Race in California's Prison Fire Camps for Men: Prison Politics, Space, and the Racialization of Everyday Life[1]

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The vast majority of social scientists agree that race is "socially constructed." Yet many scholars of punishment and prisons still treat race as static, self-evident categories. One result is that not enough is known about the production, meanings, and consequences of race as experienced by prisoners and those who guard and manage them. The author's research on California's prison fire camps uncovers the micro-level ways in which race is performed and imbued with meaning; he reveals how racial understandings color people and settings. One puzzle is that prisoners in California's fire camps will fight natural disasters side by side, sharing water and provisions, but separate into racial groups when in the camp itself. In part to answer this (and in part to develop better understandings of race and prisons more generally), the author unpacks the variegated nature of punishment and the spatialization of race and advocates for research that is faithful to the constructivist framework.

In California, some prisoners have a particularly dangerous job: they fight wildfires. Battling natural disaster, side by side, these prisoners share food

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and provisions, even the experiences of life and (occasionally) death. And yet when they get back to the fire camp and eat dinner, they separate out into racial groups, appearing to break the solidarity that seemed to exist in the face of danger.

One way to understand these practices is to engage with scholars who have studied racial construction, "racialization," and the "doing" of race by examining an ever-growing and diverse array of settings;[2] those operating from a constructivist framework have, among other things, demonstrated empirically that how people identify and how others identify them vary from domain to domain, as well as in light of individual characteristics, salient life events, and contextual factors (see, e.g., Harris and Sim 2002; Farah Schwartzman 2007; Bailey 2008; Saperstein and Penner 2012). As they argue against the sticky notion that race is a biological fact vested in morphology or genes (e.g., Morning 2008), scholars are increasingly paying attention to the mechanisms by which race is imbued with meaning and how racial understandings color people and places (for an eclectic sampling, see Jackson [2001]; Doane and Bonilla-Silva [2003]; Telles [2004]; McDermott [2006]; Obasogie [2010]).

Today the majority (perhaps even the vast majority) of social scientists appear to accept, at least at a basic level, that "race" is a social construction (e.g., American Anthropological Association 1998; American Sociological Association 2003). Nonetheless, this consensus has not universally led to robust or sustained efforts to link multiple levels of analysis when studying race (Saperstein et al. 2013) or, for that matter, ended the widespread practice of treating race simply as a convenient way of summarizing inequality across individuals or as a static variable that can be "controlled for" in statistical analyses (for a few trenchant critiques, see Zuberi [2000]; Martin and Yeung [2003]; Gómez [2012]).[3]

On this front, scholarship on prisons and punishment is a particularly stark example. Despite lip service paid to basic constructionist notions, there is too little research examining the microdynamics of the social construction of race. The result is that we know that race shapes prisons and punishment—especially in terms of the vastly disproportionate numbers of black and Latino Americans under the control of the criminal justice system (e.g.,

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[2] For several introductions to these terms and concepts, see Omi and Winant (1994), Murji and Solomos (2005), and Saperstein, Penner, and Light (2013).

[3] There are some interesting parallels here to debates among scholars interested in intersectionality, including whether and, if so, how the concept can be more than a mere buzzword (see, e.g., Choo and Ferree 2010).

Western 2006; Alexander 2010; Bobo and Thompson 2010)—but we know much less about how race and prisons are coconstitutive. Prisons are not only "race-making" machines in that they justify and perpetuate inequality (cf. Wacquant 2001, 2002) but are also sites of literal race construction (Saperstein and Penner 2010; see also Goodman 2008). They are spaces in which race is performed, understood, and made meaningful at the micro-, meso-, and macrolevels. Put differently, one cannot fully understand prisons without fully understanding race as lived experience. Racial patterns and racialized norms are windows into how incarcerated individuals construct meaning and make sense of diverse carceral sites (and racial diversity within those carceral sites).

