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### ***Book Review: Outlaw Women***<sup>1</sup>

By Teddi Mattox<sup>2</sup>

Sociologist Catherine Connolly, anthropologist Susan Dewey, social justice scholar Bonnie Zare, and graduate student Rhett Epler are out in the field, at a small Wyoming gas station during one of the many outings that characterized the early stages of their project *Outlaw Women*, started at the University of Wyoming in 2014. “You workin’ at the prison?” One of them had been asked as she cruised down the aisles of jerky, “Every one of them women is in there because of a man” (7). This statement underscored the theme of the team’s research, interviewing 71 currently and formerly incarcerated women between December 2014 and August 2015 concerning the experiences that shaped their lives leading up to, during, and after release from incarceration within Wyoming Federal Prison. Complimenting this work with well over one hundred additional interviews with parole officers in the summer of 2017, their research team sifted through 2,000 pages of recorded transcripts, coding the project’s most consequential findings to develop composite characters Tammi, Nedrah, Dakota, Itzel, and Janea (25). Together, these characters served as “narrative anchors” for a text designed to explicate “central issues of concern” (34) for these currently and formerly incarcerated women. As the authors craft a narrative that follows the life trajectories of each composite character, the unique cultural dynamics that “shape women’s experiences of incarceration and release from prison in the rural, predominantly white communities,” (2) still stereotyped as the “the Wild West,” is explored. Through their stories, the authors trace a haunting “architecture of gendered violence” through experiences of “addiction and compromised mental health, poverty, fraught relationships, and felony-related discrimination” (42) that have shaped the circumstances within which the characters are able to build their lives and maintain livelihoods. In so doing, Connolly’s team makes a significant rural focused contribution to a wealth of carceral literature focused almost entirely on urban women and racialized populations within the US, traditionally rendering invisible the poor white Americans who compromise the majority of the national incarcerated populace (10).

As Connolly et al.’s theoretical and analytical assessment of an “architecture of gendered violence” builds upon work “pioneered by feminist, rural, and narrative criminologists” (3) Connolly’s team is able to stress the “nexus of interpersonal violence, limited socioeconomic opportunities, social services, [and] a gender-stratified street economy” (2) that marginalizes women within precarious and underpaid employment, as well as contains them within cultural pressures that penalize gender non-confirming behavior. Building upon the rural specific building blocks of the architecture of violence that characterizes the book, the authors map out the significantly gendered pathways to crime that characterized the lives of all of their composite characters. Exploring these gendered pathways, Connolly et al. posit “carcerality as an increasingly globalized system that reflects complex modes and forms of governance” (8), an ongoing process leading to a 700% expansion of female prisoners from 1977 to 2010 (6). Utilizing a political

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<sup>1</sup> Reviewed Book Citation: Dewey, S., Zare, B., Connolly, C., Epler, R. & Bratton, R. A. (2019). *Outlaw Women*. New York, New York: NYU Press.

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economic lens, the authors examine how Wyoming's economy, almost entirely reliant on mineral-extractive industries, is "subject to a boom-and-bust cycle in which the state's fortunes are precariously tied to global coal, oil, and gas prices (8)." As the rural precarity that pervades areas "economically dependent on world market prices" (9) for crude products is tied into a larger, global "generalized absence of labor market security" fostered by the post-Fordist economic policies of the 1980s (8), the influence of volatile natural resource industries upon the socio-structural lives of the women is underscored. By allowing women the unique and underutilized power to "contextualize their actions and decision making within the broader socioeconomic forces that shape their lives" (15) using narrative criminology, the authors explore the impact of global economic forces upon criminalized women, their associated communities, and their support systems. By explicating the interdependencies of both criminal justice and economic systems, within a "stratified rural social order" (16), the authors introduce a very critical discussion of a rural political economy of women's mass incarceration.

