

**Book Review: Susan Dewey, Bonnie Zare, Catherine Connolly, Rhett Epler, and Rosemary Bratton, *Outlaw Women: Prison, Rural Violence, and Poverty in the American West*. New York: New York University Press. 2019. ISBN: 978-1-479-88743-9 (Paperback). 271 Pages. \$30.00.**

Reviewed by Meda Chesney-Lind<sup>1</sup>

[Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: [journal@transformativestudies.org](mailto:journal@transformativestudies.org)  
Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2020 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.]

Criminology, while increasingly aiming to be a global field, is often unaware of the ways that the perspective has been shaped by its earliest history. Born out of the University of Chicago, criminology is often hyper focused on urban crime, particularly urban male crime, which was initially imagined to be largely shaped by class. Clear notions of the role played by poverty in these urban settings, the focus was often on males engaged in public defiance, deviance and crime (often in the context of gangs). Later, the issue of race would surface as salient, particularly in the area of imprisonment. This gaze meant that male violence became normalized and the victimization of women and girls were ignored (as were their crimes). If prisons were to be studied, they would be male prisons serving these large urban environments where large number of African Americans were incarcerated.

*Outlaw women* urges a focus on rural communities, particularly in what the authors (all five of them) call the “Wild West” (2). They also urge an examination of “an architecture of gendered violence” (2) in these largely white communities. Most significantly, they want to shift

---

<sup>1</sup> **Meda Chesney-Lind**, professor of Women’s Studies at the University of Hawaii, is nationally recognized for her work on women and crime, her testimony before Congress resulted in national support of gender responsive programming for girls in the juvenile justice system. In 2013, the Western Society of Criminology named an award after her honoring “significant contributions to the fields of gender, crime and justice” and made her the inaugural recipient. In 2017, she was elected President of the American Society of Criminology; she is currently serving as past President of the Society.

the criminological conversation about crime, poverty, and prison away from issues of a near exclusive focus on race (particularly African American) and urbanism. Exploring a relatively small women's prison in Wyoming, with a population of 254, the "research team" ends up interviewing 71 present and former inmates (25). *Outlaw Women* explores the differences and common themes in these women's lives.

One notable success of *Outlaw Women* is the rich detail the reader receives of how rural poverty works in the West. The authors note that Wyoming's economy "relies almost exclusively on mineral-extractive industries and is according subject to a boom-and-bust cycle" based on global market forces (8). Women are largely sidelined in these sorts of economies, particularly women with scant education. And, of course, as has been amply documented by other rural criminologists (notably Walter DeKeseredy, Amanda Hall-Sanchez, and Joe Donnemeyer), gender based violence takes on a very specific and toxic form in rural areas. Here, women are expected to "keep their mouths shut. If you are not seen and not heard, you are not causing problems" (55). Men, on the other hand, are encouraged into a form of "frontier masculinity" that "prizes public stoicism and emotional control" (11) while ignoring high rates of suicide and "self-harming behaviors" including substance abuse and participation in "cultures of violence" (9). And, not surprisingly, women turn to drugs to deal with the extremely high levels of violence in their lives; violence perpetrated by the men with whom they live. And it turns out, there are a lot of drugs in these communities.

Drugs, and addiction to drugs, in turn, play a huge role in the incarceration of women from rural America. A key theme in this regard, the authors contend, was the "moral panic" surrounding methamphetamine use in rural areas (13). These forces produced local policing initiatives, which in turn swept up many poor, white users and a spike in the incarceration of white, rural drug users, whose drug use was far more extensive than previously known. It turns out "heroin use and addiction are now far more prevalent among rural and suburban whites nationwide than among inner-city people of color" (13).

Women's addiction was also tied to criminal behavior in women, often leading to their incarceration. Said one woman they spoke with "I have two really strong addictions. Alcohol is my drug of choice and the other is shoplifting" (72). The other theme, for most of these women was relationships with violent and often drug and substance abusing men. Said another woman, "my picker is broken, because all the men I've chosen bought boys toys and never helped with the groceries or bills" (74). Other women urge their children not to say anything to teachers or

the police about the abuse they have witnessed because “[t]hey will take you away from me if you say anything” (134).

Two unique aspects of this prison ethnography are the detailed and graphic descriptions of gender based violence in the lives of women and the relationship between that violence and women’s crime. Subjected often to savage beatings, women’s children say to them “I don’t want Daddy to hurt you no more” (132). This woman ultimately killed her abuser (at least the composite character with this history kills her abuser), but the book notes such violence is rare among women in this prison population, where most are doing time for “drug crimes” (often involvement in the “illicit drug economy” (19) and “money crimes” (burglary, larceny, shoplifting). Again, these involvements were often in response to or a product of their involvement with violent men.

Another strength of *Outlaw Women* is the focus on details of prison life, including what appears to be gender responsive programming in women’s’ prison. Here some of the class differences between teachers and students take on a particular focus. Take, for example, the woman taking the money management class and was asked about her “relationship to money,” she was puzzled. It turns out, “never staying around very long, money came and went on whatever needed paying: rent in the motel or trailer park, fast food, broken down cars with balding tires” (166). Another important strength of this book is the focus not just on women *in* prison, but also on women going to prison, and women coming out of prison. In particular, there is more texture about the gendered stresses associated with re-entry, where women often find themselves living with family members who still resent their involvement in crime (and imprisonment), often tied to embarrassment about having a criminal in the family in a small town where everybody knows everybody. One woman is sleeping in her sister’s basement, while enduring her sister’s angry rant about her past behavior, and a threat to throw her out of the house “This is your last chance, and honestly you’re really lucky to have it” (p. 77).

One drawback to the book’s credibility was the authors’ choice to employ “composite characters” to illuminate the patterns found in their data. These characters provide compelling storylines to illustrate the main findings, but they were also a distraction and sometimes felt forced (particularly when these composites were interacting with each other). Ultimately, it is not clear that wrapping the major types of offenses committed by these women were well served by this device. The authors also missed a crucial opportunity to examine how whiteness played out in the lives of these women. As one of their respondents noted, “I’ve

never seen so many white people” (28) in the prison population they studied; the prisons themselves were also characterized by the women in them in curious ways, like “Camp Cupcake” (18) referring to the facilities lack of prison like features of harsh discipline and a focus on punishment.

That said, *Outlaw Women* is a strong addition to the growing but important field of feminist criminology, particularly feminist perspectives on women’s imprisonment. Given the extremely low recidivism rate reported by these authors (25%), we need to understand what these institutions (and their communities) are doing right. A focus on the ways that small town life, despite the particular reliance on “individualism” in these communities, seem to give the woman a resilience that their urban counterparts lack. Another possibility is that the very lack of prison like features might be related to low recidivism. Their White ethnicity, even though they were low income, might also play a role in the patterns that this book reports. In sum, this book provides an important first step in the exploration of rural poverty, crime, and women’s imprisonment.