INTRODUCTION

Searching for Red’s Self

I’m lost. I’ve had to surrender my self.
—Red, on the eve of her release from prison

What must one know about oneself in order to be willing to renounce anything?
—Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self”

“I’m lost, I’ve had to surrender my self.” As Red says this, she curls her fingers into a loose fist and raps her chest as if to indicate the part of her that has gone missing. We are sitting in a shaded corner of the prison’s recreation yard awaiting word on whether her release paperwork will be processed in time for her to return home to celebrate her son’s fourth birthday. She learned the day before that she had successfully completed all five of the “transformation phases” of an experimental, intensive drug treatment program that was housed in a separate wing of East State Women’s Correctional Institution. The program, known as Project Habilitate Women or PHW for short, was the latest in the prison’s arsenal of measures designed to curb chronic prison overcrowding, high rates of inmate recidivism, prison disciplinary problems, and spiraling economic costs associated with the state’s War on Drugs. PHW was the creation of Prison Services Company (hereafter the Company), one of the largest for-profit providers of prison health care services in the country. Beginning in the early 1990s, the Company began an aggressive campaign to corner what continues to be a booming market—drug treatment services for correctional populations. PHW was one of the first in what would become a growing chain of such programs in prisons, jails, work-release facilities, and halfway houses across the United States.
Red was one of PHW’s most celebrated participants. In the twelve years leading up to her present incarceration, she made a decent living by selling drugs and engaging in small-time hustles like prostitution and petty theft. When her appetite for using drugs exceeded her income from selling them, her criminal activity took a dramatic and some would say “masculine” turn. She developed a penchant for carjacking and armed robbery—crimes that remain almost exclusively a man’s game. It was her second armed robbery, the stickup of a convenience store, that landed her in prison. Like previous stints, this one initially seemed to only deepen her involvement with drugs and crime. She began her prison term surreptitiously smoking the crack cocaine she had smuggled into the facility. Her decision to enter the drug treatment program was purely strategic. She was facing a sentence of eight to twenty-seven years on two counts of robbery in the first degree and a prior drug conviction. Successful completion of PHW held out the possibility of a significant sentence reduction.

After nearly four years in prison (two of which were spent in PHW), she seemed well on the way to turning her life around. She had racked up an impressive array of accomplishments, including getting clean, earning certification as a nursing assistant, gaining weekly, supervised visits with her son, getting approval to work outside the prison at a local sanitation facility, and earning credit toward an early release from prison. During PHW’s graduation ceremony, she described herself as a changed woman—one with goals, “positive” relationships, and a new outlook on life. She spoke of these changes optimistically and emphasized that she did not regret abandoning the person she once was—a person she described as little more than a “liar, thief, and manipulator.” Red’s characterization of her “old self” corresponded to the description that company executives and state officials used, although they often punctuated their account with a host of clinical sounding terms like “addictive personality,” “codependent,” and “criminal thinker.” Red’s story—particularly her lengthy criminal history and bumpy road to redemption—was one that state actors, from prison administrators to correctional officers, liked to tell. The fact that Red had not yet stepped foot outside the prison as a free woman was beside the point. In these retellings, she was more political allegory than data point. Specifically, they used her story to make two points. The first was that women offenders had changed. They claimed that the incoming tide of prisoners were more aggressive, drug-involved, manipulative, and prone to commit crime than were previous ones. The second point was that the ideology and structure of control in the prison also had to change in order to manage this new population effectively. State officials, in particular, argued that Red’s history of recidivism and drug relapse was facilitated, in part, by...
the limitations of a gendered system of control that had its origins in the 19th-century women's reformatory movement. To overcome this, the Department of Correction closed the old women's prison, a reformatory-era building that dated back to 1929, and replaced it with a new, state-of-the-art facility that resembled, in both appearance and effect, prisons for men. Barbed wire crowned perimeter fences, metal detectors and various surveillance devices were installed in housing blocks and main thoroughfares, and a control unit was built to deal with inmates deemed dangerous and unruly.

