

Carceral Geographies from Inside Prison Gates: The Micro-Politics of Everyday Racialisation

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Abstract: Addressing a need for carceral geographical research conducted from inside prison gates, we discuss the spatial context in which racialisation occurs, including its relationship to the performance of prison “politics”. We argue that the convoluted and contentious racial categorisation of prison inmates that begins with “racial priming” and results in “racial sorting” possesses a spatial logic derived from institutional partitioning and street-level cordoning of individual and group identities. We reveal how racialisation is relied upon through both a self-segregation and institutional classification system at the micro scale. Based on autoethnographic reflection as formerly jailed and incarcerated individuals, and through a reading of sociological, criminological, and geographical literatures, we argue that the logic of everyday micro-scale racial identity formation has more to do with location, gang alliances, antagonisms, and the necessary navigating of prison “politics” and protocol than with conceptualisations of “race” engendered by racial capitalism and enforced by the racial state.

Keywords: race, prison, gangs, autoethnography, carceral geographies

Introduction

We have both been told to “run sureño”.¹ Less a determination of our “race”, the suggestion was part of the process of being “racially primed”, as we call it, based on mandated racial categorisation and expectations of gang affiliation. It was our first lesson in how to survive once inside the prison gates and when confronted with the life and death decisions that come with racialisation. Whatever “race” we selected would have less to do with our being racially ambiguous in terms of phenotypic characteristics or our ability to “pass” than with our willingness, or not, to navigate the nagging racial politics and ever-present protocol of prison life. The intersection and coproduction of race and space, as we argue in this paper, is no more pronounced, and perhaps acutely consequential, than it is in contemporary penal environments.

Such place-based micro-dynamics of how racialisation plays out behind bars both inform and challenge the existing boundaries of racial categorisation that

are hypostatized in non-prison society. By presenting racial identity construction in a prison setting, we aim to challenge the lay view of race as an immutable identifier and natural categoriser. We argue that racialisation in a prison setting is both a situational and structural process of identity attribution and construction, and it is in this context that it reveals itself as highly contingent and co-ordinated. Following geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2002:22) along this vein, we further acknowledge that concerns about the “identity politics” of racial identification, reification, and essentialisation are perhaps over-blown in that racial categories are “a spatially and temporally differentiated produced, and *real*, condition of existence and category of analysis”. This is to say, race is “real” in that it is both imposed and embraced, but it is no less the offspring, not the progenitor, of racism (cf. Coates 2015:7).

Existing scholarship on prisons and carcerality produced from within the more orthodox branches of criminology and sociology, then, tends toward relying on durable racial categorisation due to a desire to confront and critique systems of injustice and racial disparities that derive from those very “real conditions of existence and categorisation”. Though, as sociologist Philip Goodman (2014:357) argues, the majority of studies on prisons and prison life that do highlight racial disparity, “almost invariably use race (or ethnicity) as a categorical variable in an attempt to measure unequal treatment and unequal outcomes, [thereby] reifying race as a static variable”. Far from arguing for the perpetuation of a colour-blind perspective when conducting research on prison life in order to reverse racial reification, in this paper we argue for increased attention to the incongruities of racialisation and “racial politics”² that take place inside prison gates. We do this as a means of better understanding racialisation as socio-spatial human cordoning outside of prison as well.

While the majority of social-scientific writings on prisons have come out of criminology and sociology, in recent years it has been geographers who have most intentionally informed what Moran and Schliehe (2017) see as a “spatial turn” in carceral studies and criminology (see also Hayward 2012). In addition to explicitly following in the footsteps of Foucault’s (1977, 1986) spatially informed explorations of detention and control more broadly, “carceral geographers” (Moran 2013a) have implicitly looked to Lefebvre’s (1991) conceptualisation of spatialisation, or the physical manifestation of otherwise amorphous social relations and phenomena, to better understand carcerality.

Informed by an explicit “spatial consciousness” (Soja 2013), geographers have focused on a range of carceral and prison sites and situations, including the neoliberal bureaucratisation of prisons, prison political economy, and the prison building boom and territorial expansion as a reflection of the proliferation of global carcerality and the racial state’s monopoly on legal confinement of immigrants and other racialised subjects (Bonds 2009, 2013; Brown and Schept 2017; Camp 2016; Gill et al. 2018; Gilmore 2007; Loyd et al. 2012; Martin 2020; Mas-saro 2020; McKittrick 2011; Moran et al. 2016; Mountz et al. 2013; Pelot-Hobbs 2013; Philo 2001; Story 2019; Turner 2013; Ybarra 2021). While “carceral geographies”, as a critical subfield focused on carceral conditions and abolitionist projects, has conceptually and methodologically begun to breach the prison gates

in recent years, as exemplified by the work of geographer Dominique Moran (2013a, 2013b, 2015), among others (e.g. Heynen and Ybarra 2021; Mei-Singh 2021; Moral 2013a; Moran and Disney 2019; Morin 2016; Pickering 2014; Turner 2016), insider analyses of prison-based racial categorisation processes at a micro scale have not been conducted outside of sociology (cf. Goodman 2008; Walker 2016).

