)).¹⁰ Some institutions prohibited prisoners from gathering, so convicts crafted lengthy radio shows and broadcast them within the institution; at Dorchester Penitentiary, prisoners had no choice but to hear the five-hour show as 'loud speakers [were] installed in various parts of the institution' (*Beacon Monthly*, December 1964, p.19) – there would be no silent night.

In other cases, as detailed in the 1963 *CB Diamond*, not only could the convicts gather, but outsiders were invited to attend shows – further affirming that the carceral space was figuratively transformed:¹¹

500 guests attended, including friends and family of prisoners, correctional staff, and men and women directly concerned with the work of rehabilitating the criminal offender ... the show was, next to release, the highlight of prison life. They were people. They were people using what meagre, yet meaningful talents they possessed to fulfill a basic human need – the need to communicate. (*CB Diamond*, 1963, 1, p.14)

By conducting familial celebrations in prison, 'the penitentiary becomes a *domestic satellite*, an alternative site for the performance of "private" life' (Comfort, 2002, p.470, italics in original), creating a sense of 'home'. Poignantly demonstrating the awareness of third space during the holidays, Sandra Ogilvie (1985), the recreation director at Joyceville Institution, wrote:

On the day of the party it is just a gym that can be found in any part of Canada, the prison atmosphere doesn't exist. All I see here is people sharing with people and it is beautiful. (p.4)

Wilson's (2000) work allows us to understand that these Christmas concerts and the gathering of 'outsiders', raises prisoners' awareness of 'both the outside worlds they left behind and the perceived threat of Prisonization which the system tries to impose' (p.57).

The high calibre of performers was a frequent theme as the *Feminine Features* column of the *Tele-Scope* suggested: '... a booking agent is needed for quite a few of the girls ... we have several professionals hidden in our midst' (*Tele-Scope*, January 1952a, p.5). Some writers used these acclamations to simultaneously offer a critique of the penal system:

... there is a lot of talent in prisons – talent which tends to be wasted due to society's emphasis on incarceration rather than diversion of offenders within the community where their energy and talents could be more fully utilized. (Bondett, 1975, p.39)

Present across magazines and decades was an emphasis on the scale of production that prisoners were able to achieve with few resources, an example of prisoner-bricoleur (Ugelvik, 2011),

with much of the funding coming from the prisoners themselves or community groups. A writer in the *Mountain Echoes* (February 1959) touted that 'this was probably the first time in history that a full house was played to a show that was put together for \$2.75 of [inmate] welfare funds' (p.17). By the 1980s, budgets had increased substantially and some publications ran an inventory of costs; *Bowden Ghost Courier* (January/February 1983) itemised the following Inmate Welfare Fund expenses: Santa Claus Costume, \$45; Xmas Parcels, \$2132.79; Xmas decorations and chocolates, \$222.61.

A goodly portion of January issues were used to recount the shows; each performance was described and performers lauded by name. When details were scant, readers wrote to the editors to admonish them (*CB Diamond*, 1963, 1). Given that these magazines were not just in-house organs (Gaucher, 1989), it is reasonable to think that the recognition of each person served not as only an acknowledgement of their talent and contribution but also as a souvenir for the performers and the people who attended. It was a way of traversing the distance between the convict and the outside, extending the temporality of this liminal space. In the later decades, formal events gave way to social visits with their support networks and to multiple concerts for different audiences (*Avatar*, January 1975; *Off the Wall*, December/January 1975; *Outlook*, Christmas edition 1980; *Terminator*, November/December 1974). Oftentimes, socials would be hosted by particular prison groups (Lifers, Native Brotherhood, etc.). These gatherings contained shows and appearances from Santa but primarily allowed for socialisation. By 2000, the era of all prisoners coming together in celebration was all but over.