This did not mean that gender disappeared as an organizing strategy of control in the prison. It persisted in different forms. Administrators and line staff held fast to the belief that while incoming women prisoners were different from previous cohorts, they were not men. Thus administrators resisted the idea that the women's prison should entirely morph into its male counterpart—an austere, isolating environment designed to warehouse prisoners for the duration of their sentences. They remained committed to the principle that prisons for women should prioritize treatment over punishment. To respond to the challenges presented by inmates who were thought to be more dangerous, drug addicted, and crime prone, administrators worked with executives from Prison Services Company to launch Project Habilitate Women, an intensive, confrontational form of drug treatment that was based on the therapeutic community model. Sociologists have characterized this model as “strong-arm rehab” because it is considerably more coercive than popular self-help programs like Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous. PHW made a similar distinction, referring to their system of control as “habilitation” in order to contrast it from “softer” and “more lenient” rehabilitative models. Habilitation is a set of social technologies that mobilize surveillance, confrontation, humiliation, and discipline for the purposes of “breaking down” a self that is thought to be diseased. It is guided by a philosophy of addiction which holds that the self is the ultimate source of social disorder (in the form of crime and poverty), institutional disorder (in the form of prison overcrowding and inmate recidivism), and personal disorder (in the form of drug addiction). According to this framework, women like Red get addicted to drugs and become dependent on criminal lifestyles because they are believed to possess diseased and incomplete selves—selves that are further eroded under the weight of addictions, poverty, and “bad choices.” The appeal of this program to prison administrators was that it embodied the spirit of the state's efforts to make prisons tougher and more secure, while simultaneously preserving the logic of gender difference in the application of carceral control. Ultimately, administrators and state officials hoped to alleviate the problem of drugs, crime, recidivism, and overcrowding by engineering nothing short of an institutional takeover of unruly selves.
At the time of our interview, Red had done two major stints in prison, the first beginning in 1989 and the second (and current one) beginning in 1995. Her experiences in prison straddle the divide between the classic rehabilitative system of control and the more coercive system of habilitation. Her first term was spent in the old, reformatory-era facility. She told me that she “slid” through her time there and attributed this primarily to the fact that prison staff were relatively lenient and functioned like quasi-parental figures: “They told us to be good and to read our Bibles.” Her current term took place in the new prison. In contrast to her description of her first term as “easy,” she characterized her experiences in the new prison, particularly her time spent in PHW, as “intense” and “hard”:

Red: [The old prison] never got in-depth. Inmates will say, “Prison is prison is prison.” Well, it’s not. I’ve been around. Prison is one thing—this is another, you know? In here [PHW] they get in real deep. They’re in your head and so it’s hard time—it’s a real tough adjustment. They break you down.

Jill McCorkel (hereafter JM): Why do they do that?
Red: Because addicts—addiction fucks with your head. You don’t think right, you don’t act right, you know? Addiction is my life, it affects my life and so, to get a new life, I’ve got to surrender my self to their process.

As we talk, I watch one of the PHW counselors moving across the yard to meet us. She’s got release paperwork in her hand. The counselor informs Red that she will be transferred to a community-based, work-release program within the month. She won’t make it out of prison in time for her son’s fourth birthday, but provided things go well in work release, she’ll be back home after having served just over half her minimum sentence. As the counselor disappears back into the prison, I remark to Red that she must be happy to have earned an early release from prison. She looks at me blankly and shrugs. “Most people say that prison robs you of time, but this—,” she gestures to the green building where PHW is housed, “this is a new kind of punishment. This robs you of something else. When they take away a person’s dignity, a person’s self-respect, what is left?”

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At the time of my conversation with Red, I had been an ethnographer in this women’s prison for nearly four years. It was not the first time that I heard a prisoner pose the question of what this “new kind of punishment” meant for
their sense of self. From the start, prisoners had been asking whether habilitation was a form of “brainwashing,” designed to make them into something they were not sure they wanted to be. State officials, company executives, prison administrators, and line staff were similarly consumed with the subject of prisoners’ selves, though they did not frame this in quite the same terms. For them, the diseased self was a social problem that required immediate intervention. Their questions frequently centered on how best to identify and diagnose the “real” selves of prisoners for the purposes of institutional management and social control.

It is important to emphasize that everyone from prison staff to state officials to prisoners themselves approached the self as if it were a real, empirical thing. That is, they believed in the existence of a “real self,” a coherent entity within a person that serves as a sort of inner core from which everything else (e.g., emotion, cognition, behavior, beliefs, attitudes, morality) flows. Where they differed was in their representations of what this self “really” was. Prisoners struggled to be seen as more than drug addicts and criminals. Staff struggled to determine whether the things prisoners did and said were authentic representations of who they “really” were. For the purpose of this analysis, my aim is not to discover whether the staff were right when they diagnosed prisoners as diseased, nor is it to determine whether prisoners were being truthful in the narratives they told about themselves. Such an approach would be a dubious undertaking, particularly since the question of whether a core self lurks under the surface of public identities and managed impressions is a point of theoretical controversy within the social sciences. What is important for my purposes is the fact that individuals interact with one another, and institutions like the prison act on individuals, as if a core self exists. The self, in other words, is a socially constructed object.