While analyses of broader, structural processes of racial categorisation are certainly central in the carceral geographies literature, the lack of direct and personally lived engagement with racialisation from inside prison gates is reflective of the institutional barriers that make “thick descriptions” of racialised prison life difficult to access and ascertain (Geertz 2003). It may be that geography, as a “white discipline” (Pulido 2002) that is less experientially diverse in terms of exposure to prison life relative to sociology, critical penology, and what prison scholars Richards and Ross (2001) call “convict criminology”, has not yet produced a critical mass of formerly incarcerated scholars for whom prison racialisation can be studied from the needed perspective of insider experience and autoethnographic reflection. As former “racially primed” jailed and incarcerated scholars, we contribute to the geographical literature by engaging with the concept of racialisation in the context of spatialised securitisation experienced from inside a prison and from the perspective of lived detention.

Before moving on to a discussion of our methodological framing and subsequent sections focusing on what we call “racial priming”, the spatialisation and incongruity of racialisation, and the construction of prison gangs, we first provide a discussion of what we call the securitisation-racialisation nexus.

Securitisation-Racialisation Nexus

Relying on Foucault’s (2007) formulation, we see securitisation as a *dispositif* (see Wichum 2013). Or more precisely for our purposes here, as a multifaceted assemblage of human cordoning. Securitisation functions as an assemblage of power, knowledge, and subjectivity that manifests as both discourse and material, and through both hardscapes and amorphous social relations and practices. In a prison setting where we apply this conceptualisation, securitisation manifests as both seen and unseen, tangible and intangible forms of control which are dictated from both the top-down and bottom-up, and which work together to govern prisoners’ every movement and motivation. As a site of *dispositifs*, we add that racialisation plays a major role in this process through everyday control initiated by prison staff and inmates alike.

Rather than seeing racialisation as purely a mandate of oppressive state apparatuses, we, following Foucault’s (2007) conceptualisation of *sécurité*, argue that racialisation is part and parcel of securitisation assemblages that derive from multiple sources. Simply stated, as Schuilenburg (2011:76) puts it, “the state is never the source of all relationships. It will never be able to cover the whole spectrum of current power relations within a society”, including those in the hyper-governmentalised space of the prison. It is therefore crucial to not essentialise racial categorisation as either natural or as a wholly contrived means of governmentality. In

discussing the complex and convoluted logics of the securitisation-racialisation nexus, we understand racial categorisation as a “contradictory and constitutive dimension of US society” (Omi and Winant 1994:253) that is reliant upon ascription, affinity, and affiliation within a contested and politically organised system, and “racialisation”, following Kobayashi and Peake (2000:393), as “the process by which racialised groups are identified, given stereotypical characteristics, and coerced into specific living conditions, often involving social/spatial segregation and always constituting racialised places”.

Given the applicability of their definition to the very racialisation that takes place in the prison system, it is surprising, notwithstanding Institutional Review Board (IRB) obstacles, that geographers have not looked inside the prison and its daily micro-identity politics to the degree they have analysed virtually every other space in which race is indeed “the most enduring and fundamental means of organising society” (ibid.), particularly for vulnerable and oppressed populations.

But it is precisely in the space of the prison that constant processes of acute racialisation openly take place, and in ways that have the potential to pose immediate life and death consequences for those being racialised. As sociologists Walker (2016) and Goodman (2008, 2014) have shown, such processes of prison-based racialisation reflect both the coercive “practicality” and necessity of choosing a race to “run with” (be affiliated), as well as emphasise, as Omi and Winant (1994) argue, how race is not a fixed or intrinsic characteristic of individuals, but a marker of complex and changeable status relationships (see also Saperstein and Penner 2010). However, for Walker (2016:1054), an insider researcher and formerly incarcerated Black inmate of a California county jail, “contemporary penal institutions have proactively used race as a management tool irrespective of free society identity politics” and without regard for outsiders’ privileged perceptions of racial fluidity (Saperstein and Penner 2012).

Like Walker (2016), Goodman (2008) does not see prison-based racialisation as a wholly top-down marker of incarcerated bodies, but rather, as a process in which inmates retain a modicum of agency over their racial categorisation through what he calls a “negotiated settlement” between officers filling out intake forms and newly incarcerated individuals who are asked to declare their race at prison reception centres. In fact, individuals retain so much agency in the racialisation process that their racial categorisation inside prison, that last “overt bastion of state-enacted racial segregation” (Goodman 2008:737), often appears incongruous with expected racial categorisations outside of prison (cf. Camp [2016], whose work provides a structuralist conceptualisation of racialisation emanating from carceral conditions).

For example, gang affiliation may complicate expected racial categorisation to the degree that Black-passing members of *trece* gangs get labelled Hispanic in order to house with Sureños, just as white-passing members of Crip cliques may be considered Black for purposes of bunk and cell assignments, which are highly racialised spaces of cohabitation. Moreover, in Arizona where Native American populations are significant, “Indian” inmates often choose between “running *raza*”, “Paisa”, or Mexican National, or declaring their affiliation with a recognised non-Hispanic affiliate such as Diné Pride, which has interracial rivals amongst

other Indian factions. But one of the most common occurrences of prison-specific racialisation is white-passing inmates “running sureño” (Hispanic) based on street gang affiliations, as well as white-passing inmates who affiliate with white racialised prison gangs such as the Aryan Brotherhood (AB) while locked up, but do not associate with ethno-exclusive groups or identify as “racist” on the outside.