As several writers have argued, food and the act of eating are important aspects of prison life (Godderis, 2006; Smoyer, 2019; Vanhouche, 2015). As such, the penal press took great care to feature the meals offered during the holidays, sometimes including full menus and lavishing praise on the kitchen crews (*Communicator*, 1999, 3(3); *The Issue*, December 1983; *Tele-Scope*, January 1951). They published minute descriptions, ranging from the food's preparation to the comfort of its consumption. This attention is not surprising given that:

consumptive acts are a set of practices, rituals, and behaviours that each individual, in conjunction with others, regularly performs. It is through these performances that we infuse food with meaning. (Godderis, 2006, p.255)

More specifically, eating as a group activity was an important social exercise (Vanhouche, 2015). Rick Windsor (1956) made clear how the conditions of confinement, the penal space, dramatically conditioned their experience:

Here at The Bay¹² we are allowed to eat in the corridor for Christmas dinner, a gesture which I know is appreciated by the entire prison. It is hard for some people to digest the fact, but this little privilege boosts the average man's morale. He feels that he is a human being again on this special day and not just a number. (p.35)

Within a decade there had been significant change:

Inmates of those institution were permitted to eat their Christmas and New Years' dinners in the new auditorium. The auditorium was gaily decorated for the festive season In excess of two hundred inmates carried their trays into the auditorium; the remaining two hundred chose to eat in their cells. (*CB Diamond*, 1963, 1, p.7)

The usual fare offered in prisons is a far cry from the foods prisoners would choose on the outside and this disparity creates a 'symbolic boundary between "inside" and "outside"' (Valentine & Longstaff, 1998, p.135). Thus, the arrival of the holidays and the expansion of menus served to blur this boundary. Meals reminiscent of typical North American holiday feasts (Hirschman & LaBarbera, 1989) helped them feel more like their pre-prison selves, rooting them more in their personhood (Crewe et al., 2014). Conversely, Smoyer's (2019) findings have indicated that unappealing food 'can constitute both a concrete and symbolic punishment' (p.5) – a point that the prisoners often made. Unsurprisingly, prisoners complained when the food's quality fell short of their expectations, lamenting that the food was not fit to serve to animals (*Off the Wall*, December/January 1975). The use of processed turkey, a source of food distrust (Vanhouche, 2019), drew the ire of prisoners and elicited sarcastic commentary: 'We have all heard of butterball turkey, but this year we had bowling ball turkey' (French, 1980, p.2). In some instances, prisoners refused to engage with the holiday food rituals in their entirety as a form of symbolically rich protest as they 'try to enforce their demands by putting the prison organization under pressure' (Vanhouche, 2015, p.48). By exerting this measure of control, prisoners redefined the carceral space through their physicality. This embodiment conditioned the third space experience.

3.3 | Santa Claus is coming to town¹³

Another prominent deviation from carceral monotony was the acts of kindness the prisoners enthusiastically engaged in during the holiday season. Previous scholarly works have contended that the social norms referred to as 'Christmas spirit' are 'goodwill, generosity and altruism' (Clarke, 2007, p.8; Greenberg, 2014). The prisoners' altruism was expressed in diverse ways, including donating funds to orphanages, repairing toys, building parade floats, adopting foster children, hosting blood drives, assembling Christmas boxes for underprivileged families, giving money for presents at socials, donating their Christmas dinners to homeless folks, and filling stockings for children. Regardless of form, prisoners asserted that their intention was to make Christmas merrier for others on the outside. As such, we again see the distortion of the free/captive binary as the prisoners connect with those beyond the bars. In one particularly poignant example, a prisoner (Joey) donated his Christmas parcel to a family on the street:

Maybe Joey had a rough time of it when he was a youngster; maybe he recalls Christmas as just another bleak day where he was supposed to feel happy, but didn't ... whatever the case Joey gave his Christmas box anonymously to someone he will never see: someone who will never know who Joey is. (Guiney, 1976, p.14)

Similarly, prisoners in Ontario gave up their Christmas dinner to ensure that 'the homeless and needy' had a special meal (*Mission Rag*, December 1990). In both these instances, convicts exhibited self-signalling identity work in which their actions did not need to be validated by others to have an impact on their sense of self. Their actions 'fulfill[ed] a need to view one's self in a positive light' (Gal, 2015, p.264).

These selfless projects also allowed convicts to be seen differently by others. As Hancock (2013) suggested, they received 'a sense of personal fulfilment, derived from the recognition of one who is deserving, for a moment, of unremitting and unquestioning adoration' (p.1011). Thus, their acts can be seen as 'identity-signaling behavior', which is 'motivated by the belief that the behavior will convey particular information about the individual to the self or to others' (Gal, 2015, p.257).

