

# Beyond Exploitation:

Metadata Justice and Prison Labor

*Metadata Justice in Oklahoma Libraries & Archives Symposium*

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# Digitization and Exploitation: Acknowledging and Addressing the Use of Exploitative Prison Labor by Libraries and Archives

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Kristen C. Howard

## ABSTRACT

This article draws on exploitation theory to argue that the use of underpaid prison labor for digitization projects and other memory work is unethical. Such projects, and therefore our cultural memory institutions, exploit incarcerated people. As the for-profit prison industrial complex only continues to grow and disproportionately affects Black, Indigenous, and people of color, it is imperative that the information profession recognize its contribution to this moral wrong. To this end, I offer two potential interventions: (a) hiring formerly incarcerated people in memory institutions and (b) clearly and honestly disclosing the use of prison labor to users. Enacting these interventions will not end the exploitation of incarcerated people but will provide meaningful benefits to those who are (formerly) incarcerated and work toward greater transparency with our patrons.

*The Library Quarterly*

<https://doi.org/10.1086/725070>

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# Beyond Exploitation

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1. **Argue:** Prison labor is exploitative
2. **Example:** Yearbook Project (OCI)
3. **Propose:** An intervention centered in metadata justice

# Exploitation

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**“To exploit someone is to take unfair advantage of them. It is to use another person’s vulnerability for one’s own benefit.”**

Matt Zwolinski and Alan Wertheimer,  
“Exploitation,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2016.

# Is prison labor inherently unethical?

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No.

Possible value of prison labor to incarcerated people:

- Money
- Enjoyment or satisfaction
- Develop skills for post-incarceration

# Mutually beneficial exploitation

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“Exploitation can also be mutually beneficial, where both parties walk away better off than they were *ex ante*. What makes such mutually beneficial interactions nevertheless exploitative is that they are, in some way, unfair.”

Zwolinski and Wertheimer, “Exploitation” (2016).

# Wages

— — —

Incarcerated people in OK earn (2017):

*Regular jobs (non-industry)*

- \$0.10-0.17 per hour

OCI (Oklahoma Correctional Industries):

- \$0.00+

Oklahoma minimum wage:

- \$7.25 per hour (stagnant since 2008)

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# Penal Labor Exemption

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“Neither slavery nor **involuntary servitude**, except as **punishment** for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States.”

Thirteenth Amendment, U.S. Constitution  
Ratified December 6, 1865

# Yearbook Project



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## Yearbook Examples Yearbook Examples



# Yearbook Project wages

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Incarcerated people received...

\$1.45 per hour

# Yearbook Project wages

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Incarcerated people received...

\$1.45 per hour

Oklahoma Department of  
Corrections received...

\$7.25 per worker per hour

(equivalent to Oklahoma minimum  
wage)

# \$629,740

— — —  
**Total revenue of the Yearbook Project (2020-2022) for Oklahoma Department of Corrections**

From reporting by Wendy Soares



The Program That Works for Oklahoma

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Please read this agreement carefully before using our services.

By signing this document, I give Oklahoma Correctional Industries (OCI) permission to make digital images of our yearbooks with the understanding that I will receive a copy of the images on DVD(s) **at no cost**. The yearbooks will be scanned in color at 300 DPI and saved in *PDF* format which is considered publisher quality. After the project is complete, our yearbooks will be returned to us in the same condition as they were sent in. I understand Oklahoma Correctional Industries is a part of Oklahoma Department of Corrections and the labor used is provided by the offender population.

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Thank you for your participation in the OCI Yearbook Project.

Chris Caskey

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Caskey".

OCI Yearbook Project  
Coordinator (405) 527-4825  
[chris.caskey@doc.ok.gov](mailto:chris.caskey@doc.ok.gov)

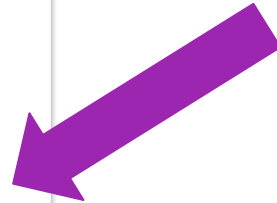
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New Hampton School Board website  
# 1 OCI Service Agreement Rev 10.12.2020

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# New Hampton School New Hampton, New Hampshire Yearbooks

Get started

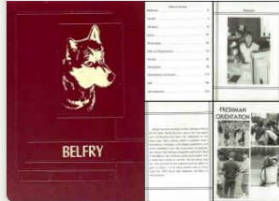
Curious about what your relatives who went to New Hampton School were like during their school years? Choose from the 18 yearbooks available for New Hampton School below to start exploring the extensive Yearbooks collection on Ancestry®.

To find a family member, enter information such as their First Name, Last Name, and where they lived into the [U.S. School Yearbooks](#) database – even a guess can help.

## New Hampton School Yearbook

**Class of 1987**

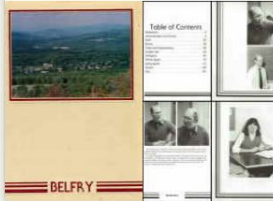
123 images, 853 students



## New Hampton School Yearbook

**Class of 1986**

116 images, 941 students



## New Hampton School Yearbook

**Class of 1985**

88 images, 300 students



## New Hampton School Yearbook

**Class of 1984**

87 images, 310 students

## New Hampton School Yearbook

**Class of 1983**

104 images, 659 students

## New Hampton School Yearbook

**Class of 1982**

86 images, 199 students

Ancestry.com

# Exploitation

— — —

**“To exploit someone is to take unfair advantage of them. It is to use another person’s vulnerability for one’s own benefit.”**

Zwolinski and Wertheimer, “Exploitation” (2016).