Suffice it to say, such granular racial categorisation becomes increasingly relied upon and enforced with ascending degrees of securitisation whereby higher level “yards” see racial segregation to a greater degree than lower-level yards. Likewise, various spaces within prisons demand greater or allow more relaxed engagement with racial politics, which we discuss later in this paper. While adherence to well-defined racial groups and corresponding gangs is seemingly wilfully entered into by inmates, the racialisation-securitisation nexus is certainly an outgrowth of top-down prison governance and the institutional benefits of human cordoning as well as supported self-policing. We return to these discussions following a comment on methodologies and our positionality relative to this research.

Analytic Autoethnography and an Arizona Research Setting

Scholars have identified “an exodus of social scientists from prisons and other penal environments” (Goodman 2008), employing the metaphor of an “eclipse” and even an “extinction” to describe the reduction in qualitative prison research (Wacquant 2002). Consequently, and given the perhaps hyperbolic discussions of the decline in ethnographic prison research, we pay special attention to ongoing attempts to get inside prison life. But given the fact that when outsiders are within prison gates, inmates tend to “be on their best behaviour”, or “on p’s and q’s” to use inmate vernacular, thereby revealing less about the intricacies and inconsistencies of identity formation, we find that traditional ethnographies may not be enough to capture the semantic, somatic, and reflexive experience of navigating prison life.

Although the social and structural process of imposed racialisation is unquestioningly emotionally and physically fraught, particularly in a prison setting given the immediate exercising of unequal power relations, considerations for deadly contestation, and all-but certain violent confrontation, in this article we have chosen to look at racialisation in the context of securitisation analytically and informed by autoethnographic reflection. We inform our approach to penal research with applications of autoethnography that have been conceptualised and employed specifically for conducting research in prison settings and with incarcerated populations, and as distinct from previous discussions that have tended toward the “evocative” or “emotional” end of the autoethnographic spectrum (Bochner and Ellis 2016).

Speaking to this approach, criminologist Yvonne Jewkes (2012:71–72) explores the potential pitfalls of over-identification with respondents as part of her commentary on autoethnography and emotion as an “intellectual resource” for “doing prison research differently”, acknowledging that “the extracting out of emotion and humanity from the research process and the pervasive failure of

researchers to own up to empathetic feelings of anger, frustration, fear, and outrage (among others) may, at the very least, represent a missed opportunity to enrich the analysis". Similarly, in their discussion of "convict autoethnography" as both an epistemological framing for research and the labelling of a criminological subfield founded by formerly incarcerated scholars, Newbold et al. (2014:441) acknowledge the pros and cons (no pun intended) of what they call "emotionalism", writing:

For the ex-prisoner, the contaminating potential of hyper-emotionalism lies in passions such as frustration, resentment, and perceived injustice, which can be considerable and sometimes consuming, and which can compromise objectivity ... [yet], the passion engendered by the experience of incarceration can add colour, context, and contour both to objective and subjective findings. Provided it does not unrealistically skew the researcher's perception or analysis, insider input may therefore be regarded as an essential thread in the tapestry of criminological inquiry.

While we certainly support the use of evocative autoethnographic methodologies and approaches to conducting prison research, here we more analytically engage in writing ("graphy") about prison culture ("ethnos") that we have personally experienced and lived ("auto") (see also Butz and Besio 2009; for an example of autoethnography in geography, see Bloch 2019a, 2019b, 2020b, 2021; and for writing from within the prison gates, see Shabazz 2014). For sociologist and ethnographer Leon Anderson (2006:375), the method of autoethnography, when qualified as "analytical", refers to research "in which the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in published texts, and (3) committed to developing theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena". Notwithstanding the deep emotional traumas that have resulted from our own state-imposed captivity, analytic autoethnography frames our epistemological and methodological approach.

Ultimately, and bearing in mind the complexity and incongruity of racialisation, we agree with Ferrell (2018:147) in his broader conceptual assessment of (auto) ethnography as "a way of living in and knowing the world" that defies "a fixed set of procedures to be deployed in criminological research". Rather, for Ferrell (2018:150), autoethnography allows insiders and former insiders to examine and articulate a brand of situated knowledge, which:

...upon close inspection, [reveals] human activities that might be dismissed as simplistic or uninteresting, or human beings who might be dismissed as unskilled or uneducated, in fact embody constellations of knowledge that are nuanced and sophisticated—and that are elegant as well in their graceful ingenuity ... [Such situated knowledge enables] an ability to read, reference, and make sense of particular situations that mostly remain opaque to those outside them.

In addition to the first author's personal observations made as an identified "gang member" detainee inside Los Angeles area jails (Bloch 2020a), followed by experiences as an instructor within a medium security state prison facility for men in the US state of Rhode Island, the bulk of our insider experiences of prison life comes out of Arizona, a state that criminologist Mona Lynch (2009) credits with

ushering in a particular transformation of American punishment and one that has been an outlier in terms of initiating and exaggerating the severity of punishment both qualitatively and quantitatively. It was within the Arizona state penal system that Author Two served a multi-year sentence (2010–2015) and was personally subject to each formal level of prison securitisation in the Arizona Department of Corrections system, including level 2 yards known as “Minimum”; level 4 yards identified as “Close” yards; level 5 yards known as “Max”; and facilities with administrative segregation or “Ad Seg”, widely referred to as “Supermax”.

We therefore situate the majority of our work in the State of Arizona, which is both a model for American incarceration as well as an outlier that brings racialisation into greater focus. It is in Arizona that state prison expenditures exceed \$1.2 billion per year (ADOC 2020b), placing it among some of the highest spending states in the US, many of which have significantly larger populations (Mai and Subramanian 2017). In fact, Arizona’s state prison incarceration rate of 559 people per 100,000 residents ($n=40,426$), the fifth highest in the nation, is greater than all of its regional neighbours in the West and Southwest (The Sentencing Project 2020).