Thank you letters published in the press showed that their efforts made the public see them as people – not just as criminals. One writer in *Transition* (January 1957a) contended that their good deeds created ‘a greater normalization on the part of the listening public that there is much good in every one of us’ (p.5). Thus, their acts can be read as ‘redemption scripts’ through which they rewrote ‘a shameful past into a necessary prelude to a productive worthy life’ (Maruna, 2001, p.87) while simultaneously breaking down the dominant public script of good/bad people.

Publishing details of their good deeds in the penal press further allowed them to communicate with their keepers. The Commissioner, wardens, chaplains, and others applauded their efforts and commended their generosity. This frequent praise may have appeared, in part, because it reinforced the narrative that the penological programme was working (Clarkson & Munn, 2021). In either case, the meaning and the practicalities were arrived at through a process outside the typical binary structure of keeper/kept. Aware of this, prisoners were careful to acknowledge the contributions and co-operation of staff and administrators. Sometimes, however, the bureaucratic structure impeded their initiatives. In these cases, frustration and disappointment were expressed:

there was a slip up of some kind in the Front Office ... this request [to send money they had raised] was never forwarded to the Commissioner. The pledge ... would have provided a swell party for the forty little girls we had adopted – forty young kids who had never had a party in all their young and miserable lives. (*Pen-O-Rama*, December 1952, p.41)

As the quote above demonstrates, their initiatives were often paternalistically-centered, including monetary donations to orphanages, concerts for ‘Exceptional People’ (*Outlook*, Christmas edition 1980, p.4), and even the adoption of a foster child by the prisoners at Dorchester Institution. However, the dominant venture was the refurbishment of toys. Not unlike Santa’s elves, prisoners churned out thousands of new and repaired Toys for Tots (*Beacon Monthly*, December 1962) for underprivileged children each year. Working in their cells or sometimes taking over the hobbycraft area, many articles and the accompanying pictorials described the institutions as having transformed into factories or a ‘Toyland’ (*Tele-Scope*, December 1953, 4(4), p.17) – a third space. Pictures in the penal press showcased their works in a Macy’s-window-like display (Marling, 2000). It was not simply a materialist accomplishment as this writer in the *Tele-Scope* (December 1952b) explained:

There seems to be a determination to make this the Christmas to be remembered for some child. Perhaps he thinks of his children, his brothers and sisters; his mom and dad who worried about how to make Christmas a happy one for him when he was a child. Whatever it may be, it is the driving power of K.P Toyland. (p.7)

Relatedly, scholars have argued that acts where one is ‘donating, helping and caring for others’ increases ‘subjective well-being’ (Mutz, 2016, p.1343), which may have helped prisoners survive the holidays.

Sometimes prisoners used their recap of charitable efforts to resist against regularly imposed controls. For example, a writer in Kingston Penitentiary spoke of their Christmas radio show and how it signalled the need for more institutional freedoms:

The program proved that it is not necessary for prison administrators to monitor or censor the sane, normal prisoner when he is speaking or writing to those in the free

world ... The administration treated them like responsible men and they responded by conducting themselves in a responsible manner. It would be nice if the same experiment were made with the magazine [*Tele-Scope*]. (*Tele-Scope*, January 1956a, p.29)

The above festivities may have undermined the exceptional nature of spending Christmas in the carceral environment. For others, Christmas Day was routine: 'for your information, the inmates did the same at Christmas as they do the rest of the year ... followed the rules and regulations of the institution' (Madden, 1963, p.31). Other prisoners sought the illusion of normalcy through traditional meals, decorations, and gift exchanges. Although trapped inside for the holiday season, they were able to replicate some of the traditional splendour. In doing so, a third space was formed wherein the season was experienced in a way that existed somewhere between the free and confined spaces (Wilson, 2004). Robbie Hebert (1975) writing from Springhill Institution, exemplified this in-between space: 'With the lights turned down to a sane dimness, it was almost possible to forget where one was and to get into imagining how it would be to sit across from your lady in a quiet supper club' (pp.9–10). Another writer at Warkworth Institution reflected on the importance of children in creating a temporary third space experience:

