

Spatially contingent racialization: A prison site ontology

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Abstract

This paper examines the racialization processes within the US prison system through the lens of site ontology. We argue that racial formation in prison cannot be understood through universalizing or structuralist notions of race alone. Rather, the prison as a site of racialization demonstrates that such processes are spatially contingent and actively negotiated. Drawing in part on personal experience, we reveal how prisoners engage in “running” race; that is, opting into specific racial affiliations as social and existential survival strategies that reflect both individual agency and site-specific prison “politics.” In elucidating this process, we contend that hierarchical conceptualizations and structuralist theories do not sufficiently account for spatially contingent racial categorization experienced by prisoners. We instead advance an ontologically flat, theoretically grounded, and relational understanding of racialization that is informed by experiential data and agentic discourse. Beyond this present paper, we argue that this ontological approach can also be applied to understanding processes of racialization and other forms of identity construction in sites far afield from the prison.

Keywords

site ontology, prison, race, racialization, carceral geography

Introduction

The United States prison system is widely understood to be predicated on racist and classist practices of criminalization, sentencing disparities, and disproportionate rates of incarceration (Alexander, 2010; Davis, 2011; Wacquant, 2001). Once incarcerated, prisoners become differentially subject to race-conscious logics of discipline, control, and punishment. Understood in this way, the prison resembles and reproduces the outside world in which logics of White supremacy, racial hierarchies, and property regimes wrought by capitalism are revealed as the dominant structural formations of society (see for example Bonds, 2019; Brooks and Best, 2021; Brown and Schept, 2017; Derickson, 2017; Gilmore, 2007; Martin and Mitchelson, 2009; McKittrick, 2011). We do not dispute this. We do, however, look more closely at the everyday practices and spatial manifestations of prison politics to reveal

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an alternative regime of racialization in which racial identities become actively negotiated with only partial deference to the racial politics of free society.

We argue that evidence of a spatially contingent racialization exists in this particular institutional setting. The prison is not merely a place that proves the existence of inequalities and disproportionalities in racialized criminalization and incarceration, nor does it simply offer a stark case study exposing the terminal manifestation of racial capitalism in contemporary America. Rather, we show how race itself becomes actively negotiated in carceral settings, providing an alternative ontology with which to understand and challenge the apparently stable logics of race and racialization. In doing so, we acknowledge that prison racialization is not a salve or proxy for the ravages of racism or racialization across free society. By employing a flat ontology at the site of the prison wherein race is actively asserted and assigned, we are reminded that while “not arbitrary,” “race is completely contingent” (Saldanha, 2006: 22).

In this paper, we analyze racialization as a spatially contingent process, emphasizing the role of social place-making, experiential identity formation, and institutional function in shaping interpretations and categories of “race.” We move beyond totalizing and universalist understandings of race, arguing for a “site ontology” as the critical lens through which we analyze how racial identities are constructed and contested. In making this case, we posit that the grand theories and structuralist narratives used to analyze race, racial identity, and racism have not taken into account the spatially contingent forms of racialization experienced by prisoners. The prison is a site, we show, where “running” a race and being categorized as “Black” or “Chicano,” or what it means to identify as “White” or “Native,” is based on agentic buy-in. This process occurs within a context of coercion, cordoning, and control as well as prisoner cooperation as the form of contingent conditioning that Clemmer (1940) calls “prisonization.”

A prison site ontology

A site ontology emphasizes how the actions of and interactions between individuals in a specific location and social context make meaning. A site ontology is often the unacknowledged theoretical frame used for conducting geographical research that focuses on the production of place and identity. Studies that employ such an ontology rely on a range of ontologically “flat” Deleuzian-inspired approaches, from actor network and non-representational theory to assemblage thinking and theories of affect (see Ash, 2020).

Here, however, we specifically name our intervention as a site ontology, thereby applying the relevant theory needed to reveal a pervasive but rarely experienced form of contingent racialization. In making this case, we seek to challenge the durability of racial hierarchy and refrain from too easily reifying the ontological existence of race. To this end, we must find moments and spaces in which the conceptualization of race is laid bare, thereby revealing its social adaptability and eventual vulnerability to obsolescence. We offer a site ontology as the means by which to accomplish this analysis.

For Schatzki (2003: 176), a site ontology provides a more situated (spatially, temporally, teleologically, and intrinsically) brand of inquiry and analysis. Schatzki argues that to make sense of social life, we must begin our analysis where it actually unfolds, where humans and non-humans commingle. This approach shifts attention away from abstract, totalizing accounts of society and instead grounds analysis in the spatial and relational contexts that give social phenomena their meaning. We offer that the prison, and presumably other heterotopias based on Foucault’s (1986) formulation, are the preeminent social spaces and sites yet to be fully encountered or conceptualized by geographers in this way.

A site ontology for Woodward et al. (2010: 273) emphasizes the “immanent, material connection between bodies and unfolding, situated practices,” which “arise from emergent (self-organising) processes – rather than stasis and transcendence,” and, we add, from totalizing forces and structuralist

logics alone. Like all sites, the prison can be thought of as “organizationally autonomous” from the state structures that conceptualize and maintain its existence. That is, in prison, as elsewhere, individuals and groups “have identities foisted on them in ways that entrain all sorts of political effects... whereby rules emerge from specific, localized relations and this material immanence makes the site the legislator of its own assembly, wherein bodies are differently enlisted and reshuffled” (Woodward et al., 2012: 204). In related work, Marston et al. (2005) make a similar case in their advocacy for a spatially and methodologically expansive “flat ontology” in the face of a seemingly all-encompassing and hierarchical globalization narrative.

