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No Fleeting Phenomenon: The Rise of Female-Centric Habilitation and the New Politics of Imprisonment

Review by Priya N. Purohit*

BREAKING WOMEN: GENDER, RACE, AND THE NEW POLITICS OF IMPRISONMENT. By Jill McCorkel. New York City, N.Y.: NYU Press. 2013.

INTRODUCTION

Breaking Women: Gender, Race, and the New Politics of Imprisonment, by Jill A. McCorkel, associate professor of sociology and criminology at Villanova University, examines the role of habilitation—a set of confrontational social technologies that induce the forcible “breakdown” of the “diseased” self of the addict—in the new penology that took shape during the “War on Drugs” in the mid-1990s.¹ McCorkel argues habilitation is both gendered and racialized, and has contributed heavily to the contemporary American penal system’s function as a racial caste system. *Breaking Women* is organized into three sections: Part I: “The End of Rehabilitation”; Part II: “The Practice of Habilitation”; and Part III: “Contesting the Boundaries of Self.” The organization of the content is nearly as important as the content itself. Thoroughly explaining the financial justifications and political conditions that enabled the end of progressive-era rehabilitation, as well as how the “get tough” climate they generated gave rise to both the practice of habilitation and its new conceptualization of the “diseased” self of the addict, McCorkel creates a compelling narrative of new penology and the sociocultural implications of the intersection of race and gender within its framework.

The success of *Breaking Women* as a comprehensive and independent

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1. JILL A. MCCORKEL, *BREAKING WOMEN: GENDER, RACE AND THE NEW POLITICS OF IMPRISONMENT* (2013) [hereinafter *BREAKING WOMEN*].

ethnographic survey of a major women's prison, East State Women's Correctional Institution,² is due in large part to McCorkel's sustained presence in the field and her long-term and frequent interaction with East State's various—including both criminal and administrative—inhabitants. In the first phase of research, from 1994 to 1998, McCorkel assembled data from three sources: participant observation; semi-structured interviews with a variety of state actors including administrators, line staff, and prisoners; and archival documents kept by the prison. During her first two years, she served in an official capacity as an ethnographer on a university research team entrusted with evaluating Project Habilitate Women (PHW), a five-stage “experimental, intensive drug treatment program” developed by Prison Services Company.³ Her high-level security clearance granted her “relatively unimpeded access to housing units, recreation areas, the visitation room and PHW,” in addition to access to high-level meetings of state criminal justice officials.⁴ In total, McCorkel conducted formal interviews with seventy-four prisoners and twenty-nine staff members, interviewing nearly half of all respondents more than once over the four-year period.⁵ The second phase of data collection took place during 2000 when she returned two years later to see what had become of the prison and PHW.⁶

By the time she left the field in 1998, it was clear that rehabilitation was no longer a viable option in the tense political climate. However, the longevity of habilitation as an institutional mechanism for individual reform was still questionable; and McCorkel was unsure if it would “harden into the foundation for new penology.”⁷ But as the final section, which chronicles the consequences of habilitation on its primary targets—poor, uneducated African American women “with some connection to the illicit drug economy,”⁸ and conclusion of *Breaking Women* illustrate, habilitation is no fleeting phenomenon. Widely adopted since the “retreat of the welfare state” and the onslaught of a “penal leviathan”⁹ at the behest of the War on Drugs, programs like PHW were forerunners of what “continues to be a booming market—drug treatment services for correctional populations.”¹⁰ Yet the aggressive privatization of prison services is no guarantor of efficacy; most of the

2. *Id.* at 229. McCorkel opted to conceal the names of all places, organizations and people (including the name of the prison) to ensure confidentiality. Although she notes that the recent trend in ethnography has been “to identify places on the premise that context matters,” McCorkel decided to keep the name of the prison and of the state private in order to “leave the door open behind [her] for future researchers to enter.” *Id.*

3. *Id.* at 1. McCorkel refers to the unnamed Prison Services Company contracted by East State as “the Company.” *Id.*

4. *Id.* at 14.