# Metadata Justice

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“Metadata justice refers to the use of accurate and appropriate language in metadata systems like library catalogs.

When we describe people, places, and events, the words we use matter. Using **accurate** and **appropriate** language helps us communicate. It can also promote justice for groups of people who historically have experienced systematic inequality.”

Karie Antell, “Metadata Justice [University of Oklahoma LibGuide],” (2022).

# Intervention

Label items, collections, and databases that benefit from exploitative labor.



## Everett High School Nesika

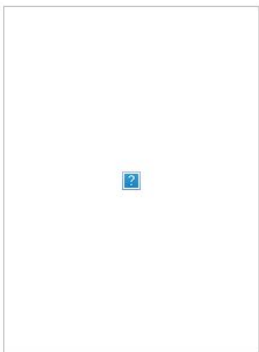
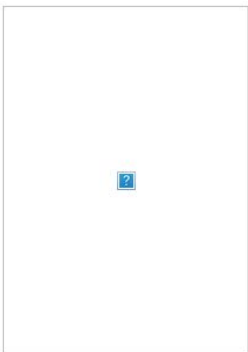
### About this collection

This collection contains the Everett High School Nesika yearbooks from 1909 through 2013. There is a brief break in coverage from 1917-1918 when the Nesika ceased to be published during World War I. These yearbooks were scanned as a collaborative effort that combined collections from the Everett Public Library, Everett High School, and members of the local community. OCR scanning was employed, so this collection can be searched; we will continue to clean up the scanned text so that search results will become more precise over time. Due to the large file sizes of these documents, images and search results may be slow to load. Contact the Northwest Room staff at 425-257-8005 if you need any assistance, or higher resolution copies of any of these images.

Browse

**Everett Public Library  
Everett, WA**  
No mention of OCI or the Yearbook Project (which we know was involved from local reporting in *Herald Net*).

## ARCHIVES: Millvale and Shaler Yearbook Collection



We are happy to announce that, thanks to assistance from the [OCI Yearbook Project](#), we have digitized dozens of our yearbooks from Millvale and Shaler High Schools! On this page you can find the .pdf links to Millvale yearbooks from 1955 – 1971 and Shaler yearbooks from 1972 – 2017.

### MILLVALE HIGH SCHOOL

[1955](#) ◦ [1956](#) ◦ [1957](#) ◦ [1958](#) ◦ [1959](#) ◦ [1960](#) ◦ [1961](#) ◦ [1962](#) ◦ [1963](#) ◦ [1964](#) ◦ [1965](#) ◦ [1966](#) ◦ [1967](#)  
◦ [1968](#) ◦ [1969](#) ◦ [1971](#)

### SHALER HIGH SCHOOL

Find the links to download .pdf of Shaler yearbooks from 1972 – 2017 on [Google Drive here!](#) (Please note that the Shaler yearbook files are very large and may take awhile to download.)

## Milvale Community Library Milvale, PA

Mentions OCI Yearbook Project, but does not expand on the acronym or provide information about the exploitative labor.



# RIHS Watchtower 2001

by [Rock Island Public High School](#), [Rock Island, Illinois](#)



Publication date

2001

Topics

[Yearbooks](#), [School yearbooks](#), [High School](#), [Rock Island Public High School, Illinois](#), [Rock Island \(Illinois\)](#), [Graduating class, 2001](#)

Collection

[yearbooks-rihs](#); [yearbooks](#)

Language

[English](#)

The Watchtower is the name of the Rock Island Public High School Yearbook. This yearbook volume is for the graduating Class of 2001.

The high school's current address is:

1400 25th Avenue

Rock Island, IL 61201

## Acknowledgement

We express our great appreciation to the Oklahoma Correctional Industries High School Yearbook Project for providing this digital edition of the 2001 Rock Island (IL) High School yearbook.

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**Rock Island Public High School  
Rock Island, IL**  
Explicitly thanks Oklahoma Correctional  
Industries and the Yearbook Project for  
“providing this digital edition.”

# Intervention

Label items, collections, and databases that benefit from exploitative labor.

1. Include a general statement that incarcerated people performed integral labor in exploitative conditions
2. Considering including name(s) of worker(s)



## **Proposed Sample Statements:**

### ***Example 1: Yearbook Project***

These yearbooks have been made accessible by the exploitative labor of incarcerated people in Oklahoma prisons.

### ***Example 2: South Dakota State Historical Society 1905 Census Data Index***

This database was made possible by the exploitative labor of incarcerated people at the Women's Prison in Pierre, South Dakota.

# Issue: Stigma

What about the possibility of a boycott or public backlash?





# Answer

What about the possibility of a boycott or public backlash?

- Don't rely on exploitative labor.



# Answer

What about the possibility of a boycott or public backlash?

- Don't rely on exploitative labor.
- Use a more neutral attribution.



**More neutral statements:  
Remove [exploitative] and derivatives**

*Example 1: Yearbook Project*

These yearbooks have been made accessible by the **[exploitative]** labor of incarcerated people in Oklahoma prisons.

*Example 2: South Dakota State Historical Society 1905 Census Data Index*

This database was made possible by the **[exploitative]** labor of incarcerated people at the Women's Prison in Pierre, South Dakota.

# Conclusion

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