It is only at Christmas when we get the chance to see these little ones, and the everyday hardness that one experiences in these places is forgotten, if only for this one day of the year. (Armitage, 1977, p.18)

3.4 | You better not cry: you better not pout¹⁴

Hirshman & LaBarbera (1989) argued that the Christmas season is characterised by 'heightened sensual/hedonic experiences' which is why some people thrived and others 'regretted and dreaded them'. This assertion finds support in the penal press wherein authors addressed the existential aspects of the holidays and described a plethora of competing emotions, expressed their frustrations, offered advice to each other, and even waxed nostalgic about the season.

For some, the months of December and January were ones in which the usual suspension of outward sentiment was complicated by seasonal expectations. They could not simply utilise the coping mechanism of masculine bravado that existed throughout the year (Crewe et al., 2014). Even the Chief Keeper at Collins Bay Institution recognised carceral misery:

Year in and year out, I find it exceedingly difficult to express my sentiments during the Christmas Season. Although we have a great many things to be thankful for, the customary tone of gayety and cheerfulness contained in holiday messages in the free world seems out of place to a group of men deprived of their liberties. (Field, 1953, p.18)

Some prisoners coped by framing Christmas as 'just another day' (*Outlook*, December 1987, p.22), while others stated that:

Yes, we who walk in the shadow of walls are stimulated by the spirit of Christmas. We rejoice but we do so with reservations ... His usual existence demands a consistent curb on sentiment. Should he relax and succumb to emotion he might fail to retain the necessary mastery over his feelings. (*Transition*, December 1953, 2(10), pp.12–13)

Despite their desire to maintain a flat affect, prisoners admitted to experiencing negative emotions, ranging from fear of being forgotten to deep depression. Research has found that the Christmas season is characterised by increased mental health struggles, greater reliance on psychoactive substances, and a general mood worsening (Dale et al., 2021; Hirshman & LaBarbera, 1989; Mutz, 2016; Sansone & Sansone, 2011). One man's poem captured this sensibility: 'But when you're locked up here inside/There is no joy at the Yule Tide' (Mullen, 1967, p.14). A few decades later, a prisoner confined in Warkworth Institution wrote:

we the inmates of the federal and provincial institutions must wake up with tear soaked [*sic*] pillows. We must go through a very emotional day, trying not to let our sorrows show. (*Outlook*, December 1987, p.22)

The Mallard (December 2019) recognised the mental stress accompanying the season and offered a lengthy, detailed column entitled 'How to cope with holiday stress and depression in prison' (p.12).

These negative feelings were often a result of the forced separation from their loved ones – an affirmation of the free/captive binary. In some prisons, visitation on Christmas Day was prohibited. A writer at St Vincent de Paul Penitentiary lamented that the holidays were meaningless if not spent with family and that 'the hours pass, and we remain standing by our bars' (Binard, 1952, p.16). Twenty-six years later, a man at Warkworth Institution agreed: 'severe moments of despair crowd the hearts of most inmates as the cold reality permeates our souls – we will not be with our families this Christmas season' (*Outlook*, December 1978, p.4). But, some were relieved that their families were not obligated to spend 25 December travelling to the prison and writers in the free press opined that visiting restrictions 'ease[d] the burden on inmates' families' (Tripp, 1988, p.9). By contrast, the system was careful to protect workers from the negative implications of familial separation. A free press reprint in *Tocsin* (Tripp, 1988), remarked upon the exclusion of visitors on Christmas Day allowing 'more prison workers to be home with their families' (p.9). Of course, the added benefit for the system was a greater control over the facility. Dixey & Woodall (2012) noted that 'from the perspective of prison staff, ... visits were primarily a huge logistical operation that demanded careful surveillance and control of both prisoners and their families' (p.39).