5. *Id.*

6. *Id.* at 15.

7. *Id.*

8. *Id.* at 17.

9. *Id.* at 226.

10. *Id.* at 1.

women in McCorkel's study, upon release from PHW were worse off than before, returning to their communities with the most acute of losses—"the loss of the integrity of the self."¹¹

PART I: THE END OF REHABILITATION: "WE'RE UNFOUNDING REHABILITATION"¹²

McCorkel, a sociologist by training, began her fieldwork at East State Women's Correctional Institution, a major U.S. women's prison, in 1994—a moment when the "get tough on crime" movement and the mass incarceration it produced signaled the demise of the optimistic tenets of penal welfarism.¹³ Penal welfarism, which first appeared in the philosophical principles of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and then became a mainstay of the American criminal justice system during the post-WWII era expansion of social engineering programs, is organized around the fundamental belief that "offenders are more unfortunate than they are bad or evil."¹⁴ Such a redemptive approach to criminal reformation espoused by and through penal welfarism, although manifest in prison and correctional facilities for both genders, has historically—at least for the last century or so—retained a stronger ideological grasp on women's facilities.¹⁵ According to East State's "founder's tale," the reason for this phenomenon can be traced to the late nineteenth-century women's reformatory movement, in which reformers (in this case from the Women's Christian Temperance Union) ventured to simultaneously realize their goals of institutional improvement and individual redemption "by providing a 'homelike' institutional space and a set of familial relationships that encouraged the emergence of [the] prisoner's 'true,' feminine nature."¹⁶ Within small cottages—replete with the reassuring accoutrement of middle-class domesticity—situated on multi-acre gardens and groves, "small groups of inmates lived and interacted as 'families.'"¹⁷

However, McCorkel counters that the founder's tale, though appealing to the liberal mind and humanist heart, falls a few paragraphs short of reality. "[N]ever a reformatory in the archetypal sense," East State Women's Correctional Institutional opened its gates in 1929, a period in history when "historians suggest that

11. *Id.* at 226.

12. *Id.* at 23–24. Warden Richardson's decision to frame the end of "rehabilitation" through the image of its "unfounding" is extremely revealing, according to McCorkel. *Id.* In its more orthodox use, the term refers to "a formal statement issued by police departments declaring that a crime previously thought to have occurred never actually took place." *Id.* at 23. In Richardson's own words, "[T]here's tremendous pressure to rethink everything—who we are, what we do. It's like the past is not a part of us—of this current enterprise Unfounding is like rewriting history." *Id.* at 24.

13. *Id.* at 5.

14. *Id.* at 5–6.

15. *See id.* at 8.

16. *Id.* at 32–33.

17. *Id.* at 33.

the reformatory model was collapsing under the weight of resource limitations and contradictory institutional imperatives.”¹⁸ The composition of East State’s inmate population, too, contributed to its failure to effortlessly embody the tenets of “feminine” individual redemption suggested by its “institutional lineage.”¹⁹ “[J]udges not only sentenced young, female misdemeanants to prison terms,” but all women sentenced to prison terms—regardless of the grade of the crime—meaning that East State no longer solely housed female offenders considered “the best candidates for change.”²⁰ “The reformist goals of ‘change’ and ‘support,’” therefore, “were realized through discipline and surveillance—the same mechanisms used to accomplish security and punishment in men’s prisons.”²¹ The control apparatus through which the aforementioned goals operated, however, “mimicked familial arrangements.”²²