The institutional preoccupation with the self took me by surprise. I began my fieldwork in this women’s prison in 1994. It was at a moment when the “get tough on crime” movement and the mass incarceration it produced appeared to signal the demise of what sociologist David Garland calls the modernist project of penal welfarism. The penal welfare system comprises an interlocking grid of institutions, agencies, and policies that make up the criminal justice system. These include indeterminate sentencing laws, pre-sentence investigation reports that allow courts to individually tailor sentences, specialty courts for juveniles, social work programs for offenders and their families, early release programs from prison, educational and rehabilitative programming in prison, halfway houses, parole, and community-based programs that aim to reintegrate offenders in the social mainstream. The origins of the system can be traced to 18th-century Enlightenment philosophy
and the expansion, particularly during the post–World War II era, of social engineering programs. It is organized around two ideas. The first is the rehabilitative ideal, a core principle that holds that penal measures should aim, whenever possible, to assist offenders in leading law-abiding, productive lives.\(^\text{11}\) The second is that the state is responsible for not only the punishment and control of offenders, but also their care and reform. The goal of penal welfarism is an optimistic one—it is to reform and normalize unruly selves rather than to permanently stigmatize and marginalize them.\(^\text{12}\) It rests on the belief that offenders are more unfortunate than they are bad or evil.

Although the decline of penal welfarism, and concomitantly the rehabilitative ideal, was evident as early as the mid-1970s, it was the maturation of the “get tough on crime movement” during the mid-1990s that heralded the collapse of this system. “Get tough” turned penal welfarism on its head at virtually every conceivable level within the criminal justice system. It rejected the rehabilitative ideal in favor of greater punitiveness, infamously symbolized in “three strikes” legislation, mandatory minimum sentences for drug crimes, and expanded use of the death penalty. It bears emphasis that these policies not only sharply upped the ante for those charged with crimes, they did away with judicial discretion and individually tailored sentences. For example, California was one of the first states to pass three strikes legislation in 1994 and over the decade, twenty-three other states and the federal government followed suit. Three strikes laws vary by state but typically impose mandatory life sentences on persons convicted of three or more felony offenses.\(^\text{13}\) Even more widespread than three strikes legislation was the statewide adoption of mandatory minimum sentences for drug crimes. The War on Drugs was part and parcel of the “get tough” movement. States modeled their drug laws after federal drug schedules created in the Anti–Drug Abuse Acts of 1986 and 1988. This legislation dramatically increased the penalties for drug crimes, particularly for crack cocaine. Indeed, crack cocaine was the only drug that carried a mandatory minimum penalty for a first offense of simple possession. Offenders convicted of possessing five or more grams of crack cocaine were sentenced to a mandatory five-year term in prison.\(^\text{14}\) Further, this legislation stipulated that criminal penalties in drug cases were not to be based on an individual’s role in the offense, but rather on the volume of the drug in question. Thus an individual who played a more minor role in a drug transaction such as a lookout or delivery person was sentenced as if he or she were one of the main parties to the crime. These laws, combined with aggressive policing tactics associated with the War on Drugs, gave rise to the contemporary phenomenon of mass incarceration. Mass incarceration refers to the fact that more Americans are incarcerated
for increasingly longer periods of time—more so than at any other point in this nation's history and defying global comparison. Currently, more than 2.2 million adults are incarcerated in federal and state prisons and county jails in the United States. With an incarceration rate of 743 adults per 100,000, the United States is the world leader in locking up its own citizens.\(^5\)

In many respects, sentencing policies that sent more offenders away for ever-longer periods of time marked the declining significance of the self within the broader terrain of the criminal justice system. The popular crime-control adage “lock ’em up and throw away the key” suggests that within the rubric of the “get tough” movement, unruly selves are considered beyond redemption and repair. The trend toward greater punitiveness was amplified within the prison system, as carceral priorities shifted away from rehabilitation in favor of the “humane incapacitation” of the millions of men and women who were serving time. Indeed, it was not just that more Americans were being sent to prison than ever before, it was that prisons themselves were changing. As prisons became preoccupied with deploying new technologies of surveillance and restraint to control inmates, educational, vocational, and rehabilitative programming all but disappeared. The 1990s and beyond were witness to the widespread use of control units within medium- and maximum-security institutions and the birth of “super max” prisons designed to house a new criminal class of “super predators.”\(^6\) These units and facilities typically house prisoners in isolation cells, for up to twenty-three hours a day, with little to no human contact.\(^7\) Research documenting these trends suggests, in men’s prisons at least, that what was emerging in the wake of penal welfarism was the antithesis of the rehabilitative ideal.\(^8\)