In this article I analyze data from fieldwork and interviews conducted in California's prison fire camps for men.[4] These atypical carceral settings generally have no secure boundaries. Prisoners perform manual labor and fight wildfires in exchange for comparatively less austere conditions than those found in most of California's walled prisons. In examining my data from the fire camps, I analyze (*a*) "racial politics" in the camps (which, drawing from its usage among prisoners and staff, I operationalize as the patterns, norms, and rules around racialized behavior and interactions), paying particular attention to the importance of work, space, and the role of staff; (*b*) how prisoners and staff make sense of those racial politics, including people's pragmatic strategies around safety, comfort, and the avoidance of norm enforcement; and (*c*) racial identity construction in the camps, including as it is understood against the foil of California's more mainstream walled prisons.

The analytic payoff is also threefold. First, I make the case that scholars need to more forcefully (and systematically) import recent theoretical and empirical advances in our understanding of race into the study of prisons and punishment. At the same time, I posit that prisons can be fertile terrain for understanding the lived experience of race more generally. Second, I argue that in order to really understand the camps and the experiences of those incarcerated and employed in them, it is imperative that we pay more careful attention to what George Lipsitz (2007) has referred to as the "racialization of space and the spatialization of race." Third, by engaging the performative aspects of "doing race" in the fire camps, it is possible to situate microdynamics against a rounder understanding of prisons as social structures. For instance, unpacking the microdynamics of racial identity construction sheds light on the ways in which prisoners and staff collude to construct the camps as more lenient in terms of racial practices (but "still prisons"); conversely, understanding the prison fire camps as liminal, un-

[4] In this article, I focus solely on men's camps. The reason is that race is lived very differently in women's camps, and I think it deserves an analysis on its own terms (future research should also consider the gendered nature of race in men's camps, women's camps, or both).

settled spaces helps explain how race functions to pattern everyday life in this specific context.

As an introduction to this approach, I turn now to a series of puzzles (or empirical observations and questions) that perplexed and guided me during the research and analysis phases of this project. Consider, for example, the picture much existing scholarship paints regarding how race is lived in men's prisons in the United States: scholars have described male prisoners as being engaged in a constant war of race against race (e.g., Carroll 1974; Irwin 1980; Carceral 2004; Hassine 2009). They have written that California shares perhaps only with Texas the dubious distinction of being "ground zero" for virulent race-based prison gangs and racialized violence (e.g., Hunt et al. 1993; Skarbek 2012). With this background, I was surprised to learn that men imprisoned in prison fire camps in California work exclusively on racially integrated crews, swinging hand tools and power tools (including chain saws) mere feet from the person in front of or behind them on the fire line. Given the dangerous nature of wildland firefighting (Desmond 2011), prisoners are putting their lives in the hands of their crewmates, including those who are categorized as belonging to diverse ethnoracial groups. What accounts for this striking difference in the nature and degree to which the two prison settings (i.e., the camps and the walled prisons) are racialized?

One plausible hypothesis is that the men incarcerated in the fire camps are somehow different from their compatriots in walled prisons and that some as-yet uncovered individual-level differences result in fire camp prisoners being more willing to work and cooperate across racial lines. While there is reason to suspect that those housed in the camps are somewhat different from their peers in walled prisons (especially in terms of comparatively compliant behavior and personal motivation to be at a camp), these differences are, at best, a partial explanation. Everyone housed in a California fire camp (at least during the time of my research, in 2008 and 2009) was previously incarcerated in a walled prison, where they constituted part of the population supposedly engaged in drawn-out racial wars and where they were subject to various forms of racial segregation. Related, although the fire camps in some ways resemble minimum-security prisons (especially in terms of conditions and freedom of movement), many of those imprisoned in the camps are more accurately described, according to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's internal classification system, as medium-security, given that they have been convicted of a wide variety of offenses. These include crimes as serious (and violent) as armed robbery (Sabalow 2011). Thus a fuller answer to the question of racialization must also consider how the camps, as places, are different from walled prisons and how staff and prisoners who traverse from walled prisons to camps (and, in some cases, back to walled prisons) produce and reproduce different patterns in how race is lived and how it affects everyday life.

Though I saw some stark differences in how race is lived in the men's prison fire camps as compared to walled prisons, the camps are not racial utopias. For instance, whereas fire camp prisoners routinely trust their lives to fellow prisoners (regardless of racial classification) when performing manual labor and fighting fires, at the end of the day or firefighting shift, they almost invariably seat themselves separately in dining halls. The result is de facto segregation, with tables unofficially (but unmistakably) designated as for "whites," "blacks," "Hispanics," and "others."[5] (The only exception is that at camps with just a few prisoners categorized as other, those individuals often share a table with people categorized as black). Why, then, will men who fight fires, engage in demanding physical labor, and even die alongside one another so steadfastly refuse to break bread together?