During one of her earliest visits to East State, McCorkel spent the afternoon with two women who had enjoyed the perks of knowing high-ranking prison staff members for the better part of a decade: “Mom is Deputy Warden [Pearson] . . . and the warden [Richardson]—some girls still call him ‘Daddy’ but since moving [to the new prison] we’re not supposed to anymore.”²³ McCorkel notes that familial imagery, especially imagery evoking the bond between parent and child, was intrinsic to the lingua franca of East State during the first years of her fieldwork.²⁴ While male inmates were regularly branded as “the stuff of badness,”²⁵ staff members sympathetically painted the girls as emotionally unstable and helpless, victims of their “feminine subjectivity and past victimization.”²⁶ However, as East State quickly became susceptible to overcrowding due to the increase in rates of incarceration in the mid-1990s, the already limited financial resources of the state prison system began to buckle, and another crisis—“a crisis over the meaning of punishment”—emerged.²⁷ “In the politically charged context of the drug war, however, recidivism began to look more and more like an indicator” of institutional ineptitude.²⁸ If rehabilitation was genuinely effective, then upon release its beneficiaries would find steady employment, make amends with their families, and possess the tools to liberate themselves from the most toxic aspects of their respective communities—in short, they would be productive members of society unlikely to reenter the prison system.²⁹ The failure of rehabilitation created a space for amplified levels

18. *Id.*

19. *Id.* at 34.

20. *Id.* at 33.

21. *Id.* at 35.

22. *Id.*

23. *Id.*

24. *Id.* at 36.

25. *Id.* at 37.

26. *Id.* at 42.

27. *Id.* at 46.

28. *Id.* at 47.

29. *Id.*

of “trans-institutionalization,”³⁰ and private corporations, such as GEO Group and Corrections Corporation of America,³¹ did not have to work very hard to make their programs and services seem attractive to strained prison and state administrators.³²

Warden Richardson, too, was more amenable to the heightened presence and influence of private interests at East State, particularly in the form of the Company’s new drug treatment program, PHW.³³ Employing the logic of eighteenth-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham, the Company’s panoptic brand of therapeutic services maintained that “law and order could be better achieved through . . . intervention into prisoners’ minds.”³⁴ Collapsing the distinction between “treatment” and “punishment,” PHW distinguished habilitation from rehabilitation by endorsing the former as “tough, confrontational, and punitive.”³⁵ The shift in the practice of punishment overlapped with the shift in the racial demographics of the prison population,³⁶ a shift responsible (at least in part) for the prevailing staff assessment of incoming prisoners as “real criminals” as opposed to troubled, but fundamentally “good” girls.³⁷ Company executives pounced on racialized and racist constructions of “real” criminals to encourage a new philosophy of penology—“one that attributed drug addiction and criminal behavior to a diseased self.”³⁸ As “state actors endeavored to make sense of it all—the rates of women’s incarceration, their participation in drug crime” to name a few, “race and the presumed moral decay of [impoverished and urban] Black and Latino/a urban neighborhoods” took center stage, and the inhabitants of those communities, especially “young, poor, undereducated African American women” became easy and inevitable scapegoats.³⁹

It is at this moment, near the end of Part I, that both McCorkel’s research

30. *Id.* at 56. “[A] lack of adequate medical care, as well as the nonexistence of ‘therapeutic’ and clinical services” for patients suffering from what Dr. Nesbitt (of the Company) refers to as a “‘dual diagnosis disorder’ (i.e., a history of mental health problems and criminal offending)” facilitated the need for the Company within the penal system. *Id.* (citing Kenneth Minkoff, *An Integrated Treatment Model for Dual Diagnosis of Psychosis and Addiction*, 40 HOSP. & COMMUNITY PSYCHIATRY 1031 (1989)).

31. GEO Group and Corrections Corporation of America are two disparate entities, unaffiliated with “the Company” that McCorkel references in *Breaking Women*. *Id.* at 53–54.

32. *See id.* at 54.

33. *See id.* at 50–52.

34. *Id.* at 56–57.

35. *Id.* at 59.

36. “From 1986 through 2003, the incarceration rate among Black women increased by 800% compared to an increase of 400% over the same period for non-Black women.” *Id.* at 73 (citing LENORA LAPIDUS, NAMITA LUTHRA, ANJULI VERMA, DEBORAH SMALL, PATRICIA ALLARD & KIRSTEN LEVINGSTON, ACLU, *CAUGHT IN THE NET: THE IMPACT OF DRUG POLICIES ON WOMEN AND FAMILIES* (2005)).