As Chapter 1, "Hitting Rock Bottom," explores how adversity stemming from the "criminalization and medicalization of substance abuse, addiction, and other mental health issues" (42) is compounded by limited availability of rehab, along with "gendered rural social control mechanisms" (42). The authors show how women's substance abuse is stigmatized as women are discouraged from seeking help. Through composite characters, the authors address the trajectories of untreated addiction and mental health that led to the incarceration of a significant proportion of women at the Wyoming Federal prison. The violence fueling mass incarceration is underscored as the reader is made to understand prison as the "first real opportunity to receive therapeutic treatment for substance abuse and mental health issues" (82) for the majority of the women there. Criticizing carceral perspectives and programming that "positions lawbreaking as the product of individual cognitive dysfunction" Connolly et al. draw critical attention to how a focus on individual decisions to break the law "fails to account for social forces that contribute to higher rates of incarceration among poor and working-class people and people of color relative to their more privileged counterparts" (4). This is exemplified in the muted relief their character "Tammi" feels to be incarcerated, viewing jail as "a respite from the intergenerational poverty and struggles with addiction that structure the everyday lives of almost everyone she knows" (47). Addiction is framed as "a form of inheritance associated with community loss" (52) which is accelerated by lack of mental healthcare resources and compounded by "constrained economic opportunities, and limited social worlds" (51). Within the precarious world of Wyoming, this volatile mix is credited with stoking an "overincarceration of mentally ill individuals in county jails for crimes symptomatic of their illnesses" (54). As their composite characters experience the complexities of the criminalization of substance abuse, battling addiction with compromised mental health, the authors note the study limitations that accompany an all-white survey population, emphasizing that issues their characters face are "often differentiated by race and class, as well as gender" (86). *Outlaw Women* is effective in analyzing the double victimization rural women already struggling with addiction and poor mental health face. Gendered stigma with their felony records, limited long term programming to prevent relapse, and disproportionate economic dependence on men is ignored by carceral programming that demands these women take accountability for actions as if they were freely chosen within an "imagined world where the realities of sexism, racism, and class distinctions do not exist" (86).

The victimization that incarcerated women experience under the weight of a totalizing carceral system refusing to acknowledge the socio-economic conditions that structure pathways to prison forces criminalized women to develop ways to navigate "gendered socio-institutional

beliefs” (86) that deny the realities of their lived lives. As Chapter 2, “A Productive Member of Society,” explores the “moral-cultural ethos that denies the structural violence of rural poverty, sexism, and felony-related discrimination,” (97) the authors utilize composite characters to examine the “gendered components of economic crime, the process by which women become socialized into institutional norms, and coping mechanisms the women use to do their time (91).” As the reader understands how the majority of incarcerated women in the study committed their crimes during “situations of economic duress” that “limited or otherwise compromised the choices open to them,” (92) a progressive argument is made for economic crime to be considered in context. This argument is especially salient within the context of Wyoming, where the wage gap in 2015, between women and men was forty-ninth in the country, compounding women’s exclusion from the male-dominated resource extraction market and limiting opportunity for legal moneymaking activities (93). Reflective of U.S. cultural values, prison programming is overwritten with the ideals of rugged individualism, consistently ignoring the tremendous structural violence of rural disenfranchisement, rampant sexism, and felony-related stigma, ultimately failing to equip incarcerated women with realistic ways to improve their precarious life situations both during and after imprisonment.

The pervasive structural violence of sexism is examined in Chapter 3, “Violence Has Flow,” as the socioeconomic structures embodying rural patriarchy, and cultural norms that discourage women from seeking help to escape abuse (43) are dissected through the commonalities of interpersonal violence that the incarcerated women shared. The uniquely gendered and rural adversity that the women of Wyoming’s prison faced is investigated through the three main themes of “incarcerated women’s experiences with violent victimization, rural women and intimate partner violence, and women as violent perpetrators” (135). Pervasive hetero- patriarchal cultural norms, the ongoing feminization of poverty, and extensive childhood abuse underscore the context within which women are criminalized, traumatized, and motivated toward maladaptive coping mechanisms. The substance abuse and violent behavior that patterns their lives is understood to motivate “intergenerational cycles of criminal justice system involvement (136).” As the small-town maintenance of a traditional and gendered status quo restricts women’s economic mobility, emphasizes male power and control, and challenges female solidarity, the authors situate female violent offenders within “cumulative victimization that emerges from abuse, poverty, sexism, and other marginalizing social forces that considerably constrain women’s choices” (141). The totalizing “toxic alchemy of structural violence” (173) was dissected throughout this chapter for how it took victimized characters acting out of righteous rage and self-defense, often for their own lives, and turned them into “criminals who must be contained in the name of public safety” (174).