In their influential 1992 article “The New Penology,” sociologists Malcolm Feeley and Jonathan Simon endeavored to map the contours of what they argued was emerging as the system of punishment that would replace penal welfarism.\(^9\) Among their key claims were that the fundamental objectives of the criminal justice system were changing, as were the techniques of control. The goal of rehabilitation was being replaced by the desire to identify and manage risk. The objective of risk management is premised on a much more pessimistic set of beliefs about crime and criminals—specifically, that crime is never going to go away and that serious offenders are incapable of reform. Thus the central task of the criminal justice system must be to manage crime by identifying those groups who are thought to be the most crime prone and subjecting them to high levels of surveillance and control. Feeley and Simon observe, “The new penology is neither about punishing or rehabilitating individuals. It is about identifying and managing unruly groups.”\(^10\) With this comes a renewed emphasis on incarceration as the primary technique for
neutralizing the threat presented by dangerous groups. In this model, prisons become little more than human warehouses, designed to hold offenders until the risk they pose diminishes or disappears altogether. The internal work of the prison system subsequently redirects itself away from tailoring treatment to improve the individual offender’s chances for success upon release and toward finding more cost-effective, efficient means for managing large groups of prisoners for longer periods of time. Feeley and Simon’s theory of the new penology has been critiqued for, among other things, its failure to adequately theorize race and gender and its treatment of prisons as homogenous and static institutions. Nonetheless, the term “new penology” remains in use today by prison scholars like Loïc Wacquant to refer to the general and systemic shift away from rehabilitation and toward the management of dangerous groups. I am using the term in a similar way here, to refer to profound shifts in punishment ideologies and techniques of control within prisons.

I began this study with the intention of documenting the impact of the “get tough” movement in the women’s prison. As a sociologist who studies gender, I was particularly interested in understanding how such a pronounced shift away from rehabilitation would affect the gender regime of the prison. Research by feminist sociologists and historians makes clear that prisons are gendered organizations in which assumptions about masculinity, femininity, and gender difference are encoded into the practices, ideologies, and distributions of power. For the better part of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, prisons have operated according to the logic of separate spheres, in which the techniques of surveillance and control and the ends to which both were put were guided by beliefs about men’s and women’s essential natures, the source of their criminality, and socially constructed assumptions about their needs, capabilities, and their locations vis-à-vis family, market, and state. In many respects, the ideology of rehabilitation has occupied a more central and stable place within the feminine side of the penal system. Criminologists Candace Kruttschnitt and Rosemary Gartner argue that this is because broader cultural assumptions about women criminals and normative expectations of femininity have persisted through time. Crime is not considered an extension of women’s essential nature but rather a perversion of it. Thus there has been a tendency to portray women offenders as more mad than bad and, concomitantly, an institutional mandate to prioritize treatment over punishment.

By the mid-1990s, however, the “get tough” movement seemed poised to upend this gendered logic. Restrictions on judicial discretion, primarily in the form of mandatory minimum sentences, meant that tens of thousands of
women were being sentenced to lengthy prison terms. From the start of the War on Drugs in the mid-1980s through century’s end, the number of women in state and federal prisons increased by over 400%. Much of this increase is attributable to mandatory sentences for drug crimes. Today the number of incarcerated women in the United States stands just under 115,000. More than three-quarters of women prisoners are African American or Latina and the majority are mothers to children under the age of eighteen. Increases like these are historically unprecedented and demonstrate a shifting set of priorities within the criminal justice system. Indeed, the very categories of persons for whom mercy was once reserved—first-time and nonviolent offenders, juveniles, and women—became the fastest growing segment of the prison population. Feminist criminologists were quick to christen the gendered effects of the new penology as “equality with a vengeance.”

My primary aim in undertaking an ethnographic study of a women’s prison during this period is to understand how punishment, in terms of its constitutive logic and practices, changed, and to document the implications of these changes for prisoners, line staff, and administrators. Most of the scholarship on mass incarceration and the new penology has been produced from afar. Social scientists have analyzed survey data, descriptive statistics, judicial decisions, legislative mandates, administrative decrees, media coverage of crime, and political rhetoric to piece together what is happening. As valuable as these analyses are, none are able to offer an interior account of the punishment process. How did state actors interpret, implement, and legitimate “get tough” policies? How did they reconcile them with the prison’s tradition of reform? How, in turn, did prisoners experience, resist, and make sense of what was happening? As the handful of ethnographic studies of men’s prisons made clear, the “get tough” movement not only changed who is sent to prison, but also how punishment is enacted therein. How these changes affected the institution of the women’s prison and prisoners like Red is the subject of this book.