37. *Id.* at 78–79. The category “good girl,” McCorkel states “was born of a historical moment when white women constituted the majority of prisoners in the state.” *Id.* at 83.

38. *Id.* at 73.

39. *Id.* at 77.

and *Breaking Women* take off. As her focus converges on PHW, McCorkel's background in sociology enables the accompanying narrative not simply to be one that interrogates the new forms of institutional control through a theoretical framework, but to be one that reveals the profound real-life implications of the end of rehabilitative paternalism and the rise of female-centric habilitation, rehabilitative paternalism's more punitive replacement.⁴⁰ *Breaking Women* departs from previous studies of "responsibilization"⁴¹ and the new penology in two ways. First, McCorkel contends that the framing of the self as incapable of self-regulation is an outcome of prison privatization and the racial politics of mass incarceration. Second, McCorkel homes in on the relationship between race and the "disordered self" in a way that has eluded much of the scholarship on women's prisons, which has had the tendency to minimize the distinction between race and poverty so that the drug war is analyzed as a method of governing poor women.⁴² McCorkel argues, conversely, that racial stereotypes of black women, specifically as "welfare-dependent, crime prone, and drug addicted," became galvanizing symbols for the institutional repudiation of rehabilitative paternalism and the rise of increasingly coercive and intrusive strategies of control.⁴³ The main objective of programs such as PHW is not to heal or normalize the self, but for the addict to surrender to a vision of herself as continually and incurably diseased.

PART II: THE PRACTICE OF HABILITATION: "EVERYWHERE YOU GO, EVERYTHING YOU DO, THE EYES ARE ALWAYS WATCHING YOU"⁴⁴

For the prisoners, being in PHW involves deliberately intrusive varieties of enculturation and socialization.⁴⁵ To enable readers to fully understand the extent to which habilitation necessitates a breakdown of the self, McCorkel transitions seamlessly into the role of cultural anthropologist in Part II by paying special attention to the confrontational techniques relied upon by PHW staffers. Calculatedly designed to isolate troublemakers, encounter groups have two primary functions: first, to challenge the way the target understands her "real" self; and second, to

40. *See id.* at 9–10.

41. The term "responsibilization" refers to a "general strategy of governance that shifts the responsibility for social problems from the state to the individual and, then in turn, encourages the individual to become self-regulating." *Id.* at 10 (citing Nikolas Rose, *Government & Control*, 40 BRIT. J. CRIMINOLOGY 321 (2000)).

42. *Id.* at 12.

43. *Id.* at 13.

44. *Id.* at 97. A central tenet of PHW's philosophy of punishment, this message can be found on posters throughout the facility. *Id.* at 107.

45. Enculturation is the process by which people learn the requirements of their surrounding culture and acquire the values and behaviors appropriate or necessary in that culture. John W. Berry, *Acculturation*, in HANDBOOK OF SOCIALIZATION: THEORY AND RESEARCH 547 (Joan E. Grusec & Paul D. Hasting eds., 2007).

trigger women into releasing and then promptly regulating their emotions.⁴⁶ McCorkel, sitting in on these encounter groups and then narrating the content of the exchanges between prisoner and counselor, utilizes the example of this particular type of interaction to demonstrate what is truly at stake in PHW—the prisoner’s conceptualization of herself versus PHW/the counselor’s conceptualization of the prisoner’s self as diseased. PHW counselors characterize addiction as “‘a disorder of the whole person. The problem is the person, not the drug.’”⁴⁷ Unsurprisingly, PHW counselors characterize addiction treatment in complementary terms: “‘Rehabilitation implies a fully formed self. Crime-involved addicts suffer from incomplete and underdeveloped selves. Therefore, they cannot be rehabilitated, they must be habilitated.’”⁴⁸