Answers to questions about the striking differences between the camps and the walled prisons and about important variation in how race is lived in different spaces within the camps are revealed throughout this article. They include, among other things, the sharp distinctions camp prisoners and staff draw between "work" (or "forestry") and "prison" spaces, the fact that many camp prisoners cherish the firefighting work they are asked to perform, and the pragmatics of fighting fires. They also include a desire to maintain an appearance of the fire camps as still being "mainline" prisons that adhere, more or less, to the core elements of California's brand of racialized prison politics. Cutting across these analyses are broader arguments about how patterns of racial interactions are fluid, dynamic, and contested: those in the camps tend to understand race, and permissible racial behavior, in multifaceted ways—including both as a trait ascribed to particular individuals and also as something that is inextricably intertwined with particular spatial and temporal contexts (cf. Omi and Winant 1994).

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. First, I offer some comments on the existing literature on race, punishment, and prisons as a way of contextualizing the present study. The next section offers a brief overview of the fire camp program and describes my methodological approach. Then come three sections that make up the empirical "heart" of the article. The first explores racial politics in California's walled prisons for men and compares those prisons to two distinct spaces within the fire camps ("work" and "prison" spaces). The second empirical section explores how those politics are understood (primarily by prisoners, but with some atten-

[5] "Others" is a hard group to define neatly. It includes those who identify and are categorized as not belonging to one of the three major groups because they identify with a nondelineated group, such as "Asian." It also includes people who refuse to adopt a single group categorization; in some cases, these are individuals who, outside prison, consider themselves "multiracial." For some sense of how this category is deployed in California walled prisons, see Goodman (2008).

tion to staff). The third sheds light on boundary work and norm enforcement. I close with a discussion and conclusion that distills several contributions to our understanding of prisons, punishment, and race writ large.

RACE, PRISONS, AND PUNISHMENT

There has been no lack of attention to race (and ethnicity) among scholars interested in crime, punishment, and prisons. Specifically, there is a rich literature, spanning several decades, that has attempted to uncover (and sometimes explain) ethnic and racial disparities across virtually every stage of the criminal justice system, as well as in the broader systems of social control in which policing, courts, and corrections are embedded (for some reviews and introductions, see Cole [1999]; Russell-Brown [2004]; Krivo and Peterson [2009]; Tonry [2011]). This is critically important scholarship, in part because one in nine men categorized as black between the ages of 20 and 24 are incarcerated in the United States on any given day (compared to one in 60 men of the same ages categorized as white; Pew Center on the States 2008). Attention to racial disparities in incarceration is not only timely and warranted but also desperately needed as a critique of what is arguably a great human/racial injustice (e.g., Wacquant 2002; Western 2006; Alexander 2010).

Despite frequently professing allegiance to the basic idea that race is socially constructed, studies of racial disparities have almost invariably used race (or ethnicity) as a categorical variable in an attempt to measure unequal treatment and unequal outcomes. Perhaps this is due in part to efforts to influence policy. For instance, one surely gets more mileage from arguing that blacks and Latinos are disproportionately stopped by police during routine highway patrolling than one would in detailing how policing affects people's understandings of race and how race affects police practices. Nuance is a hard sell in much of politics. Also consequential is the fact that many scholars use "official" government data that typically treat race as a static, individual-level characteristic into which people can be slotted using deceptively simple categories (for critiques, see, e.g., Twine and Warren [2000]; Harris and Sim [2002]). There are, of course, some exceptions (including a few discussed below), but the larger trend is fairly consistent: while being an important (and influential) area of study, because of either inattention or pragmatism, much scholarship has inadvertently reified race as a static variable. The tacit message is that "races" exist as types of people rather than as constructed categories that take on particular meanings in particular times and places.