The third space allowed prisoners to cope by transcending their present circumstances:

The majority sit back in the lonely confines of their cells and think of their families. Wives, mothers, fathers – their children too – all are with them again ... in their own land of make-believe. They are, so to speak, 'back in their living rooms'. (Windsor, 1956, p.35)

While it is evident that some of these reflections were based on 'a kind of wishful Shangri-la, a utopia of the imagination' (Marling, 2000, p.125), the third space gave some convicts both a sense of normalcy and provided a hopefulness alien to the carceral environment. Harold Gaucher (1985), writing from Mission Institution, shared that:

these good memories and thoughts help to remove the pain of incarceration during Christmas ... maybe I too can be free, while still in prison this year. (p.105)

Others managed by embracing the season as a moment of reprieve from the otherwise dour environment:

Christmas adds warmth to the hearts of the cold prison inmates: it adds sparkle to the eyes of men that have showed nothing but emptiness for the past several months: it brings many smiles to the many many faces that have been blank over the entire year. (Windsor, 1956, p.35)

Some remained grounded fully in the carceral dimension and merely feigned delight and gave the 'illusion of gaiety' (*Pen-O-Rama*, December 1952, p.25). A Collins Bay prisoner remarked on the absurdity:

Christmas in jail is tragic for the jailed and jailer. Both try to chuckle through it. The inmates pretend that they are having a merry old time and the administration pretends that the inmates are not pretending. (Madden, 1962, p.1)

The holiday season was often framed by administrators, faith leaders, and the prisoners themselves as an opportunity to engage in 'transition rituals' (Paez et al., 2011, p.375). For example, a writer at Collins Bay Institution advised: 'Why not make a real beginning on Christmas Day, a fresh start? Give ourselves a gift, a gift of a full year of decent living' (*CB Diamond*, December 1956, p.3). A few decades later, a writer in BC Penitentiary, somewhat arrogantly, encouraged reflection:

try a new way of life in '73; how you do that will be your problem; – all I can tell you [*sic*] there are many ways that you can do this – if you want it, look for it. (Open Doors, December 1972, p.14)

Some writers suggested that grounding themselves in faith and sacred practices would help with this contemplation and this is supported by literature which indicates that participation in religious rites is 'associated with better mental health and greater subjective well-being' (Mutz, 2016, p.1343). Often the self-reflections were tied to a sense that holiday seasons, and the arrival of a new year, represented a year closer to freedom: '[it] instills a certain perseverance to keep them going until the next Christmas and onward to the finishing of their sentence' (Starosta, 1988, p.5). Unfortunately, this symbolic countdown negatively marked penal time as: '... for some, that day may still be a long way off' (King, 2001, p.10). Ultimately, the focus on penal time surrounding the marking of a new year, anchored the prisoners to their captivity and limited engagement in the third space.

An additional coping strategy that emerged was to participate in acts of solidarity. At the Prison for Women, a solidarity-themed Christmas tree was drawn featuring the names of all Canadian federal prisons, including a branch representing provincial prisoners, and a star on top reading: 'Our Love for All' (*Tightwire*, Winter 1988, 22(4), p.47). A writer in Westmoreland Institution advised his fellow prisoners:

let us remember we are all in this boat together. It goes without saying that those of us who have to spend Christmas here would rather be elsewhere. Keeping this in mind, we should all try to make each other's holidays as pleasant as possible. (McNamee, 1990, p.2)

One article by Dean Roberts (2019) described those at a minimum-security prison hosting a Christmas dinner, with a small gift exchange in one of the housing units. Paez et al. (2011) contended that acts like these increased social identification and lowered loneliness. In this way,

incarcerated brethren become an ersatz family unit that can co-create a third space. As part of this co-constitution, at Christmas the prisoners flipped the script and exerted control over ‘what, when, and how prisoners eat’ (Vanhouche, 2015, p.48), an act that Vanhouche (2015) would see as eroding the typical carceral controls. It also allowed them to undermine the carceral space by replicating the ‘sort of foods that they would choose to eat at home’ (Valentine & Longstaff, 1998, p.135). At Mission Institution, Dean Roberts (2019) admitted that ‘despite all my bah-humbug-nay-saying going in, I managed to thoroughly enjoy myself. Even worse for my inner-scrooge, I started to look forward to next year’. He described the following Christmas as being even more elaborate, replete with convicts making a vat of apple cider and delivering it to other prisoners: ‘Nutz! Who does that? Definitely not hardened criminals, right?’ (Roberts, 2019, pp.7–8).