One pinball session between Counselor Tynice and a prisoner named Tai,⁴⁹ who was found guilty of insubordination, reveals the kind of unrelenting attack PHW inflicts on the prisoner’s notion of “self.”⁵⁰ Accused of passing a note expressing homosexual desire for another prisoner, Tai walks away from a counselor while being reprimanded for the act in the pinball session, and is initially adamant that she is not homosexual and did not “write . . . romantic letters to another woman.”⁵¹ Nevertheless, her protests fall upon deaf ears:

‘Come on, [Tai]. You know we were gonna find out sooner or later. I got [Jamillah (to whom the note was passed)] saying you did it, and not only that but several people in this house including your roommate remember seeing you write notes during your free time and I got a person that says she saw you pass the note to [Jamillah].’⁵²

By revealing to Tai that her fellow prisoners exposed her misconduct, Counselor Tynice implied that there is no such thing as a “fellow prisoner.” “‘There are no friends in treatment,’” the counselors frequently declare, and “*embodied surveillance*” of the prisoners by one another perpetuates conditions of distrust amongst their numbers.⁵³ Counselor Tynice goes on to call Tai a helpless, manipulative, and manipulable “crack whore” who cannot deal with her emotions and attempts to control them by taking drugs.⁵⁴ At first, Tai who is “confident enough in her own

46. BREAKING WOMEN, *supra* note 1, at 101.

47. *Id.* at 86.

48. *Id.* at 86.

49. A pinball session is a type of encounter group in which “the target sits alone in the middle of a circle and is confronted in a rapid-fire style by staff, as well as by other prisoners whom the staff hand-selects to participate in the confrontation.” *Id.* at 102.

50. *Id.* at 103–105.

51. *Id.* at 109–110.

52. *Id.* at 110.

53. *Id.* at 111–112.

54. *Id.* at 105.

knowledge of self,” objects to her superior’s appraisal.⁵⁵ The intensity of the confrontation in the pinball session, however, expedites the disintegration of her sense of self *and* her faith in the fundamental integrity of that self. By the end of the session, Tai “no longer believes she is the source of knowledge about herself,” having finally unearthed her real (and in this case “diseased”) self through the counselor’s harsh words.⁵⁶

More so than any handbook from PHW or interviews with prison and program administrators, heated, tense, and normally confidential exchanges like the one between Counselor Tynice and Tai offer the reader not only an accurate insight into habilitation, but also a deeply personal one. As a result, the reader understands both what habilitation as an institutional practice intends to do to the addict’s mind, as well as its very real psychological consequences. The reader follows these women as though they are characters in a story—the women understand why they have been imprisoned, they understand the conditions of their sentencing that have brought them into the PHW fold, and they have a sense of the dynamics within their external families and communities. Consequently, the prisoners are not perceived as the nameless incarcerated, but as empathetic individuals often entrapped in a vicious cycle of poverty and abuse. McCorkel’s true subject matter is not East State or PHW; her real subject matter is the women who inhabit these institutions. By revealing the limitations of institutional practices such as PHW through their devastating effects on female prisoners, McCorkel exemplifies the central argument in *Breaking Women*—that prisons are ill equipped to provide long-term, effective solutions to the composite issues of poverty and substance abuse.

PART III: CONTESTING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE SELF: “LIFE ISN’T EASY SO WHY SHOULD RECOVERY BE?”⁵⁷

In the final section, McCorkel examines how prisoners reacted—either in the form of internalization or surrender, “rentin’ out [their] head,”⁵⁸ or open defiance—to habilitation, and their reasons for doing so. Though women of all ages and criminal backgrounds can be admitted to PHW, the one label they all share is that of “addict.” However, as Part III makes vividly clear, the women defined as “addicts” and the counselors and administrators who define them as such, are often at odds with respect to what exactly constitutes an “addict.” Some women who were unwilling to surrender to a vision of themselves as addicts envision addicts as those who lack control over their drug use, and as a result, felt the reverberations of

55. *Id.* at 112.