For them, flat ontologies encourage the recognition of “self-organizing systems” that allow scholars and activists alike to analytically look beyond hierarchical scale that (de)limits practical agency (Marston et al., 2005: 423). As they put it, “invariably, social practice takes a lower rung on the hierarchy, while ‘broader forces’, such as the juggernaut of globalization, are assigned a greater degree of social and territorial significance” (ibid.). Applying this to our discussion of the US prison system, it is the juggernaut of racial capitalism that delimits our ability to see how racialization actually plays out as a spatially-contingent social practice.

Seen from the God’s-eye view of structuralist theories on racialization, prisoners are always already and enduringly racially categorized as subjects of the state. This perspective establishes that the state, vis-à-vis its most austere of institutions, plays a role in shaping the behaviors and interactions of those within it, thereby organizing daily life and social relations according to its own logic. Such a vertical view and intellectual preoccupation with top-down racialization, to continue with Marston et al.’s formulation, “blinds us – researchers, policymakers and laypeople – to the ways ‘global’ discourses produce identities that disempower us as agents.” As we discuss in some detail below, and further relying on the work of Marston, Jones, and Woodward, we see prison “‘sites’ as immanent (self-organizing) event-spaces dynamically composed of bodies, doings and sayings. Sites are differentiated and differentiating, unfolding singularities that are not only dynamic, but also ‘hang together’ through the congealments and blockages of force relations” (Jones et al., 2007: 265).

Theorizing racial capitalism and other vertical conceptualizations of racialization without regard for site specific and self-organizing systems of identity formation, we argue, hinders our ability to flatten and gradually undo racial oppression through a greater emphasis on agentic practices of identity construction. But, to be clear, such greater agency expressed in the racialization process, as we discuss it below, is not akin to “individualism” in the social, political, or philosophical sense of the term. Rather, sites of difference and defiance in which agency is expressed still depend on site-specific and spatially-contingent social relationships, rules, material contexts, and expectations (Schatzki, 2003). While agency is a contributing factor to site specific racialization in prison, even a focus on agentic practices and individual prisoner assertions of race does not completely ignore or obscure “the material force relations that draw them together” (Woodward et al., 2010: 273). That is, “no individual is ever outside of the dense materialities that compose sites” (ibid.).

We are two scholars who have personally navigated the racialization process within multiple jail and prison sites for periods of time ranging from days to years-long stints at every level of confinement. In fact, our concept of contingent racialization is based in part on our own experience of having to negotiate and ultimately rest upon specific racial categorization while in captivity (Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo, 2021, 2024a). We navigated a process that both heightened and erased previously learned notions of what race means and how it works in a free society captivated by the presumably static contours of racial identity. And yet we struggle to explicate or even fully comprehend the logic and boundaries of race as we lived them on the inside and continue to experience them on the outside. Speaking more generally to the politics of “autonomous spaces” that mirror the site of the prison and “prison politics” as we have experienced it, Woodward et al. (2012: 209) contend that “direct participants” who are untethered to the tenets of universalizing theory often “leave scratching their heads and fumbling to make sense of the messy reality” inherent in the production of lived spaces and creation of

identity boundaries. Following Woodward et al. (2012), we acknowledge that racialization, like other site-specific forms of identity construction, remains an enigmatic process, and in fact, that is one of our main arguments. What follows are discussions of site-specific racialization in the context of “prisonization,” which we offer as a challenge to durable conceptualizations of race perpetuated by universalizing theory.

Racialization and carceral contingency

Rather than static conceptual categories of race that correspond neatly to ontological differences in melanin or phenotype that have been conceptualized and propagated in the West, particularly since the Enlightenment (Kobayashi, 2003), race-making throughout the Global South and across time comports to a myriad of site-specific logics. Kobayashi and other scholars of race argue that such varied racial logics nevertheless manifest in hierarchical thinking and oppressive action often resulting in anti-Blackness. In an effort to identify and combat oppressive theories of race coming out of the Global North, particularly the United States and United Kingdom, critical race scholars have in recent decades advanced views of racialization that theorize the ravages of “racial capitalism” as “a necessary logic” for conceptualizing carcerality (Roy, 2019: 228; see also Noxolo, 2022).

Operationalizing abstractions are not new in the discipline of geography. As Kobayashi (2003: 548) points out, in the decades after World War II, but beginning in earnest with a radical turn in the discipline starting in the early 1970s, scholarship tended to prioritize how colonial and class relations were produced through the workings of capital, rather than focusing directly on race or the mechanisms of racialization. As Kobayashi (*ibid.*) asserts, “the explanation for racial inequality as an effect of class relations presented by subsequent Marxist analysis cut short an understanding of the phenomenon of ‘race’.” Race as phenomena owes to the humanistic geographers who extended their analysis of race into the everyday experienced lifeworld, and, as Kobayashi (*ibid.*, 548) continues, “were part of a generation that wanted to cast spatial understanding in much more complex philosophical terms” (see also Kobayashi and Peake, 2000). The work of Ley (1974), for example, represents a humanistic approach to conceptualizing the “Black inner city” that took more from phenomenology than political economic understandings of race. For Kobayashi (2003: 554) there has been a less than consistent intellectual trajectory in geography since Kant toward a more critical understanding of racialization and the “discursive forms that sustain racism,” though interspersed with periods of “putative neutrality.” But what remains wanting to this day is analysis of the relationship between racialization and spatialization.