Like state officials and executives from Prison Services Company, I am also using Red’s story and the stories of women incarcerated alongside her. My purpose in doing so is not, as they did, to legitimate new forms of control; rather, it is to interrogate these forms of control. As the interview excerpt from Red’s account of her time in prison suggests, the implications of this “new kind of punishment” within women’s prisons are profound. It shapes not only how women prisoners experience the pains of incarceration, but also how they come to experience the self, often with devastating consequences. Beyond this, it suggests that despite the implementation of various “get tough” measures, women’s prisons are moving in a distinctly
different direction than men’s. At the moment when men’s prisons became preoccupied with containing the body, the prison I studied became even more deeply invested in the self as the primary object of institutional control. This does not mean, however, that the rehabilitative ideal persisted in women’s prisons as it withered in men’s. As my analysis will show, rehabilitation quickly lost legitimacy in the wake of various sets of institutional crises reverberating throughout the prison system. Further, habilitation as a technique of control cannot be understood as rehabilitation by another name. I argue that it does indeed signal the arrival of a new system of punishment—one that is deeply gendered and racialized and reflects the growing influence of privatization and market-based sensibilities in the governing logic of punishment.

Gender and Women’s Prisons

Even during the height of the “get tough” movement, women’s prisons were not moving in lockstep with men’s. In their book *Marking Time in the Golden State*, Candace Kruttschnitt and Rosemary Gartner present a comparative historical study of two different women’s prisons in California at two different points in time, the 1960s and the 1990s. They report that during the 1990s, vestiges of a rehabilitative framework remained, even as the prisons themselves adapted to the more punitive institutional context in which they found themselves. Prison staff continued to theorize women’s criminality in terms of their vulnerability to risky men and their “bad” relationship choices. This is a key distinction from men’s prisons, where the logic of “get tough” framed male offenders as rational actors who committed crimes intentionally. Gendered assumptions about subjectivity shape how “get tough” measures are translated into practice within the prisons they studied. What changed then from the 1960s to the 1990s is not so much the belief that women offenders needed to be punished more than rehabilitated, but that offenders themselves, rather than the state, must take up the torch of their own rehabilitation. Scholars call this process “responsibilization.” The term refers to a general strategy of governance that shifts responsibility for social problems from the state to the individual and, in turn, encourages the individual to become self-regulating. In recent years, responsibilization has emerged as a major theme in scholarship on women’s prisons.

In her extensive research on women’s prisons in Canada, sociologist Kelly Hannah-Moffat examines the implementation of “woman-centered” and “gender responsive” policies aimed at empowering women prisoners.
Although these policies aim to counter some of the harm associated with “equality with a vengeance,” they do not, in actual practice, offer women prisoners much in the way of empowerment. Arguably, they do more to disempower women by masking the coercive effects of incarceration. Their failure to improve conditions for women prisoners is linked both to their psychologizing of the inequalities that women confront (e.g., domestic violence is attributed to poor self-esteem rather than structural vulnerabilities) and their tendency to position women as victims. Women are expected to take ownership of their problems and resolve them by learning how to make the “right” choices even when, in many instances, the situations they find themselves in are not an outcome of choice.

Sociologist Lynne Haney explores gender, punishment, and responsibilization in her comparative ethnography of two California-based residential facilities for women offenders. The programs are community-based alternatives to prison for women and their children. Her study spans a ten-year period from the early 1990s through 2005. In both cases, programming was cast as a gender-specific and “empowering” corrective to “get tough” measures. In the program she studied during the 1990s, the focus is on breaking women from their dependency on welfare, crime, and unreliable men by encouraging self-reliance through wage labor and education. Ten years later, the second program she studied promoted a much more restrictive model of citizenship. In the latter case, women were told that their problems are a function of “dangerous desires” (e.g., physical, sexual, and emotional drives) and that in order to improve their circumstances, they must learn to regulate the self. The program operationalized self-regulation solely in terms of managing thoughts and emotions, so much so that therapeutic counseling was prioritized over job training and education. Both of the programs are responsibilization schemes, but the latter, with its efforts to tame women’s “dangerous desires,” offers a particularly bleak portrait of gendered governance on the feminine side of the penal system.