56. *Id.* at 113.

57. *Id.* at 173. A prisoner wrote a rap song about her experience in PHW; the line cited is the final line of her song. *Id.* at 172–73.

58. *Id.* at 155. In PHW, “rentin’ out yo head” is tantamount to “faking it to make it.” See *id.* at 159–60.

this absence in other facets of their lives.⁵⁹ For example, women who felt strongly that PHW had misclassified them as “addicts” included: Betty, a fifty-two-year-old grandmother who received “an eighteen-month prison sentence for possession of cocaine after police searched her apartment on a tip that her grandson was dealing drugs out of the home”; Jenna, who “was in charge of a local prostitution ring” and admitted to selling and occasionally using drugs through the women who worked for her; Alicia, who worked for a beauty salon and sold drugs on the side; and Carmen, who protested that her main issue with drugs stemmed from the money she made selling them.⁶⁰

Prisoners who rejected the label also condemned the “frequent and liberal use of degrading terms to refer to women in the program” during group confrontation sessions.⁶¹ For Alicia and Meesha, both of whom were kicked out of PHW, the staff’s use of expletives and belittling remarks were highly inappropriate given the physically and emotionally abusive backgrounds from which many female prisoners come, and more importantly, reflected the fact that counselors were not invested in prisoner well-being or healing.⁶² Testimonies such as these echo McCorkel’s belief that prisons and the increasingly privatized, for-profit systems in which they operate have neither the institutional nor human capacity to offer the kind of healing that most of these women require. Though McCorkel does not advocate a return to the comforting civility of penal welfarism—which, to be fair, is neither financially nor politically feasible and clearly resulted in high rates of recidivism—it is clear she believes that actual rehabilitation, or “habilitation,” cannot come from inside the current penal system. Confrontation-based practices, she rightfully affirms, contribute to the rapid erosion of humanity in both “the keepers and the kept.”⁶³

Female prisoners who did surrender to the process of habilitation, however, were widely touted by counselors and prison administrators as shining examples of PHW’s triumph. Upon surrendering to the definition of their core self as “diseased,” women increasingly relied on addiction narratives not only to make sense of the contradictions in their lives, but also to resolve ambiguities within their self-identities. Surrender displaced the “locus of identity construction” from the “individual to the institution such that [the women] became entirely dependent on the institution to supply the narratives around which they fitted their lives.”⁶⁴ Their narratives as mothers, workers, and lovers were all manipulated and reconstructed so that drug use became the central axis around which all other activities and roles revolved. Red, a prisoner who surrendered after thirteen months, described her new sense of self with an emphasis on the incurability of her addiction. Initially defiant,

59. *Id.* at 190.

60. *Id.* at 188–91.

61. *Id.* at 191.

62. *See id.* at 192–93.

63. *Id.* at 227.

64. *Id.* at 180.

Red submitted to PHW's narrative of her "diseased" self willingly "because she was tired of her drug use and seeking a way to control it."⁶⁵ She became, essentially, who the staff told her she was: a "diseased" self who was controlled by her addiction. Red may have adopted the narrative supplied by PHW, but McCorkel slips the reader Red's previous narrative: during the years of her "addiction," Red had received her high school diploma, "raised her son, worked three jobs at a time to support him, and successfully enrolled her mother into a counseling program for her heroin abuse."⁶⁶ Inextricably tied to her addiction, Red alienates this past, arguably productive self, in order to manage her disease. She cannot hope to fully recover because the terms of surrender brand her as "incurable," and so she is left with a sense of self that drifts languidly in an orbit of past failures, regrets, and frustrations.