“Racialization,” as defined by Kobayashi (2003: 548), “refers to the process by which somatic characteristics (which may be phenotypical or genotypical) have been made to go beyond themselves to designate the socially inscribed value and the attributes of racialized bodies” (see also Omi and Winant, 1986). Although racialization extends across time, space, and bodies, much of the work in geography on racialization, she points out, typically takes place at a “methodological distance from the ‘sites of struggle’ in which racialized discourse occurs” (Kobayashi, 2013: 244). Geographies of race have traditionally tended to depend upon archival research and theory that renders racialized people “as analytical categories” (*ibid.*). Such distance, we contend, has only increased in recent years as calls for abolition and critiques of racial capitalism have enabled scholars to “scale out” in their research to the point of “violent geographical abstraction” (Loftus, 2015).

While scholarly engagement with race as a contextualized category certainly exists across geography, particularly in speaking to how space makes and is made by race and racism through a mutually constitutive process (see for example Bonds, 2019; Inwood and Yarbrough, 2010; Ranganathan and Bonds, 2022; Shabazz, 2015), analyses of ontologically flat processes of contingent racialization are less developed. Holloway (2000: 198), however, has argued for an explicitly social constructivist and contingent understanding of identity that avoids broad theories of race that tend to perpetuate what he

sees as the tendency to essentialize identity while overlooking the complexity of place. Similarly, and as a corrective to social constructivists' "lack of reflexive rigor" (Bonnett, 1996), Anderson (2002: 25) has called for enlarging and socially situating "the discursive terrain of critical race theory in ways that help release the narrative hold of 'race' on analyses of identity and social life without obscuring 'race' as a material force."

Relatedly, intersectionality—understood as a theoretical and methodological problematization of unidimensional understandings of identity and power relations—has become the go-to conceptual tool for examining multiple identity positions experienced across a network of social situations (Crenshaw, 1989). While relational ontologies might appear to align with intersectional thinking, we follow Yuval-Davis (2015) in understanding intersectionality as homogenizing and reifying race, thereby advancing multiple marginality more than elucidating contingent states of being. Put simply, unless qualified as "situated intersectionality," as advocated by Yuval-Davis (2015: 95), orthodox intersectionality tends to heighten rather than conceptually challenge the simplicity and rigidity of identity politics as expressed across free society. On the other hand, situated intersectionality, understood through a mutually constitutive and flattened ontology, is especially useful because it remains attuned to the specific spatial, social, and temporal contexts of the individuals or groups under study, and does so within contexts that are often contested, fluid, and multiple. Situated in a prison site, race is relational and "intersectional" in that it is constituted by and co-constitutive of a variety of factors, from locational attachment and sense of style to expressed self-perception, in addition to more mainstream modalities of class, capital, race, gender, and nationality. Put simply, situated intersectional identity is not beholden to dominant academic conceptualizations that align with siloed and overlapping markers of social stratification. In prison, identity is meted out differently than it is in free society, and with immediately devastating consequences for failure to acquiesce.

One way to release the narrative and ideological holds on conceptualizing identity within structuralist frameworks of racial capitalism and intersectionality that currently dominate some geographic scholarship produced far afield is to encourage site ontologies and a contingency perspective of prison social spaces. Contingency as a world view and methodology has been at the center of discussions in philosophy and debates in geography for decades (Simandan, 2010, 2018), and it is not now, nor has it ever been, employed to supplant structuralist theories that help elucidate the distribution of power in prison settings. Rather, we too rely on such ontological thinking as part of our understanding of "the contingent outcome of the tensions that exist between structural forces and the practices of human agents" (Marston, 2000: 220). Or, as Jones and Hanham (1995: 186) put it, is a "warning against the dangers of imposing rigid meta-narratives on the diversity of social life ... and not to celebrate particularity, but to better theorize-and account for-the complexity of place." Contingency, they argue, "signals the possibility of multiple outcomes derived from similar causal processes due to the complexity of social relations embedded in spatially differentiated contexts." This is an ontological assertion we accept without reservation.

Following Jones and Hanham's (1995: 186) critique of the spatial sciences more broadly, we likewise assert that rehearsed ideological narratives and structuralist thinking "collapses the complexity of social life under the weight of a universalist epistemology that privileges overarching theoretical statements and mechanistic methodologies over a contextual approach sensitive to the differentiated outcomes of complex social processes." To make this point from our perspective on prison politics, we now engage the logic of "racial capitalism" in a carceral geographies context as part of our foray into site specific discussions of prison racialization.

Racial capitalism and carceral geographies

Introduced to Western academic audiences by Robinson (2020 [1983]), "racial capitalism" is articulated as a corrective to Marxist notions of the rationalization of social relations. For Robinson (*ibid.*,

6), capitalism has developed, organized, and expanded around “race” whereby “racism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism.” Based on this formulation, scholars have argued, tautologically and without qualification, that “‘racial capitalism’ requires its users to recognize that capitalism is racial capitalism,” and is equally deployed vis-à-vis White supremacist development, incarceration regimes, as well as through liberal and multicultural spheres of performative inclusion (Melamed, 2015: 77). Deployed in this way, “racial capitalism” has become an operant paradigm in geography for understanding virtually all social relations in all places (see also Pulido, 2017; Ranganathan, 2020). This is particularly the case within a Black Geographies context, and notwithstanding a recent reliance on a relational Black ontological framing (Wright et al., 2024), in which Hawthorne (2019: 6), evoking Bledsoe and Wright (2019) asserts, “scholars of Black Geographies insist that racism and capitalism are fundamentally intertwined and that this relationship is both structured by and structuring of space.”