Here, then, we can turn to the deep literature on racial construction, which offers at least three key insights that inform this project. First, scholars have demonstrated repeatedly that racial identities are constructed via a fluid pro-

cess in which context matters. One of the most persuasive (and best fleshed-out) examples is a line of research conducted by Aliya Saperstein, Andrew Penner, and colleagues investigating changes in how people racially categorize themselves and how others racially categorize them. In one study, the authors found that fully 20% of respondents in a large, nationally representative sample (the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth) had at least one divergent racial classification (i.e., some change in how they were racially classified by an interviewer over the course of multiple waves of interviews). Instability in self- and other-classification was associated with changes in social status, including unemployment, poverty, incarceration, and the receipt of social assistance (Saperstein and Penner 2012; see also Penner and Saperstein 2008; Noymer, Penner, and Saperstein 2011). In an earlier article focusing specifically on incarceration, the same scholars demonstrate that prison literally *blackens*. For example, a period of incarceration lowered the likelihood that a person who is identified as white by an interviewer at time 1 would still be identified as white by an interviewer during the following interview from 96% to 90% (Saperstein and Penner 2010, p. 104). As amply demonstrated across these and other studies, race is a dynamic way of seeing and being seen; it cannot be divorced from the social contexts and life experiences in which individuals are embedded.

These mostly quantitative data are nicely complemented by a growing number of qualitative (and often ethnographic) projects examining how race is constructed and understood "on the ground." A major area of inquiry here (obviously not the only one) is an examination of locally constructed meanings and consequences of "whiteness" (for two excellent introductions, see McDermott and Samson [2005] and Twine and Gallagher [2008]). In her ethnography of workers at convenience stores in Boston and Atlanta, for example, Monica McDermott argues that what it means to be white varies in important ways across space. In the Atlanta neighborhood McDermott studied, she found that being white was seen as a source of stigma rather than a source of privilege and social capital (local reasoning held that only the most incompetent or drug-addicted whites remained in an otherwise mostly black neighborhood; McDermott 2006). In this way, people's understandings of race color (literally and figuratively) how they see themselves and others, both contributing to and conditioning sources of structural inequality. Thus no matter how unstable racial categories are, race plays a significant role in how people interact with others in their daily lives and how they construct and reconstruct their social worlds.

A second key theme is more a foundational principle than an empirical finding: to fully investigate race as a social construct is, necessarily, to consider simultaneously questions of structure and agency. Consider interdisciplinary scholar John Jackson's insightful book *Harlemworld* (2001). As

Jackson puts it, "by co-constructing our social spaces, we co-construct our social selves. Folk theories of racial difference are not simply given in totality by the cultural order and its taxonomic proclamations, but rather *refashioned and fought for* by the people who hold them dearest" (p. 15; italics added). Jackson argues that men and women who live or work in Harlem are repositories and progenitors of what it means to be black in a place so strongly (and historically) identified with blackness. The lesson here is that a "thick" study of race ought to consider both how individuals make sense of their interactions and how racialized patterns and norms at the meso-level pattern and structure (but do not overdetermine) their lives.

A third theme that can be gleaned from the diverse literature on racial construction is the spatialization of race. This concept is borrowed from the title of an article in which Lipsitz surveys a broad swath of U.S. history and policy to demonstrate that racial inequality has long been dependent on "spatial control" (2007, p. 17). In applying both spatialization and racialization to research on punishment and prisons, we can turn to a small (but fast-growing) cadre of scholars working under the loose umbrella of "carceral geography" (for an introduction, see Moran, Gill, and Conlon [2013]). For instance, those working in this vein are demonstrating a venerable finding in new ways: experiences of punishment are not tightly bound within prison walls, but instead travel outward and inward; likewise, we are reminded that punishment varies across diverse carceral spaces. This is made particularly clear, for example, by geographer Dominque Moran (2013), who shows that visiting areas within prisons are liminal spaces in which outside and inside meet and mesh, specifically as prisoners and their loved ones are afforded a chance (albeit limited in scope and duration) to perform a simulacrum of home-ness (see also Comfort 2008). Similarly, the geographer Anne Bonds argues that efforts to build a new prison and a master-planned community of upscale single-family homes in Madras, Oregon, were undergirded by "a normative racial framework that sustains the social and economic status of whiteness, stigmatizes Latinos and Native Americans, and (re)produces unequal spaces" (2013, p. 14). Looking across these (and many other) studies supports the finding that communities negotiate space and race simultaneously, not just in terms of formal separation or segregation but also in terms of what types of people—and what types of behavior—"belong" in one space versus another.