McCorkel's issue with habilitation—and the reason she believes it does not work—is that it eliminates any kind of complexity or nuance from the women's lives. As a result, once the women leave prison and PHW, they are unable to meaningfully engage with the countless emotional, financial, and sometimes physical difficulties they face in their communities and families. They have had absolutely no vocational training, no exposure to higher education, and no opportunities to discover and hone their individual strengths during their years in prison. They depart the oppressive confines of PHW as shadows of their former selves, without the skill set to rebuild themselves and their lives. In the final pages of the conclusion, McCorkel writes of the last time she saw Red, which was at a street festival "sitting on a bench with a man who was rumored to be one of the area's most significant drug dealers."⁶⁷ The former inmate greeted the author with a characteristically bright smile, and though they made plans to meet the next day, Red never showed up and McCorkel never heard from her again.⁶⁸

McCorkel's decision to close her study with a putative end to Red's story is not at all coincidental; it is Red, in fact, who utters the first words of *Breaking Women*. "I'm lost, I've had to surrender myself," declares Red as she sits with McCorkel awaiting word on whether her release paperwork will be processed in time for her son's fourth birthday.⁶⁹ One of the most celebrated "graduates" of PHW, Red even described herself as a changed woman, stressing that she did not regret discarding her old "[y]ing, thie[v]ing, and manipul[at]ing" self.⁷⁰ When Red left PHW, she returned to her old community, which was still fraught with violence, substance abuse, and abject poverty. Though the neighborhood had remained the same, Red had undergone an irreversible change—she had surrendered and lost her

65. *Id.* at 178.

66. *Id.* at 179.

67. *Id.* at 226.

68. *Id.* at 226–27.

69. *Id.* at 1.

70. *Id.* at 2.

sense of self in PHW. The core problem that McCorkel identifies in PHW is not that it aims to “break women,” but that it is unequivocally uninterested in developing a genuine mechanism for reconstituting the “broken” self into one definitively able to transcend the intense marginalization these women are pummeled with in nearly every aspect of their lives. In the new penology, women—Latina and African American women in particular—are encumbered by yet another form of socio-political marginalization; they are at once criminal and victim.

CONCLUSION: THE END GOALS OF DISCIPLINE AND PUNISHMENT IN THE NEW PENOLOGY

Ultimately, McCorkel stops short of suggesting new avenues of treatment or offering her own philosophical treatise on the gender of discipline and punishment, stating in the preface that her intention is “to call for greater interrogation of punishment in all its guises.”⁷¹ But what is the end goal of punishment, or incarceration, or the new increasingly privatized penology which PHW embodies? Though these questions are at the heart of McCorkel’s prolific research, they remain unanswered at the close of *Breaking Women*. The contemporary American penal system, mired in financial distress with its prisons teeming with inmates as a result of the War on Drugs, has no discernible end goal in mind for the incarcerated. An absence of intent—an absence of desire to truly help and better the mental and emotional states of those imprisoned—is perhaps one of the most flagrant causes of recidivism. What McCorkel exposes through her meticulous study of East State, as well as its inhabitants and employees, is that even if that desire is buried deeply somewhere in the system, the system inherently lacks the capacity to implement such positive change. To successfully and, perhaps more importantly, sensitively engage with the myriad socioeconomic factors, racial dynamics, and gendered experiences that inmates—and particularly female inmates—experience both inside and outside of prison, the penal system would need to adopt a much more nuanced and individualized approach to those in its custody. Prison, of course, is not a psychologist’s office or vocational training center, and the likelihood of total institutional transformation remains a far-fetched dream of the idealistic at best. Therefore, those who study and work inside of the American penal system must genuinely consider its true function in our society. If it is meant to bring peace and stability to the social order, how can it aspire to do so without addressing the compound reasons for which its inmates are locked up? As in the case of the multiple inmates and former inmates chronicled in *Breaking Women*, these women are not jailed until death, but are released back into the very communities that have incontrovertibly contributed to their incarceration. Have these women failed themselves, their families, and their communities when, like Red, they simply revert back to old, toxic habits? Or has the American penal system, their alleged reformer, failed them?

71. *Id.* at xi.