Of Arizona’s more than 40,000 state prisoners (ADOC 2020a) of whom almost 90% are identified as male, 38.8% are categorised as Caucasian, 32.2% Mexican-American, 14.7% African American, 6.6% Mexican National, and 5.5% Native American (ADOC 2020c). While these numbers give us a sense of the general racial breakdown from an institution-wide perspective as provided by the Arizona Department of Corrections, the everyday categories and complexity of race reveal themselves differently on the ground, at the scale of the individual prison facility, and as determined through “negotiated settlement” from the top down as well as “racial priming” from the bottom up. It is at this scale, the scale of the micro, that race becomes part of an everyday enforceable and navigable identity politics for inmates for whom interpersonal conflict diverts attention from institutional sequestration.

Racial Priming

Unlike rigid, immutable, and implicit racial categorisation forwarded in ideologically conservative and liberal settings alike, racial attribution in the context of incarceration is actively negotiated. One’s geography, allegiance, experiences of socialisation, as well as phenotype and self-perception are considered when determining one’s “race” during the racial priming process. Racial priming often takes place before a sentenced individual is confronted with the choice of “official” racial categorisation at a prison reception centre, a process Goodman (2008) describes as “negotiated settlement”, which contributes to official demographic statistics such as those listed above. It is during the reception stage of the detention process, he points out, that inmates must declare a racial identifier and gang affiliation that governs bunk and cell assignments as well as expectations for fraternisation. But based on our own experiences of being “schoolled” (educated) on what to expect in terms of racial affiliations, we see the process as beginning much earlier and far more co-constructed and bottom-up.

Racial priming, the first step in racial categorisation for many prisoners, relies on group input, and in some cases collaboration with a single “shot caller” (gang leader or enforcer of “*reglas*”, or rules) who possesses experience with prison racialisation and the nuances of everyday “politics”. Fellow inmates may likewise be motivated to form alliances and recruit would-be associates, and will therefore help a newly incarcerated individual strategise about which race will best suit them on the inside before being “sent up”. Such a determination is based on personality, proclivity, and preoccupation, as well as one’s place of residence and general habitus more than perceived visual racial characteristics.

While in a county facility awaiting arraignment, Author One asked a white-passing inmate if he planned to “run peckerwood” when he went up north (to one of the several state prison facilities located north of Los Angeles). The dorm mate answered: “miss me on that. The only white dudes stupid enough to get locked up are meth heads, paedophiles, and wife beaters, so when I go up, I roll Sureño. No questions asked”. Later, giving advice to an Iranian-born ethnic Armenian in the same day room, the same white-passing inmate told him that if he planned on remaining unaffiliated he “better think again and run Norteño [a Sureño rival], or else get ready to get rolled [beaten up and extorted] by every mother fucker in there”. The advice to join a rival gang was given as a gesture of care, as well as to redirect non-Hispanic ethnic minorities who tend to “run Black” once inside.

As a racially ambiguous individual with notoriety in a gang-adjacent subculture, Author One had to make the choice to run peckerwood or Sureño, but told his cellmate, a non-gang affiliated Chicano who planned to run Sureño based on nothing more than having gang-involved cousins, that he would rather go “PC” (protective custody) than fight for anyone. But he was told, in no uncertain terms, that “it’s better to roll wood or Sureño, or even Black, and then maybe get trustee [status as a trusted inmate with particular privileges]”, adding, “fool, you sound smart. You’ll get a fat ass assignment and just glide, but not if you go in and the deputies have you pegged a pussy. They don’t play that shit”. His advice alluded to the fact that like fellow inmates, prison staff likewise adhere to and perpetuate prison politics in addition to the enforcement of standard prison protocol and official practices. In this way, prison staff are arbiters of both top down and bottom up forms of racialisation on which prisons depend for the sake of control through cordoning.

For Author Two, also a racially ambiguous individual, but with stronger connections to his Mexican-American heritage, the stakes were far higher given the extended prison sentence he was facing. His first encounter with the concept of racial affiliation happened in a rural county jail in Arizona, far removed from the politics of the prison yard. A fellow inmate who had served time within the prison system and was on his way “back in” asked “where’s the Raza” (members of the “race”, which refers to Chicano residents of Aztlán, or the historical territory encompassing much of the South West), thereby seeking out race-based alliances as well as new recruits as preparation to reenter the inmate population.

The self-described “gangster” with deep ties to the Sureño gangs in Arizona and California took it upon himself to “school” Author Two in the realities of what prison life was like for inmates of Mexican descent. Author Two could choose to

declare himself a Mexican-National, or “Paisa”, regardless of his American citizenship, but was also advised this would mark him as “subservient to the Sureño shot callers who ran things on every unit”. Almost a full year before experiencing the prison reception centre and mandated racial categorisation preceding a several-year sentence, Author Two had been primed by his peers to perceive race as a negotiable and critical factor in his prison survival.

Spatialising Racialisation

In his work on institutional racialisation in a county jail setting, Walker (2016) discusses how “racialisation varies from space to space”, providing the example of the trustee pod and church as “de-racialised” spaces, which is similar to psychologists Mie Haller and Torsten Kolind (2018) for whom drug treatment wings and similar “soft” settings in a Danish prison blurs the ethnic divisions found among “harder” high security populations. Following these observations, we elaborate on several prison spaces, but begin by complicating the notion of the “church”, or worship environment as a de-racialised site.