My study builds on this scholarship but offers two important modifications to the way that responsibilization, as a gendered outcome of the new penology, has been theorized. The key difference between the “new punishment” as it evolved in East State Women’s Correctional Institution, and the “empowerment” strategies detailed in these other studies turns on the distinction between rehabilitation and habilitation as techniques of penal control. Executives from Prison Services Company were fond of saying, “Rehabilitation implies a fully formed self.” In other words, rehabilitation presumes an otherwise complete self in need of a fix, whether this involves job training, anger management, or improved parenting skills. This can be fitted in
with responsibilization schemes like those studied in California and Canada, in the sense that a complete self is regarded by state actors as theoretically capable of taking up the mantle of self-regulation and rehabilitation. As one of the counselors in Haney’s study observed of the young women in her care, “They’re gonna make it ‘cause they’re doing things for themselves.” This stands in sharp contrast to habilitation, which begins with the premise that the self is incomplete, flawed, and disordered. As my analysis will demonstrate, this is not a self that is regarded as capable of self-regulation. Nor is it a self that the state hopes to normalize. Rather, it is a self that must be “surrendered” to a lifelong process of external management and control.

What does this mean for how social scientists have come to understand responsibilization and the new penology in women’s prisons? I argue that framing the self as incapable of self-regulation is an outcome of prison privatization and the racial politics of mass incarceration. Privatization is one of the key elements of the new penology, but it remains under-theorized in feminist analyses of the carceral state. Although we tend to think of prison privatization in terms of facilities that are wholly owned and operated by for-profit companies, privatization is actually a much broader phenomenon. It includes the provision of thousands of goods and services to prisoners as well as to their friends and families. The expanding role of for-profit companies within the prison system, particularly at a moment when incarceration rates are exploding, prompted activists and scholars to declare this new leviathan the “prison–industrial complex.” The result is that over the last thirty years, public prisons have evolved into “hybrid institutions,” in the sense that they play host to a range of private and nonprofit partnerships. This raises important questions about how market sensibilities and the profit motive influence the ideology and practice of punishment. In the present study, it is hardly coincidence that Prison Services Company is promoting an ideology of addiction which holds that drug-involved offenders can never be “cured.” The disordered self is a profitable self in the sense that it requires various forms of external management throughout the life-course. As I will show, this ideology and the Company’s influence within the prison system were consequential not only for the prison’s administrative apparatus but also for how control was enacted and legitimated on a day-to-day basis.

The second way my study modifies previous discussions of responsibilization and the new penology is to center the issue of race. Scholarship on women’s prisons has tended to collapse the distinction between race and poverty so that the drug war is analyzed as a method of governing poor women. While it is certainly the case that poor women, compared to
working- or middle-class women, are the most likely to be harmed by drug war policies and the “get tough” movement, it is crucial to acknowledge that the most coercive measures and punitive outcomes have been directed at poor, African American women, and that it is African American women who bear the greatest weight of “equality with a vengeance.” For example, between the mid-1980s and early 1990s, the demographic group experiencing the greatest increase in its incarceration rate was African American women. The number of Black women in prison increased by a staggering 828%, compared to a 241% increase among white women. By 1995, 31,000 African American women were serving a term of a year or more in state and federal prisons. In the state I studied, one out of every 284 African American women was incarcerated, compared to one out of every 1,448 white women. Further, white women were disproportionately likely to be sentenced to community-based alternative-to-prison programs, while African American women were much more likely to be sentenced to prison. This has implications for how punishment and control are enacted. Scholars like Michelle Alexander and Loïc Wacquant offer sophisticated theorizations of race as it effects African American men and the organization of control within the men’s prison system. Wacquant, for example, argues that it is no coincidence that the rehabilitative ideal died at the very same moment when the number of African Americans behind bars surpassed the number of incarcerated whites. He argues that this is linked, in part, to broader economic shifts that serve to remove entire socio-demographic groups from the labor market permanently. Further, as Alexander argues, the mass incarceration of African Americans does more than manage economic inequality—it creates and sustains a social order that systematically privileges whites over Blacks and Latino/as. What remains underdeveloped is how race affects punishment within women’s prisons. What are the consequences of racial marginalization and changes in the political economy for ideologies and techniques of control in women’s prisons?