Running parallel to geography’s increasingly broad engagement with and applications of the concept (see Fonseca Alfaro, 2024), racial capitalism is at the center of ongoing critical discussions and debates within sociology (see for example Go, 2021; Levenson and Paret, 2023; Virdee, 2019). Most prominently challenging its salience as an essential descriptor for all social, economic, cultural, and political structures within contemporary society, Wacquant (2023: 161) derides the notion of racial capitalism as a “conceptual speculative bubble.” Wacquant (2023: 158) critiques the concept not only for its limited ability to account for the diverse historical foundations through which race has operated as a tool of naturalization and hierarchy, but also for the questionable historical accuracy of applying the concept uniformly across different forms of capitalism. For Wacquant its more glaring flaw is the degree to which the “momentary political allure of racial capitalism [has turned] into an enduring analytic lure.” While Wacquant’s critique is as essentializing as that which it seeks to challenge, we too see some activist and scholarly discussions of carceral geography being framed as beholden to a totalizing and hierarchical notion of dominant racialization and spatial cordoning wrought by capitalism (see McKittrick, 2011). We do not deny the importance of theorizing capitalism as racializing, and agree that it is a prominent organizing modality for identity and the production of space. But we also assert that racialization experienced firsthand in a prison setting provides needed nuance to discussions of race, power, and politics. It is within the carceral geographies literature that this is already occurring.

Coupled with abolitionism, racial capitalism in recent years has become one of the predominant theoretical frames for understanding the prison across the discipline of geography (Bonds, 2019; Gilmore, 2007; Hamlin, 2023; Hawthorne, 2019; Loyd et al., 2012; Pelot-Hobbs, 2023). In the more broadly conceptualized carceral geographies literature within which prison remains the *sine qua non* of carceral spaces (Bloch, 2024; Massaro and Boyce, 2021; Moran, 2016), geographers have extended the application of the carceral to a range of intellectual and empirical terrains that comprise the landscape of racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and racialized criminalization (Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo, 2024b). In exploring geographers’ conceptualization of the carceral in carceral geography (Moran, 2013; Moran et al., 2018), Gill et al. (2018) have offered the concept of a carceral “circuitry,” which gives “priority to the connections between, around, within and beyond carceral institutions,” which implicitly evokes the foundational Foucault (1977) metaphors of the “carceral archipelago” and “carceral continuum.” Such metaphors for how carcerality manifests in and across space, we argue, speak to the need for further operationalizing prison site ontologies, while bearing in mind, as Mitchelson (2019: 223) puts it, “prisons can be analysed as productive of (and being produced by) the absolute, relative, and relational spatial process of imprisonment. In this sense, rather than a totalizing ‘definition’ of prison space, any given prison is many places at once.”

Scholars epistemologically conducting prison site ontologies have examined a range of material and affective atmospheres, including green space and water features (Jewkes et al., 2020; Moran et al., 2020), prison soundscapes (Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo, 2025; Hemsworth, 2016), sightscapes

(Schept, 2014; van Hoven and Sibley, 2008), and general environmental exposure and toxicity (Miyake, 2021; Moran et al., 2024; Oviemhada et al., 2024; Pellow, 2021). When race is discussed in such work, it adheres to orthodox notions of racial hierarchy and spatial manifestations of racial inequality. Gilmore's (2007) work is often cited as an example of operationalizing a particular prison-race nexus, but we propose a different reading of her work.

While correctly credited with advancing an abolitionist agenda in prison research through the application of a racial capitalist framing, we also see Gilmore's work as providing a contingent theory of racialization similar to our own. Specifically, Gilmore's (2007: 247) definition of racism as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" does not provide an ontological referent in the form of an already existing racialized identity. Rather, it is "vulnerability to premature death" that marks a body as "racialized," and it is "group-differentiation" that establishes a socially constructed hierarchy of relative exposure to that vulnerability. Racialization, therefore, is contingent upon the site at which group-differentiation is experienced, which for us is the prison. Further, Gilmore does not reduce race or racism to a mere function of economic exploitation based on phenotype. Instead, she argues that racialization shapes how capitalism operates, and vice versa, though "neither derives from nor leads to a monolithic view of the state or an 'essentialist' view of race" (2022: 16). Race, and its progenitor racism, with all of its "place-based particularities" is, as Gilmore (ibid.) puts it, a "practice of abstraction, a death-dealing displacement of difference into hierarchies" (ibid.) that constitute a historically contingent category shaped by material relations, and discriminately determines who is disposable, who is protected, and who is subjected to premature death.