While non-denominational Christian services provide racially-neutral sites of worship, race-based worship sites are rife. For example, Nordic ceremonial functions are exclusively attended by skinhead Odenists and white supremacists, while Muslim prayer services are attended primarily by self-proclaimed Black nationalists. Other ethno-exclusive congregations include Native American ceremonial spaces occupied by members of “Warrior Society”, while Roman Catholic mass in many institutions is the domain of “Hispanic”-identified Sureños. Attending various religious services while incarcerated likewise has the effect of transforming inmate identity once outside of a sacred space. Identifying as “Christian”, for example, could lead to an inmate being labelled “soft” in a way similar to the inmates in Haller and Kolind’s (2018) study being labelled as “weak” for seeking residence in a drug treatment wing.

In American prisons we have seen how “running Christian” affords prisoners a less-than-contested kind of reprieve from everyday racial politics, allowing them to “hide out”, but simultaneously branding them as “lacking heart” as defined by racial ethos and gang solidarity built on notions of masculinity (Cowen and Siciliano 2011). Such stigmatisation does not, however, affect those who attend ethno-exclusive worship. We argue it is not the act of worship or adherence to a religious community that creates the perception of weakness, but rather, it is the willingness to cohabitate interracially during worship in ways that break racial taboos.

The physical spaces in which worship takes place are not static, with prison mosques, for example, doubling as classroom space, and church sites serving as addiction rehabilitation counselling rooms. Because these religious places are no less located inside the gates of penal facilities, such social transformation and fluidity of uses can still be understood as facilitating relationships between space, meaning, and power as conceptualised by Hancock and Jewkes (2011). We briefly extend such analysis to the following five prison sites. Each site listed below possesses its own micro politics of racialisation given differing realities and regimes of

spatialisation, which, we argue, obscures the larger-scale politics of human confinement and racial cordoning. It is such everydayness of micro politics that perhaps precludes inmates' greater reflection on and contestation against the incarceration apparatus.

The Visiting Room

Like other spaces open to outside scrutiny, the visitation room becomes a race- and conflict-neutral space as inmates spend time with family members. In addition to a universal respect for the valuable time spent with loved ones, it is also a space where contraband (drugs and cellular phones, for example) is passed, necessitating that inmates remain, to use prisoner vernacular, "on p's and q's" so as not to attract undue scrutiny from prison staff who may be aware that contraband is being passed, but rely on plausible deniability. If a visiting room "gets hot" due to uncontrolled racial tension or the flouting of regulations, "business matters" as well as family time is interrupted. In the geographical literature, the visitation room is also the most studied due in part to the relative ease of access afforded to outsiders (Moran 2013a; Tasca et al. 2016). As Comfort (2002) has shown, the visitation room also extends to the "ranch", "conjugal visit" bungalow, and other family housing units where outsiders travel even further into prison space for stays of up to 48 hours.³

The Yard

More than any other carceral space, the "yard" reveals the extent of a facility's level of racialisation relative to its official securitisation. On minimum security yards, "rec time" is unscheduled and available throughout the day in most facilities across most states, with racial intermingling throughout all activities (handball, basketball, poker tables, etc.), as the functioning of "politics" does not strictly rely on race- or gang-based partitioning. However, as levels of security increase, yards exhibit increasingly stark intra-racial congregation and interracial segregation. As within other prison spaces, including those discussed below, several reasons for heightened or diminished racial segregation in varying contexts of securitisation abound, with theories that run the gamut, ranging from structuralist explanations about advanced security logics of inmate control, to agent-based explanations for why more "hardened" inmates demand stricter racialisation regimes. Parsing the varying perspectives and providing the historical provenance for differences in localised levels of racial segregation and/or congregation remains to be done.

Chow Hall

"Chow time" is a particularly racially stratified time-space similar to the yard, with white and Black inmates maintaining racially exclusive seating arrangements by table at all levels of security, though intermixing between Chicanos and Paisas is common in lower security facilities. Added to the lining up and seating

arrangement that is highly segregated across security levels, social functions performed at chow time called “spreads”, during which inmates pool resources and commissary-bought items to share in a potluck experience, are exclusive by race with few exceptions. It is also in the chow hall that racial segregation is starkly enforced, with white inmates lining up first, and Black inmates, with rare exception, taking the back of the line to collect their food.

Work Areas

Like the visitation room, work areas are race-neutral due to the practicality of earning money and creating opportunities for passing contraband. Because every individual is encouraged to “get their hustle on” in defiance of the prison and in an effort to “hook up” others with paid-for services ranging from special care taken on laundry items, to selling kitchen wares and writing letters for non-literate inmates or conducting legal research in prison libraries, interracial enmity and a lack of cooperation is seen as a disruptor of economic relationships. Beyond the work environments located inside the prison gates, work assignments such as grounds keeping and road crews afford inmates the opportunity to leave the prison grounds, creating yet another “liminal space”, to use Moran’s (2013a) phrasing. Likewise, Goodman (2014) writes about the fire camp as a liminal space which reproduces the prison in a wilderness area in which work time witnesses complete racial integration and cooperation while fighting forest fires, but back at camp, which is considered a reproduction of the “mainline” prison, prisoners return to racially segregated seating at chow time and bunk arrangements during down time.