Importing insights from these studies of racial formation thereby makes it possible to better understand what is happening in a particular penal site and to use that site as a mechanism for studying the local construction of particular ways of thinking about race and racial norms. I turn first, however, to a description of the prison fire camps (and those incarcerated in them), as well as my approach to studying them.

SETTING THE STAGE: CALIFORNIA'S PRISON FIRE CAMPS AND RESEARCH APPROACH

California's Prison Fire Camps

California's prison fire camps do not conform neatly to popular media depictions of prisons or to the preexisting categories used by many criminologists. On one level, California's fire camps look a lot like minimum-security prison camps, such as those managed by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Prisons (for an overview, see Santos [2004, pp. 179–202]). California's fire camps typically have no secure border, they have comparatively attractive landscaping and many are set against the backdrop of bucolic settings, and there is considerable freedom of movement enjoyed by prisoners. In California's prison fire camps, people enjoy tastier and healthier food than that served in most of California's walled prisons,[6] opportunities to work and earn better wages (but still at a fraction of California's minimum wage),[7] nicer facilities for visiting, and a more cordial and pleasant atmosphere (including, generally speaking, better relations among prisoners and between prisoners and staff). What is more, the fire camps are quite small when compared to California's walled prisons: each camp houses, on average, between 80 and 130 male or female prisoners, in contrast to several thousand people incarcerated in the state's typically overstuffed walled prisons.[8]

Despite what is published on the website of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), not everyone housed in a prison fire camp has been convicted of what most laypeople would consider a nonviolent offense; in terms of the CDCR's internal classification system, level 1 and level 2 prisoners are eligible for fire camp placement (but not levels 3 and 4, people who are classified as the highest risk). In practice, this has excluded people convicted of crimes such as rape and murder but included many found guilty of crimes such as drug trafficking, property crimes, vehicular manslaughter, and even (although less commonly) armed robbery. At the time of my research, many of those imprisoned in the camps had previously served

[6] The contrast is particularly stark when prisoner crews are deployed to fight fires, as there are dedicated funds used to prepare special "fire meals," including items such as steak, barbecue chicken, and shrimp—items that are never served "behind the wall."

[7] I have argued elsewhere (Goodman 2012*b*) that work performed in the camps cannot be fully understood using either of the two popular frameworks for thinking about penal labor, namely, as pure exploitation or as a panacea to the exorbitant cost of corrections and high rates of recidivism. Instead, many of those incarcerated in fire camps are proud of the work they perform (and consider it a public service) but also find certain aspects exploitative.

[8] In June 2013 there were approximately 119,000 people housed in walled prisons in the state, compared to just under 4,000 in fire camps (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation 2013).

time in at least one (and often many more) medium- or maximum-security prison.[9]

Further, contrary to some of the perceived "amenities" of these camps, California's prison fire camps are not the chimerical "Club Fed" prisons lambasted by the media and conservative politicians. Those housed in the camps are not free to leave: they miss important life events, suffer from absences in the legitimate labor market (and later employment discrimination against ex-prisoners), and feel the acute pain that comes from a loss of freedom (cf. Sykes 1958). Likewise, though there may be more cordial relations and a less tense atmosphere in many of the fire camps, officers nonetheless wield considerable power and discretion over camp prisoners' lives, sometimes using that power capriciously or maliciously. Finally, the camps are marked by limited educational opportunities. Despite administrator and media claims, very few of those incarcerated in the fire camps actually get jobs as wildland firefighters after release (one internal, hard to verify, estimate puts the number at 3%–5%; Rogers 2009). Any attempt to paint the prison fire camps with a broad brush is likely to obscure more than it reveals.

More productive, perhaps, is to think of the fire camps as liminal spaces, as in Comfort's (2008) and Moran's (2011) analyses of walled prison visiting spaces. This is not due simply to the traffic of individuals into and out of the camps (although that certainly happens); rather, the fire camps are liminal because they are shaped in palpable and consequential ways by the long shadow of walled prisons, with which they share some qualities. Yet the camps also exist as separate facilities with their own local cultures. Recognizing the camps' unique (and complex) positions vis-à-vis walled prisons, I argue below, is key to understanding how race unfolds therein.