Alternatively, too "strong" a theory of racial capitalism, like too essentializing a concept of race, runs the risk of being so universalizing in its application and analytic function that it ceases to account for changing forms of differentiation as well as challenges to dominant racial regimes, thereby obscuring how racialization plays out across carceral sites and as experienced as well as contested by actual prisoners. Based in part on our reading of Gilmore's agenda-setting intervention, and her explicit directive that "geographers should develop a research agenda that centers on race as a condition of existence and as a category of analysis, because the territoriality of power is a key to understanding racism" (Gilmore, 2002: 22), we offer our own theoretically-informed and empirically-grounded discussion of a contingent racialization through a prison site ontology. In doing so, we follow Go's (2024) "'contingency-contextual' approach" through which "race" "serves as a contingent construction by which capitalism's inequalities are structured and legitimated."

This suggests that racial capitalism's ravages are without question, but does not account for all manifestations of and experiences with violence across all sites. Go's proposed "weak theory" of racial capitalism defies universalist positions that all capitalisms always produce racial inequality in the same way, and, conversely, all racial inequality is similarly capitalist in its origins and maintenance (see also Gibson-Graham, 2006). As Go (2024, A8) points out in his advocacy for a weak and contingent theory, "racism and capitalism are intertwined in some countries, locations or contexts and not in others." Such a seemingly polemical argument "does not make racial capitalism theory irrelevant – it just means that the theory has certain boundaries or scope conditions." We accept such an approach, which simultaneously recognizes racialization as a difference-making mechanism inherent to and maintained by capitalism, but also recognizes the inadequacy of "racial capitalism" as an analytic for understanding racialization across all sites and in all ways, including within the prison where it plays out behind opaque prison walls.

Running race

The movement from the streets to the prison forces one to consciously confront and navigate racial categorization, which includes the ability to exert agency over the racialization process. Far more

than a passive identity politics of “being” or “passing,” prison-based navigation of race is a matter of immediate social and existential survival mediated by pervasive threats and outbreaks of physical violence. To be seen as “White” on the outside and then “run” Sureño, Chicano, or Raza on the inside exemplifies the differing spatial contingency of racialization. Whereas being seen as White affords one membership to an amorphous community endowed with relative “privilege,” “power,” and “supremacy” in free society, to actively run White in prison is a matter of choice and is based on one’s relationship to “prison politics” that are no less shared by those who, for example, “run Raza.” Although the majority of imprisoned people in the United States are and have always been identifiable as “White,” to run White comes with a whole host of stigmas and risks shared by members of other “races” who equally enact and enforce prison “politics.”

Prison “politics” refers to prisoner-imposed rules of conduct, also known in Spanish as “reglas,” that govern virtually every facet of prison social life, from social interactions and daily cooperation with members of other racialized groups, to prohibitions regarding the interracial trading of contraband, and seating arrangements throughout otherwise integrated institutional facilities. Prison politics is enforced by a “Big Homie” or “Shot-Caller.” Their responsibility is to dictate appropriate intragroup punishment for mild to severe transgressions, from lying to “snitching.” In addition, a Shot-Caller determines the appropriate level of coordinated attacks waged against other racial prison gangs and cliques, which can range from a slap to a stabbing. Like understanding how prison politics play out, “running” a race is a key analytic for understanding our advocacy for conducting a prison site ontology given how it is dependent on action, agency, and contingency. To “run” a race is to opt into affiliating with a racially bounded group. It is with this prison-specific social entity that one will house, eat, exercise, socialize, trade contraband, protect from violence, and with whom one will stand in the event of a prison riot or attack by a rival prison gang. In short, running a race, like “playing politics,” is a matter of both increased exposure to and protection from the intricacies of prison life and death. Prison politics likewise operate within official and sanctioned spaces of “enfold-ing” care and control regimes that constitute “prisons within prisons” (McGeachan, 2019).

Relying on the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and speaking to racial formation in a non-prison context, Saldanha’s (2006, 2007) discussion of racial “viscosity” within the Goa trance music and dance scene is pertinent to our discussion. He contends that “the embodiment of race encompasses certain ethical stances and political choices. It informs what one can do, what one should do, in certain spaces and situations” (Saldanha, 2006: 11). Understanding the workings of race as “machinic,” he elaborates on how:

“race is not something inscribed upon or referring to bodies, but a particular spatiotemporal disciplining and charging of those bodies themselves. Bodies collectively start behaving like situationally distinct aggregates—racial formations, racial clusters. These clusters emerge *immanently*, without external blueprint, through the corporeal habits and connections with the environment that bodies necessarily engage in.” (Saldanha, 2007: 190)

Like Saldanha’s example of contingent racial formation, the nuances of adopting and “running race” in a prison setting are based on disciplining and the aggregation of identity, as well as experience, practices (Schatzki, 2003), habitus (Bourdieu, 1984), and signification (Butler, 1993). Speaking directly to the contours and counterintuitive process of racialization that are distinct from identity politics within free society, Weide (2022: 203) also explains that transracial identity in a prison context is often based on “cultural praxis and social location ... irrespective of [a prisoner’s] ethnoracial phenotypic appearance or family heritage.” As Weide argues, it is life experience, including the seemingly superficial differences in adopted style of dress and music preference that distinguish “Black” gangs from “Chicano” gangs more than allusion to race or simplistic notions of skin color adopted from mainstream society.

Such context-specific sources of racialization should not suggest that “race” in its other incarnations does not matter. “Racially motivated” and interracial violence in prison, particularly at higher rungs of security, exists at levels unseen within free society in a contemporary US context. Running a race is therefore crucial for how violence is both avoided and exacted, regardless of the seemingly superficial and counterintuitive criteria relied upon for choosing which race to run with.