In the prison I studied, a shift in the racial demographic of the prison population was as consequential to the emergence of habilitation and the “new punishment” as privatization was. As African American women eclipsed white women to become the prison’s majority, prison staff began distinguishing inmates who were “good girls” from those who were “real criminals.” Race was central to this categorization. In fact, racial stereotypes of Black women, particularly as welfare dependent, crime prone, and drug addicted, became galvanizing symbols for abandoning the rehabilitative ideal and replacing it with control strategies that were both more coercive and more intrusive than earlier practices.
Ethnography on the Inside

This ethnography of East State Women's Correctional Institution is premised on a set of theoretical questions I had about gender, race, and the new penology, as well as a set of questions raised by prisoners regarding the consequences of this new kind of punishment for the self. Data are drawn 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. Data collection occurred in two phases. During the primary phase of this research project, I averaged between fifteen and twenty hours per week in the facility, and balanced my time between hanging out in housing units and recreation areas with prisoners and attending administrative events, conferences, and meetings with prison staff and state officials. During the first two years in the field, I had an official role in the setting in that I was brought in as an ethnographer on the university research team charged with evaluating the PHW program. I was granted a high-level security clearance, which meant that I was able to enter the prison at any time, and was given relatively unimpeded access to housing units, recreation areas, the visitation room, and PHW. Beyond the setting of the prison itself, I was also able to attend high-level meetings of state criminal justice officials that brought together wardens, administrators, judges, politicians, decision makers from the Department of Correction, and executives from Prison Services Company. When the evaluation was completed, I received permission from the warden and the director of PHW to remain in the prison to continue collecting data for my own purposes.

In addition to participant observation data, I conducted formal interviews with seventy-four prisoners and twenty-nine administrators and staff members, including correctional officers, counselors, and a number of state officials (e.g., politicians, judges, officials from the Department of Correction, and executives from Prison Services Company). Interviews with state officials, administrators, and line staff explored the evolution of criminal justice policies in the state, the nature of their work, the problems they encountered within the prison system and beyond, their assessment of prison policies, and their observations regarding crime, addiction, gender, race, and poverty. Interviews with prisoners, the overwhelming majority of whom were in PHW at one point or another, typically focused on their experiences in the criminal justice system, particularly their prison experiences, as well as broader discussions of their life histories. Nearly half of all respondents were interviewed more than once over the four-year period. In addition to formal interviews, I had hundreds of informal conversations with prisoners, former
Introduction

I supplemented interview and participant-observation data with archival documents collected by the prison, including population and summary statistics, inmate surveys, case files, disciplinary reports, memoranda, meeting minutes, monthly state of the prison reports, institutional manuals, press releases, and other documents relating to PHW and the contractual relationship between the prison and Prison Services Company.

During the primary phase of this project, PHW admitted 264 prisoners: 77% were African American, 17% percent were white, and 6% were Latina. The median age of women in the program was thirty years, with 50% of participants in this study ranging between the ages of nineteen and thirty. Prior to their incarceration, the vast majority of women in PHW lived in poverty or near-poverty conditions. According to case records compiled by the program, 91% were the survivors of sexual or physical abuse.

The second phase of data collection took place during 2000. Throughout my first four years in the field, the prison was in a period of tremendous upheaval. Prison officials faced increasing pressure to abandon reform efforts in favor of “getting tough.” This pressure, combined with overcrowding and budgetary crises, gave rise to a persistent sense among prisoners and staff that the institution’s future was up for grabs. By the time I left the field in 1998, it was clear that the rehabilitative ideal had faded in significance and was regarded as little more than an artifact from a distant and moribund past. What was not clear was whether habilitation, as a replacement control strategy, would harden into the foundation of a new penology. I returned two years later to see what had become of the prison and of PHW, and to ascertain the consequences for current and former inmates, staff, and administrators. I did participant observation for six weeks in the prison and conducted interviews with twenty-six current and former prisoners (many of whom were part of the original study) and twelve administrators and staff members, including the former warden, his replacement, counselors, and correctional officers from the original study.