The Classroom

“Class” is the term used to describe any programming for inmates, including OSHA certification, drug rehab counselling sessions, and DUI and anger management re-education. But given the offering of vocational and college credit-bearing courses in some US prison facilities, the space of the classroom has become an increasingly pronounced site of interaction between inmates and outsiders. Whereas incarcerated students are still as mindful of “the p’s and q’s” in the classroom as they are in the visitation room, there is also a heightened degree of reverence for class time that transcends the need for family interaction or the passing of contraband. It is also in the space of the classroom where differences concerning race between inmates and free society abound.

Based in part on Author One’s experience teaching the same course in both an Ivy League college classroom and a prison classroom during a particularly politically fraught and “racially charged” US presidential election year, we are struck by how students on the college campus exercised the privilege of socially, ideologically, and spatially self-segregating along racial and socio-political lines, whereas in the prison setting, racial divisions and indeed highly localised race-based hierarchies were suspended during class time. That is, the prison classroom provided a space of reprieve from the otherwise violent politics and nagging racialisation that

dictated and micromanaged virtually every movement and every relationship within the prison environment (see also Richmond and Johnson 2009).

While both prison and campus classroom spaces are certainly both products and purveyors of structural racism from a macro perspective, the differences in micro-racialisation between these two educational spaces is in need of further critical analysis. In doing so, and following Goodman's (2008) assertion that prisons are "woefully understudied locales, and the lack of attention to the construction of 'race' inside carceral facilities is a prime example", such work can bring the prison complex and its "society of captives" (Sykes 2007) squarely into scholarly conversations about race and racialisation that are taking place on and directed at college campuses, many of which are located within mere miles of prison complexes, yet remain *terra incognita* to many scholars, including scholars of critical race theory (cf. Lee et al. 2020; Medina and Nguyen 2018; Mendieta 2004; Mitchelson 2012).

What is missing from our list is the everyday spatialisation of racialisation that occurs at the scale of the body within day rooms, dormitories, and lavatories, in which, for example, inmates are expected to walk (never between tables occupied by "other" races), socialise (never with members of rival gangs unless "business" is in play), and talk (never out of turn or within earshot of other races). Because such race-conscious navigation of everyday spaces takes place far from the liminal zones in which the public is able to access the prison environment and scrutinise prison life, such embodied forms of racialisation, or what Pyrooz and Decker (2019) call "prisonisation", remain understudied. Further, it is the mundane microdynamics of inmate-to-guard and inmate-to-inmate interactions that remain obscured and understudied, including those interactions that are sexual in nature. Nevertheless, we now turn to gang identity as a penultimate commentary of the incongruity of racialisation in prison life.

Gangs and the Incongruity of "Race" in Prison

The apparent incongruity of racial categorisation in prison settings provides a case study in identity fluidity and adaptation. Just as some inmates in US-based penal institutions are able to choose between being identified as white (wood), Chicano, Sureño, Paisa, or Norteño based on matters ranging from phenotypical indicators to geographical origin and neighbourhood associations, in parts of northern Europe and Scandinavia where important work on racialised prison gangs has been conducted due in part to greater access afforded to researchers (Haller and Kolind 2018), the choice of self-identification is dependent on which unit one finds themselves housed and how that unit corresponds to notions of nationality, religious affiliation, and masculinity.

For Author Two of this paper, the choice to identify as Chicano and affiliate with Sureño gang members initiated a series of complicated decisions that required him to perform tests of loyalty and acts of violence in adherence to a strict "code of conduct" enforced by gang leaders ("shot callers"). Failure to live up to this standard of behaviour would result in harsh physical discipline metered

out by other Chicano inmates. These imposed "*reglas*" (Spanish for "rules") dictate everything from the manner and time that Chicano inmates will work out, and the way that they will wear their state issued uniforms, to the cleanliness and personal hygiene expected of them in order to maintain the image of "*la raza*".

Whereas Author Two was primed as a Sureño, and promised the protections and privileges that come with being affiliated with the US prison system's largest and most respected (i.e. feared) "race", the decision to run Paisa would have provided more freedoms from self-imposed *reglas* and intragroup "drama". Further, running Paisa would have allowed for more intergroup association and mobility, including on the highly racialised and segregated yard.

As experienced personally and expressed in our continuing informal interviews conducted as part of a larger research project, we have not seen strong adherence to a particular "race" while locked up inform one's racial self-perception on the outside. Rather, it is the daily demand of "politics" that formerly incarcerated individuals appear less likely to unlearn upon release. Even more than dictates from prison staff, it is *reglas* that seem to embed on formerly incarcerated people's semantic and somatic memory systems. This is brilliantly dramatised in the film *American Me* (1992) when former *Eme* (Mexican Mafia) shot caller Montoya Santana, played by Edward James Olmos, goes shoe shopping after his release from prison. Santana does not concern himself with the clerk's race, ethnicity, or authority, but is angered by the clerk not "showing respect" when he says "I'll be with you in a minute" without making eye contact.

Such "power tripping" by ex-cons is far more common than expressions of hostility for law enforcement, for example, or outward displays of "racism" or racialised self-identification despite having served time in a highly racialised environment. Relatedly, "ex-cons", as formerly incarcerated people often self-identify, will often "check" members of other races to gauge levels of "respect", but will overlook past participation in the violent guarding of racial lines on the inside. That is, expectations for interpersonal respect on the outside, regardless of one's membership in a street gang, replaces the compulsory racialisation of gangs on the inside.