Choosing a “race” takes place as individuals enter a particular facility and go through the intake process. The process includes declaring a “race” from a menu on an official document called the Integrated Housing Program (IHP) form (Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo, 2024a). On the form, they must select and then choose to join an already “negotiated” and coherent affinity group of “Whites,” “Blacks,” “Chicanos,” and in some institutions “Native American” or “Mexican National” (Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo, 2021; see also Goodman, 2008; Walker, 2016). What is officially considered a “race” in the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation, and Reentry (ADCRR), for example, includes ethnic groups, national origin, and labels used to mark Security Threat Groups (STGs), which is the official designation given by prison staff to “gangs.” Many of these racial distinctions come from racialized gang formations that originated within the California prison system by the 1960s with the formation of the Mexican Mafia, Aryan Brotherhood, and Black Guerilla Family (Weide, 2020). While these are the three historically dominant STGs in the United States, differences in demographics at different sites and geographical contexts result in changes to STG distinctions and racial group formations both in terms of one’s assigned and asserted identity. As Jones et al. (2007: 265) remind us “any site is always poised for compositional variation – subject to reorganizations and disorganizations.” For example, the officially recognized “race” of “Native American” in Arizona, as well as the formation of the rival “Warrior Society” and “Diné Pride” STGs, reflects the region’s population of Indigenous prisoners.

Once assigned and asserted, these racial categories further congeal given the “thick” identity that organizes members in relation to all other aspects of social life (see Cornell and Hartmann, 2006). And yet variations between racial identities continue to emerge from within these categories, shaped by specific affiliations and individual negotiations. For example, a person categorized as Chicano may assert a broader “Hispanic” identity rooted in cultural pride and a particular political consciousness. In contrast, others might align with national or regional identities like Salvadoran or Puerto Rican. The assertion of these other, thinner identities under the umbrella of a thick identity may foster a sense of individuality, but only if they do not interfere with the primary mechanism for prisoner social power; that is, racial solidarity under the aegis of a racialized prison gang. Lopez-Aguado and Walker (2021) likewise evoke the metaphor of the “umbrella identity,” pointing out that racialized prison gangs and “cars” subsume several distinct place-based affiliations into broader categories that depend on the thickness and saliency of their non-race affiliations.

Regardless of an individual’s thick, thin, or even nonexistent racial affinities or gang affiliations on the outside (Pyrooz, 2024), on the inside individuals are expected as per prison “politics” and the internally constructed “racial code” (Infante et al., 2023) to “stick to their own kind” once a “car” or racial group has in fact coalesced (Lopez-Aguado, 2018). Offering a metaphor for what we see in a prison context, Saldanha writes about the “viscosity” of race to describe such site-specific racial formations. As he puts it “the spatiality of race is not one of grids or self/other dialectics, but one of viscosity, bodies gradually becoming sticky and clustering into aggregates.” “Under certain circumstances,” Saldanha (ibid., 18) continues, “the collectivity dissolves, the constituent bodies flowing freely again. The world is an immense mass of viscosities, becoming thicker here, and thinner there.” In a prison context, such “sticking together” is made more durable by the constant threat of both institutional and interpersonal violence, thereby contributing to the creation of what are known colloquially as “cars.”

A “car” is prison slang, derived from the idea of “riding together,” which refers to a group of prisoners who closely associate based on shared characteristics such as geographic origin and gang affiliation, which often corresponds to the racial group they opted into during the intake process. They

function as support networks, providing members with security and access to resources, including contraband. Unlike STGs, individual cars may operate with a loose social hierarchy and laxer adherence to “the politics,” though rules for internal loyalty and reciprocity are expected and enforced. Cars also function as smaller social factions that inevitably and collectively belong to a mutual STG, but operate independently on an individual cell block, tier, or “run.” Put another way, sites within sites likewise allow race to thin and thicken differently, from place to place and day to day.

What follows is a brief description of the three largest racialized prison groups, the first of which we personally aligned ourselves with in a prison and jail setting as a matter of both survival and affinity. Each of the following groups is also recognized as a prison gang, or STG (see Pyrooz and Decker, 2019; Skarbek, 2014), which is also often comprised of several semi-autonomous cars. It is important to keep in mind, as Skarbek and Woltz (2024: 638) put it, that prison gangs do not exist in all prisons, and when they do exist, they exhibit substantial variation. In places like California and Arizona, whose institutions of captivity we have personally experienced, gangs regulate contraband, run underground economies, engage in violence, but also offer protection and provide camaraderie, creature comforts, and social cohesion.

Running Chicano

The catch-all category for what in free society would be “Latino” or “Hispanic” is “Chicano.” But even “Chicano” possesses several synonyms and distinctions depending on the prison site, including “Raza,” “Ese,” Mexican American,” and “Homie.” Each of these is also particular to male prisoners as sites of women’s imprisonment do not engage in racialization or racial categorization, nor do they possess prison gangs. Women’s prisons also remain under-studied, particularly in a US context (Schliehe, 2017).