In Connolly et al.’s final Chapter 4, “On the Radar,” the authors critically engage with gendered experiences of discrimination within community reentry, exploring economic marginalization and community prejudice against women who have been criminalized. The impact of cultural expectations, social ties, as well as the role played by parole and community service providers is examined as the released characters attempt to reestablish their lives, struggling with both reentry and recidivism. With the “socioeconomic and interpersonal constraints on women’s reentry success” mirroring the “constraints that shaped their lives prior to incarceration,” (181) only worsened by the addition of a criminal record, this final chapter explores how women battle narratives that have structured their life worlds long before they had the autonomy to do so themselves. As the composite characters struggle to find stable employment, comply with parole requirements, reunite with family, and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships, the gendered forms of “state, community, and interpersonal surveillance” (43) that recently incarcerated

Wyoming women have to navigate are explicated for the adversity that they pose for reintegration within functional community life. Within a Wyoming resource extraction economy prioritizing male economic rights and power, readers can observe the impact of socioeconomic forces on individual choices, directly shaping gendered experiences post-release for the composite characters (210). This was especially the case as the systems of rehabilitation and supervision of which the characters had to navigate did not account for the structural forces fueling violence, and resort to lawbreaking, within their lives.

As the main problems compromising an “architecture of gendered violence—addiction and compromised mental health, poverty, fraught relationships, and felony-related discrimination” (42) are explored throughout the chapters and composite characters, *Outlaw Women* gives voice to thousands of rural women trapped within the U.S. prison industrial complex. The authors build upon the mythos of the American frontier during a pivotal moment in time in which the criminal justice system has reached its’ own frontier, compounding economic precarity, stoking downward mobility, stressing rural communities to their limits, and rendering the needs of rural women not only invisible, but subject to criminalization. The authors insist that there are alternatives to the devastating outcomes associated with the criminalization of mental illness, cultural denial of structural poverty, systemic interpersonal violence, and socioeconomic stratification. They offer evidence that these very solutions could build upon “the kind of community and systems of mutual support that many rural people pride themselves on fostering (44).” Highlighting the “inherent interconnectedness of all social problems and of all individuals in society” (220) that runs contrary to the ethos of individualism that is central to the Wyoming frontier, the authors contest the political willingness of the U.S. populace to enact “fear-based responses to widespread substance abuse, addiction, and social inequalities (221).” Connolly et al. stress that this system can be dismantled yet doing so would require the recognition that “problems leading to incarceration are community issues manifesting in the lives of individuals” (226). The personal as political underscores the three core beliefs the authors believe must be dismantled to liberate rural women from cycles of violence and incarceration. By addressing the ideas that “drug-abusing women are a threat to public safety, law-breaking is an individual choice rather than a community problem, and [that] women released from prison pose a long-term risk to society,” (222) the authors dare to imagine a world in which gendered, carceral violence is no longer waged against a marginalized class of “outlaw women.”

Nedrah, a main character, best surmised the macrostructural violence under which women are criminalized, incarcerated, and marginalized, when she lamented that there were “just as many different kinds of prisons as there are ways to be free” (78). Connolly et al. are able to surmount the monumental task of investigating the constellations of violence within which incarcerated and recently released female prisoners in Wyoming are ensnared, at the same time managing to highlight the humanity, courage, and resilience of rural women implicated in the expanse of mass incarceration in the USA. Deviating from a canon of urbanized, carceral research with their depiction of mass incarceration as a “community problem,” the authors uniquely demonstrate that the issue is not the prison system itself, but rather the interdependent, suppressive forces with which the prison industrial complex is sustained. Any potential reader of *Outlaw Women* should understand that the text contains subject matter that is not only painful to read, but potentially retriggering for the all too many who have been touched by gendered socio-structural violence.

Despite the mass trauma and brutality that *Outlaw Women* seeks to critically analyze, I would highly recommend this text for readers of all backgrounds and education levels. The research outlined by Connolly et al. is rich in both context and diversity of evidence, helping

anyone aspiring to understand not just *why* mass incarceration of poor, marginalized women across different contexts and conditions in the U.S. has expanded, but *how* it has been sustained by the very systems that allow for disenfranchisement to occur in the first place. By exploring not only the structural constraints, but the belief systems and ideologies that provide fuel to the gendered ways in which macrolevel systems of extraction, capital accumulation, governance, and social conditioning prey upon the lives of women throughout the countryside, *Outlaw Women* stands firmly behind these women, their stories, and the unequivocal need for change.