Prison Gangs as "Races"

As Brotherton (2016:245) points out, and in contradistinction to many popular, academic, and policy-oriented understandings of post-1970s American gangs as economically motivated (Coughlin and Venkatesh 2003), "the prison gang is not simply an economic organisation but also a social, political, and cultural phenomenon". Elaborating, Brotherton (2016:245) writes:

While it is true that prison gangs behave rationally they also behave irrationally and are given to bouts of vindictiveness, paranoia, the settling of personal scores, collaborations with the administration ... [and] perform and function in highly contradictory ways that often defy the presumed logics of a rational social scientific framework.

Apart from Brotherton's articulation of the discrepancy of prison gang culture is the majority of academic and policy-oriented literature that tends toward overwrought positivist conceptualisations of prison-gang membership and identity

formation that pay little heed to situational understandings and realities of gang affiliation and its messiness (cf. Decker and Pyrooz 2016; Pyrooz et al. 2011).

Similar to geographer Dugan Meyer's (2020:2–3) conceptualisation of the gang as a "security symptom" through which the figure of the gang member "functions within the urban security paradigm ... as a necessarily empty signifier around which contingent relations of subjectivity, power and space—that is, social order—are produced", we see prison gangs as both a progenitor and producer of prison security paradigms. While prison-gang activity contributes to increased securitisation and is a *raison d'être* for administrative segregation (Ad Seg) (Frost and Monteiro 2016), prison gangs likewise form as a result of racial ingrouping and congregation, as well as in response to rampant racialisation enshrined by prison administrators and the broader racial state.

Given the many site-specific sources of prison-gang formation that are dependent on and engendered by segregation and top-down prison protocol, a convergence hypothesis of street gangs and prison gangs is unlikely despite work that attempts to show otherwise. For example, criminologists and gang researchers Decker and Pyrooz (2016; see also Pyrooz and Decker 2019) argue that for many scholars, "viewing [prison and street gangs] as separate entities is seemingly impossible" due to high rates of recidivism as well as shared counter-views of "conventional society" (Mitchell et al. 2017:1199). In such prevalent formulations, prison-based offender subcultures are "exported back into the community, regardless of where or when this criminal mindset was born" (ibid.). We however, following the work of criminologists Louis Kontos, David Brotherton and Luis Barrios (2003), challenge such a supposition that prison gangs unduly inform the functioning of street gangs, or vice versa. Rather than a prison-to-street and street-to-prison pipeline through which mores, dictates, or norms flow, we understand the relationship between the prison setting and the street as more of a dialectic in which the two settings are co-constitutive, but with clear differences and durable boundaries produced by their respective spatial contexts.

Even gang-affiliated individuals who enter prison experience gang allegiance and alliances in new ways that do not jibe with their experiences from the streets. Once in prison, "racial" alliances take precedence over neighbourhood group formations so that members of rival and even actively warring gangs outside the prison become allies inside of prison in an effort to defend business interests, secure leisure territory, and maintain daily safety. Even ethnocentric street gangs such as Los Angeles-based Armenian Power (AP) and Salvadorian Mara Salvatrucha (MS), both of which have a long history of antipathy for and antagonism toward Chicano gangs, began to enter the prison system during the late 1980s and early 1990s as *Sureños*, thereby being granted the right to represent the 13 or *trece* as part of their street-level identifier and prison-based affiliation with the Mexican Mafia. While antagonisms still exist between AP13, MS13, and other *trece* gangs on the outside, once on the inside mutual enmity ceases for the sake of maintaining strength in numbers to be used in opposition to rival prison gangs and "races".

As one fellow inmate and self-described "chill peckerwood on the outside and ABer [Aryan Brotherhood gang member] on the inside" put it, "I only care about your skin colour or your set [gang] when we're locked up. On the outside that

shit don't matter, and I sure as hell don't fuck around with gang banging bullshit and that 'what neighbourhood are you from' drama". In one interview with a self-identified "Brown Pride Sureño" and formerly incarcerated gang member conducted as part of a larger study of ethnic-exclusive gang identity, we were told that "I claim a set on the outside because I want to, but I claim a set on the inside because I have to. I wouldn't be fuckin' around with a bunch of *Salvies* [Salvadorians] and some of those lames unless it was because of politics. Period. Out here, shit, we [the street gang] wouldn't accept most of those fools or let them even represent our set. But inside, we're 'family'". Such sentiment also reflects the transmissibility of perceived racial antipathy, whereas members of some of the largest and most rigidly racialised prison gangs such as Nazi Lowriders and Black Guerrilla Family are far less likely to apply feelings of racial antagonism toward members of other races in non-carceral settings (see also Lynn 2021).

In Arizona, a state with one of the largest Native American prison populations, the complexity of Native prison-gang formation and affiliation comes into greater contrast than in other institutional settings. While the Native American Brotherhood (NAB) has long existed within the US prison system, the informal organisation took shape to oversee indigenous religious and ceremonial practices and to ensure adherence to an extensive set of by-laws, most of which revolve around "walking the Red Road", or adhering to spiritual expectations of humility, humanity, and health. But in the past two decades, as Native numbers have increased as part of the trend toward "colour blind" mass incarceration in the context of a prison boom (Alexander 2020), relatively newly recognised prison gangs such as the Warrior Society and Diné Pride have contributed to the prison-gang landscape in ways that are no less complex and counterintuitive from the perspective of lay understandings of racial ingrouping and identity-based allegiance.