For male prisoners, “Chicano” is a term used to identify those who possess Mexican ancestry, but, as journalist Rubén Salazar is credited as stating, do not hold “an Anglo image of themselves.” “Raza” translates loosely as “race,” and is used to self-identify as a person of Mexican ancestry or as a descendant of the Nahuatl inhabitants of the mythological homeland of Aztlán, which comprises the entirety of the US Southwest. “Ese,” which on the streets is used to identify a “cholo,” “vato,” or “pachuco” may be an appropriation of derogatory slang used against “gang related” Mexican Americans at the turn of the 20th century. “Mexican American” is the institutional designation for Chicanos, regardless of one’s connection to Mexico. “Homies” is a self-referential category and term of endearment, particularly among “Sureños” who hail from Southern California and are affiliated with the Mexican Mafia (La Eme), which was started in the California prison system. Other “racial” distinctions, not including epithets, exist in particular prison sites and include “Border Brothers,” “Paisas,” “Norteenos,” and “Mexican Nationals,” the latter of which is the official “race” category used by the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation & Reentry (ADCRR), and is not limited to Mexican nationals.

Chicano STGs are hierarchical and bound by internal rules (*reglas*). Inclusion in Chicano STGs, “cars,” and cliques is to a greater degree than other racialized groups based on experience, a particular sense of self, and the exhibition of embodied forms of Chicano capital. Put simply, to be assigned a Chicano identity, one has to assert a Chicano worldview through the use of Chicano vernacular, an expressed American identity, or association with a Chicano street gang that maintains its affiliation with the Mexican Mafia. In short, while “Brown Pride” and evocations of “La Raza” constitute part of Chicano identity in prison, it is social affiliations that are geographical in nature that determine what it means to run Chicano.

Running White

Long-rehearsed racial purity doctrines and White supremacist ideation are the bedrock of the White Security Threat Group known as the Aryan Brotherhood (AB). More than with other STGs, espoused

racism permeates the organization of Whites throughout the entire carceral system, with White STGs communicating and cooperating across institutional boundaries. While not all, or even most, prisoners racialized as White (or any other racial group for that matter) personally subscribe to racist or even racializing ideology on the outside of a prison setting, White prisoners abide by the rules laid down by the AB in explicitly race-conscious terms. Because running White is more dependent on phenotypical characteristics than possessing a White habitus or White worldview, people racialized as White can do so as long as they “look” White, and regardless of their affiliations in free society.

Individuals identifiable in free society as “White” can choose to run Black or Chicano, but only if their street credentials as a validated “White boy,” or “Güero” (also spelled Huero) member of a Black or Chicano gang or community can be verified by an existing street gang or STG member. His Whiteness falls away given his actions and fealty to Black or Chicano cliques and causes, as well as lived experience and geography. However, an identifiably White prisoner who espouses common cause with or great empathy for Black identity, culture, or politics would not be granted inclusion in a Black car, and would thereby have to run White despite internal conflict with White supremacy or racist ideology. He would have to put his ideology on hold for purposes of survival, opting instead to run White based on shared characteristics gleaned from free society’s notions of race. Therefore, to understand running White in prison as providing access to accumulated privilege granted by or gleaned from free society, or as the perpetuation of “White supremacy” as a product of “racial capitalism” is to operationalize race at a point of meso level abstraction rather than experience with how race works in spaces of state sanctioned captivity and contingency (cf Friedman, 2025).

Running Black

Black STGs likewise run the gamut in terms of racial boundaries adopted from free society. Like Chicano groupings, identifying as Black or closely associating with Black gangs on the outside allows one to run Black on the inside. In this way, race crystallizes in the site of the prison based on individual experience. But running Black also presents a contradiction in which it relies on a more assertive “Black buy in” due in part to the pervasive anti-Blackness in a prison setting. But running Black is also more accessible for those who are present in small numbers, for example Samoans, Tongans, and other Asian Pacific Islanders who are members of traditionally Black umbrella gangs such as the Bloods and Crips on the outside. A Blood gang identity coupled with being a member of a numerical minority in a prison setting results in the possibility of running Black regardless of free-society notions and expectations of race.

Black STGs are often not distinct from street gangs, unlike Chicano and White STGs, which are constituted by gang members and non-gang affiliated prisoners alike. They are also far less hierarchical and its members are less bound by specific reglas and “racial” identity relative to Chicano and White STGs, respectively. This allows for non-STG Black “cars” to include “stragglers” and those rejected by far larger Chicano and White STGs. Similar to the apparent incongruity of, for example, self-identified Armenians and members of the “Armenian Power” street gang running Chicano in a prison setting, ethnic Hmong from Laos and Cambodia, or Assyrians from Turkey and Syria may run Black in prison facilities with small Asian and Middle Eastern populations, particularly outside of Minnesota and Michigan where their respective numbers would be larger due to local demographics. To identify as Black, in short, relies on a contingent and convoluted array of site-specific realities and relationships that take both the inside and outside of prison life in account.

Running Native

“Native American” is a single “race” classification by the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation, and Reentry (ADCRR). Yet within that official racial category there is a marked

hostility between different tribal affiliations and their respective STGs. For decades, the predominant STG has been The Warrior Society (WS) whose membership consists of “Natives” from the large population centers of Arizona, namely Tohono O’odham from the Tucson area, and Pascua Yaqui and Apache from the greater Phoenix metropolitan area.