Overview

The ethnographic analysis that follows comprises three parts, each of which considers the emergence of a new penology in the women’s prison from different vantage points. In the first part, I take a broad view of the prison and the wider criminal justice system of which it is a part, in order to analyze how and why, over the course of a decade, the structure and ideology
of punishment underwent a radical revision. In chapter 1, I trace the rising influence of “get tough” policies and the concomitant decline of the rehabilitative ideal within the local context of the women’s prison. The focus in this chapter is on prison administrators and line staff, most of who were trained according to a rehabilitative paradigm and who were vested, both organizationally and ideologically, in the reform of women offenders. In the early years of the drug war, these state actors refused to implement “get tough” measures, on the grounds that such policies were gender inappropriate and undermined the institution’s tradition of reform. In the wake of a severe and persistent overcrowding problem, however, they began to doubt the effectiveness and viability of the institution’s reformist mission. What initially emerged as a resource crisis broadened into a crisis of meaning as staff and administrators struggled to understand the obstacles that confronted them, the responses available to them, and their own stake in various outcomes. It is within the crucible of institutional crisis that reformist ideologies and practices were abandoned, a process the warden characterized as the “unfounding” of rehabilitation.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine the strategies state actors pursued in response to the resource and ideological crises that plagued the prison. I demonstrate that while their responses were constrained by larger institutional forces, those forces did not determine their responses. The choices they made in light of the constraints they faced reconfigured the prison’s structural arrangements and discursive forms and set the stage for the emergence of a new penology. Chapter 2 attends to the prison’s resource crisis, with particular emphasis on how a private company offered a resource bailout to the prison. Prison Services Company received federal grant monies to develop an experimental drug treatment program targeting incarcerated, “drug addicted” women. Although the proposed treatment program was controversial on a variety of fronts, the deal was too good for prison administrators to pass up. The chapter details the deal that was brokered and considers the organizational implications of privatization. Chapter 3 attends to the prison’s ideological crisis and the racial politics that fueled it. In the early years of the drug war, staff were unable to reconcile political pressures to “get tough” with their own beliefs about the nature of women’s criminality. All this changed, however, when a shift in the racial demographic of the prisoner population coincided with a rise in institutional disorder and overcrowding. Staff began to distinguish between prisoners of old (“good girls”) and an incoming tide of “real criminals.” Race was central to this distinction and, ultimately, to legitimating a change in the prison’s control apparatus. I argue that Prison Services Company capitalized on this crisis by providing staff with a clinical
discourse that offered quasi-scientific validation for racist constructions of “real criminals” and their needs. In short order, the disease concept became the central ideological register for justifying changes to the practice and objective of control within the prison.

In part 2 I examine the social technologies that constitute habilitation. Habilitation relies on a distinct power/knowledge apparatus. In contrast to rehabilitation, the object of habilitative control strategies is not to repair or restore a self that has been damaged; rather, it is to “break down” a self that is incomplete and disordered. In this sense, the endgame of habilitation is not to normalize the deviant self, but to manage the unruly one. Chapter 4 brings readers inside Project Habilitate Women and examines the mechanisms of power that program staff use to control prisoners’ bodies and minds. These mechanisms include surveillance, confrontation, discipline, and humiliation. I demonstrate that power strategies serve both repressive and probative functions. They ensure behavioral conformity by detecting and sanctioning prohibited acts. They simultaneously generate knowledge of prisoners’ habits and customs that serve as one basis for the program’s efforts to diagnose and manage the self. Chapter 5 scrutinizes the kinds of knowledge about the self that the habilitative control apparatus yields. While the previous chapter analyzes how program staff know what they know about prisoners’ selves, this chapter inventories the contents of that knowledge. The images of internal disorder that counselors “mirror” back to prisoners draw on racially controlling images of African American women across three domains: motherhood, sexuality, and labor market.

In the final section of the book, I consider the consequences of this new system of punishment from the perspective of those who are its targets—predominantly poor, African American women with some connection to the illicit drug economy. Most women resisted the program’s efforts to change their identities, others surrendered, but all struggled to navigate the new penology in ways that minimized their exposure to routine humiliations and maximized their efforts to achieve respectability. In chapter 6 I examine how prisoners experienced and made sense of habilitation. They likened the experience to “renting out one’s head” and revealed that they pursued one of three strategies in response to it. These included “surrendering to the process,” “faking it to make it,” and open defiance. The remainder of the chapter considers the first of these paths, surrender, and identifies the various factors that pushed some women into accepting the program’s addiction ideology and abandoning their claims to an autonomous self. Chapter 7 documents the struggles of women who rejected the PHW’s addiction philosophy in whole or in part. These women pursued one of two strategies. Either they
engaged in open defiance or they “faked it.” Women who engaged in open defiance did so to simultaneously (1) achieve an autonomous self and (2) provoke program staff into releasing them back into the prison's general population. For women who were sentenced directly into the program or those who faced additional years in prison should they fail to successfully complete it, open defiance was not an option. Instead, they engaged in a strategy of “faking it to make it,” which involved a complex set of distinctions between public conformity and private unruliness, the “rented head” and the “real” self.

The conclusion reports on what happened to Red and other women in the years following their release from prison and traces the expanding influence of habilitation and disease rhetoric throughout the prison. Since I left the field, PHW’s treatment modality has been replicated in women’s prisons and in community correctional settings across the country. Yet the habitative model could hardly be considered a success. Most of the women I studied resisted the program’s efforts to change their identities, and they did so in ways that were often dramatic and consequential. Substantively, their acts of resistance were not so much organized in defense of either their drug use or criminal careers, but in defense of the integrity and essential goodness of their “real” selves. While their struggle presents a compelling portrait of the resilience of the self, it invites sustained reflection and debate on the punitive character of the new penology.