For example, coming out of a period of prison-gang "accelerated growth" (Useem and Piehl 2008), gangs such as Diné Pride, which was founded by inmates who hailed from the Navajo Nation but in recent years has included members from other tribes including the Hopi, have sought to challenge Warrior Society and the group's Apache, Tohono O'odham, and Yaqui alliance with prison-based Sureños. While such realities of prison alliance appear dizzyingly complex, it is this very complexity that works to the advantage of prison officials for whom institutional order is the desired outgrowth of racialised identity politics.

In fact, we argue that such context-specific incarnations of racial identity formation and antipathy, including the apparent incongruity of Native America prison gang alliances and underreporting of Native prison populations (Abril 2003), is in need of further scholarly investigation. For our purposes here, we simply wish to reiterate that such consequential prison-gang alliances and antagonisms do not readily or even nearly translate into or inform street-gang patterning or community cohesion despite causal linkages suggested by prison policy makers.

Conclusion

We have situated this discussion of racialisation in a prison setting by pointing out how decades of scholarly theorisation and legislation focused on the

operationalisation of race in federal and state agencies outside of prison gates has had little to no effect on the everyday lived realities of rampant racialisation and segregation inside prison gates.⁴ The existing research on prison-based racialisation reveals a disconnect between academic and policy-oriented conceptualisations of race and the realities of race experienced on the ground and at the micro scale by the more than two million individuals currently incarcerated across the United States. Based on this assertion, we argue that any discussion of social categorisation and segregation that does not include the US's inmate population is incomplete at best. Prison spaces, we emphasise, must continue to be considered in discussions of race, ethnicity, nationality, and class even if, or precisely because, they challenge increasingly neat conceptualisations of place-based identities. Further, we encourage geographers to continue to include lives lived in prisons and other carceral environments in their analysis of identity, housing, labour, health outcomes and educational opportunities in order to paint a more inclusive picture of human-inhabited and highly racialised environments (e.g. Bonds 2019; Gilmore 2007; Shabazz 2015).

Compared to other social scientific disciplines, geography has been slow to analyse some of the most consequentially racialised sites of state-sanctioned and state-imposed incarceration. A basic search of the literature reveals far less work on the prison pipeline—from policing to reentry and recidivism—than would be expected of a discipline interested in state manifestations of power and the systematic carving of space and cordoning of spatialised bodies. With this paper we hope to have contributed to the conversations currently being held about carcerality more generally, while pulling the analysis further inside the prison gates where racialisation, segregation, and state-mandated violence continue to occur with impunity.

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Endnotes

¹ Much of the vernacular used in this paper is made clear in context, notwithstanding its complex etymology and fluidity in terms of usage, but a primer on primary “racial” and gang-affiliated identity categories is in order, noting how most are delineated by geographical origin: *Sureños*: Chicano-based, gang-affiliated prison network with close affiliation with the Mexican Mafia (*La Eme*), and origins in Southern California, from which the name is derived (*sur* is Spanish for south). Department of Corrections (DOC) racial category: Arizona = Mexican American; California = Hispanic. *Norteños*: non-*sureño* affiliated Mexican-Americans or Latin American nationals, as well as gang-affiliated individuals representing *Nuestra Familia* who hail from agricultural areas north of the Bakersfield in California. DOC racial category: Arizona = Mexican American; California = Hispanic. *Paisas*: a non-*sureño* and non-gang affiliated individual, or Mexican national, particularly of rural origin. DOC racial category: Arizona = Mexican National or Mexican American; California = Hispanic. *Peckerwoods*, or *Woods*: a white-identifying inmate with affiliation or membership in

white prison gangs, including the Aryan Brotherhood (AB) and Nazi Lowriders. DOC racial category: Arizona = Caucasian; California = White. *Brothers*, or *Kinfolk*: a Black-identifying inmate with affiliation or membership in Black prison gangs, including Black Guerilla Family. DOC racial category: Arizona = African American; California = Black. *Other*: includes inmates of Asian, Middle Eastern, mixed-race, and Native American decent, as well as declared unaffiliated white, Black, and Hispanic inmates. DOC racial category: Arizona = Other; California = Other. *Native American*: as a stand-alone category, Native American, as well as Native American prison gangs such as Warrior Society, are found in a limited number of states. DOC racial category: Arizona = Native American; California = Other.

² "Politics", in a prison context, is an oft-used term for everyday self-imposed and bottom-up hierarchies, conflicts ("beefs"), codes of conduct, social etiquette, hostilities ("drama"), interactions, and ethics that dictate virtually every aspect of inmate life.

³ Author One's first encounter with prison life was as a child and while visiting and sleeping in a family unit inside the gates of San Quentin Prison, Corcoran, California Institute for Men ("Chino"), California Rehabilitation Center ("CRC" or "Norco"), Folsom Prison, and Sybil Brand women's facility (Bloch 2019a).

⁴ There is, however, scholarship looking at desegregation efforts in Texas (Trulson and Marquart 2002), as well as a 2005 Supreme Court decision in *Johnson v. California* on the issue of "strict scrutiny" and the equal protection clause of the US Constitution related to institutionally-imposed racial segregation in the nation's largest prison system (see Trulson et al. 2008).

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