As greater numbers of self-identified Diné became incarcerated in the last two decades in tandem with prison expansion and mass incarceration reaching into rural tribal lands, and contingent upon the fact that Arizona as a state has one of the highest rates of incarceration for its indigenous population, they have grown in number and refused alliance with existing Native STGs. This has led to the informal formation of a self-identified “race” and recently validated STG called “Diné Pride” (DP) whose cars consist of self-identifying Hopi, Shoshone, and Diné individuals. Ultimately, and unlike the “White” STGs and cars, there is no Native identity monolith informed by an ontological understanding of race imported from outside a prison context. Rather, and in defiance of any scalar logic gleaned from meta-theories of identity, prisoners in the ADCRR are “Native American” by “race,” WS and DP by STG, and make up cars comprised in terms of Arizona geography both in terms of cardinal points as well as rural and urban cultural distinctions and habitus.

Prison continues to be, as Wacquant (2024) puts it, the paramount race-making and class-splitting institution of our time. The byzantine nature of racialization experienced upon moving into a prison site, particularly at the highest levels of security, is a result of its contingency. Higher levels of security correspond to a “thickening” or “hanging together,” to use Schatzki’s (2003: 194) formulation, of racial identity, practices, and groupings, wherein prisoners confined to the lowest levels of security, even within the same facility, can eke out a relatively race-neutral social existence of cooperation and interaction. These differing levels of security correspond not just to differences in control and confinement, but also vast differences in length of imprisonment.

As we have illustrated in employing a site ontology in our discussion of prisoner racial grouping, racialization in prison does not neatly conform to racist typologies or totalizing theories of race. Rather, prison racial codes often deviate from and sometimes completely reject or even invert societal expectations for racial belonging and identity perpetuated across free society. In prison, race becomes a choice, an agentic process, and one that is practical more than ontological, material, or ideological. As Saldanha reminds us, and as we see at the site of the prison:

race is a nonnecessary and irreducible effect of the ways those bodies themselves interact with each other and their physical environment, [that is] race’s spatiality is emphatically not about discrete separations between ‘races’. Nobody ‘has’ a race, but bodies are racialised.... The concept of race is not for taxonomic ordering, but for studying the movements between human bodies, things, and their changing environment. (Saldanha, 2006: 19).

Prison, from the perspective of a site ontology, reveals the existence of this alternative and always convoluted and congealing experience of “race,” which delimits the supposed durability and universality of race. After all, as Saldanha (2006: 15) reminds us, “race is like everything else ... impure from the start.”

Conclusion

In the preceding sections, we have sought to demonstrate the necessity of approaching carcerality through a prison site ontology that foregrounds race as a central, though no less fluid and relational, analytic of identity. The prison, like race, is not merely a bounded vector, but a node through which state power, as well as contingent cooperation and conflict among agents, operates. A prison site ontology resists the universality of race, as well as the reach of totalizing systems of power, choosing instead to shift the analysis of identity construction to particular places, moments, and configurations

of captivity as they are experienced and contested. Attending to race as contingently constructed reveals both the durability and the fragility of racial categorization and, ultimately, domination. Our argument also calls on prison abolitionists and theorists of racial capitalism to reckon with both the reality of the racial foundations of the carceral while remaining attentive to the contingent, intersectional, and often counterintuitive ways race is lived, experienced, and reconfigured in sites of captivity.

Marston et al.'s (2005) flat ontology, we have argued, provides carceral geography with a way to conceptualize how site-specific socio-spatial relations are central to the experience and administration of imprisonment. Once flattened, carceral spaces reveal themselves as composites of different geographical contexts and competing social functions and identities. Each of these is contingent upon a wide array of fluid and relational social, political, and economic processes that are not easily reducible to metaphors for scale or totalizing abstractions, nor to concrete conceptualizations. This perspective encourages scholars to consider how power and difference are enacted relationally through different sites, thereby fostering interdisciplinary research that interrogates and integrates the social scientific disciplines of geography, sociology, social psychology, critical criminology, as well as law and legal studies (Bloch, 2025b).

A site ontology of prison that is disciplinarily unsiloed and unburdened by the operationalization of scale also provides further insights into policy-oriented and abolitionist praxis. By examining how prisons function behind the veil of scale, we can better learn from how mutual aid, solidarity, and cooperation operate, rather than depend on continued narratives of hierarchical control and carcerality that extend beyond the scale of the body (Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo, 2024c). Such site-specific contingency allows us to reimagine systems not merely beholden to centralized state control or capitalist exploitation, but rather helps us see prisoners' existing ability to, no matter how fraught, exact some semblance of agency and control over their own lives.

Ultimately, conducting a site ontology of "running race" is motivated by an intellectual desire to better understand the relationally constructed world and its constituent places, paradigms, practices, and people. It represents the desire to learn from complexity and challenge hierarchical conceptualizations of how the world works here and elsewhere. We believe such ontological thinking is theoretically grounded and liberatory: it frees scholarly understandings of place and race from the intellectually privileged bird's-eye view from which totalizing claims about other people's lives are often made. The best way to advance site ontology as an operative intellectual and methodological approach in geography is through research conducted by those who have personally inhabited the places and spaces of racialization under scrutiny. Informed by feminist scholarship on situ/situatedness (Kobayashi, 2009; Staeheli and Kofman, 2004), we see personal narratives and testimonios (Cahuas, 2025), embodied knowledge (Hunt/Tlalilila'ogwa and Farrales, 2024), trauma-informed autoethnographic writing (Bloch, 2022, 2025a), and other experiential sources of reflexive data as key to moving the discipline of geography forward and toward a flatter future.

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