4 | CONCLUSION

Throughout seven decades of ethnographic accounts, we see seasonal rituals used as a means of transporting the outside world in for the holidays and transforming the physical and metaphysical prison environment into something new. Existing third space scholarship on prisons opened an avenue to explore carceral spaces in a way which broke down the binaries of free/captive, inside/outside and keeper/kept (Crewe et al., 2014; Henley & Parks, 2020; Wilson, 2000, 2003, 2004). Using these and other theoretically-informed works provided a point of entry to examine Christmas in captivity and to broaden this corpus of work. We came to understand the holidays as existing beyond the dominant spatial plane that would be expected given the carceral space. More to the point, we believe that these first-hand accounts confirm and extend the previous third space analyses and add nuance to their application to the carceral. The role and rule relaxations, deviations from the mundane operations of the total institution, and the extraordinary events (like charity drives and Christmas feasts) not only symbolically transformed the physical spaces but created something beyond. The third space provided a temporary, albeit incomplete, escape with new discourses and ways of being. In these liminal spaces, formal and informal behaviour codes are reconstituted, identities are reconfigured, normally suppressed emotions are permitted, and conditions of confinement are resisted without the usual repercussions. Additionally, families of origin come into the prison and new ‘carceral families’ are created, which helps prisoners cope with the disjuncture of being removed from the social body during a season predicated on togetherness. Perhaps, for prisoners, the real Christmas gift is an escape into the third space.

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ENDNOTES

¹All penal press materials used are part of the Gaucher/Munn collection, some of which is available at www.penalpress.com

²Meaning government is closed, those who labour are entitled to extra pay, etc.

³In the penal press, there is very little acknowledgement of other religious holidays (like Ramadan, Hannakuk) and there is no indication that these other religious holidays were marked by the Correctional Service of Canada.

⁴To understand the concept of third space, Susan Mayhew (2009), suggests that we must begin by understanding that ‘first and second spaces are two different, and possibly conflicting, spatial groupings where people interact physically and socially: such as home (everyday knowledge) and school (academic knowledge)’. She differentiates

this from third spaces which she describes as 'the in-between, or hybrid, spaces, where the first and second spaces work together to generate a new third space'.

⁵Martin, Blane & Garland (1943).

⁶The proportion of those granted leave was low. A prisoner at Collins Bay Institution clarifies: 'Out of 6000 federal prisoners in Ontario, only 127 Christmas passes were issued and 16 New Years Passes . . . C.S.C. [Correctional Service of Canada] gives just enough to say they are working the program' (Opsitnik, 1989, p.16).

⁷Having alcohol to celebrate the holidays was commonly mentioned. Some argued that the staff turned a blind eye to their drinking; others worried about being caught: 'I found the residents were greatly distressed that the guards might find their "best brew yet". And with its loss, Christmas would be dismal' (King, 2001, p.10).

⁸The New Deal provided space for rule lessening and imbued a 'prisoners are people' mantra that allowed for the organisation of events in new ways.

⁹Lee & Marks (1958).

¹⁰Devout prisoners were afforded extra church services over the holidays in which more carols and Christmas hymns would have been offered (*Beacon Monthly*, January 1963; *CB Diamond*, 1963, 1).

¹¹Those actively engaged with Christianity were additionally rewarded with 'Family Service Days' as noted by a writer in the *CB Diamond* (1965, 15): 'Inmates earn the privilege of inviting relatives by regularly attending services on Sundays during the intervening period' (p.21) – a reward of obvious value as the magazine trumpeted that over 300 visitors were in attendance. As it was 'considered unethical for chaplains to force inmates to attend a religious program' (Kerley, Matthews & Shoemaker, 2009, p.88), this may have been a way to circumvent such judgments. Victor Hassine (1997) problematised this fact when he speculated that in the USA the reliance on Christianity manifested in racist ways: '... the staff's religious orientation made Christian observance a sign of contrition, in search of salvation, on the path of redemption, which translated into parole eligibility. Therefore, men who were both non-white and non-Christian were readily accepted by the prisoner population but were at the centre of the staff's doubts and distrust' (p.39).

¹²Collins Bay Institution.

¹³Coots, Gillespie & Reser (1934).

¹⁴Coots, Gillespie & Reser (1934).

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