The process by which individual prisoners get to a fire camp can be a long one. Typically, the first stop for people in the state system (even those who have served a state sentence before) is a reception center located inside a traditional walled prison. At the reception center (or, in some cases, at another walled prison) people are "endorsed," or declared eligible, for fire camp and allowed to begin the training process. There are various formal requirements, including overall classification score (an institutional measure of risk), as well as several prohibitions, including convictions for arson, being labeled an active prison gang member, and being categorized as a sex offender. In general, only prisoners who want to be at a fire camp are en-

[9] At the time of my research, to be eligible for camp placement, prisoners had to have five years or less of their sentence left to serve; the average time served in a fire camp was about eight months (Werth and Sumner 2006). This may be changing today under the state's project of "realignment" (Assembly Bill 109; McAllister 2013).

dorsed; many people have to work hard to convince a classification committee of their sincere interest and willingness to follow the rules.[10]

After being endorsed, prisoners are sent to one of the state's three pipeline prisons for physical fitness and firefighting training. People often wait several months or longer in the pipeline prison until a spot opens at a suitable camp. The result is that almost all of the people I interviewed and observed for this project had spent at least six (and often many more) months in two or more walled prisons in California. Thus when fire camp prisoners make sense of racial politics by comparing their experiences in the camps to walled prisons, it is based on firsthand, intimate knowledge of a diverse array of penal settings.

Sampling and Research Approach

This article draws from data collected as part of a larger project using California's prison fire camps as material for a broader inquiry into the nature of punishment in California and beyond. In particular, three research methodologies were brought to bear: archival research into the history of penal labor in California (including both road and forestry camps); observational fieldwork at 10 fire camps across the state; and in-depth, semistructured interviews with 45 prisoners, 12 staff (six correctional and six forestry), and two correctional administrators.[11] Although much of the most visible data for the present study comes from interviews, fieldwork provided a valuable mechanism for contextualizing what people told me in interviews and, in some cases, reaching my own conclusions through observation of a variety of encounters and daily life in the camps.

I selected the camps at which I conducted interviews using a quota sample. Specifically, after pilot testing the interview instrument at one camp in southern California, I randomly selected five fire camps using the following parameters: one women's fire camp, at least one camp located in each of three broad geographic regions of the state (which I defined as southern, central, and northern California), and at least one camp supervised by each of the forestry agencies that comanage the fire camps with the CDCR. Once I arrived at each camp, potential interviewees were selected randomly from rosters of all prisoners and all staff at the camp. The participation rate, across all groups, was excellent: 93.4%.[12]

[10] Furthermore, once at camp, it is relatively easy for people who do not want to be there to request a transfer back to a walled prison. As a result, people incarcerated in fire camps almost invariably prefer that housing site to the alternative.

[11] Interviews and observational fieldwork were carried out during 2008 and 2009.

[12] Rates varied by group: 97.8% for prisoners ($n = 45$), 85.7% for correctional guards ($n = 12$), 85.7% for forestry staff ($n = 6$), 85.7% for correctional camp supervisors ($n = 6$), and 100% for prison administrators ($n = 2$).

I did not universally collect information on interviewees' commitment offenses. Nonetheless, the fact that prisoners were selected via random sampling means that the range should be similar to the overall camp population. CDCR official data from 2006 report that 37.4% of those housed in fire camps were convicted of a drug crime, 31.7% of a property crime, 23.0% of a crime against persons, and 7.9% of an "other" crime (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation 2006).[13] As mentioned above, those categorized as active prison gang members are excluded from the camps (and therefore from my sample), but I interviewed about a dozen people who told me that they had previously been affiliated in some fashion with a prison gang. Likewise, over half of interviewees had some sort of affiliation with a "street gang" (before imprisonment).

The interviews averaged about two hours in length, with a handful taking less than one hour and about half a dozen continuing for four or five hours (sometimes the very long interviews were spread over the course of two or three days). The interview instrument was designed to facilitate wide-ranging discussions of life in the camps, including questions about people's backgrounds, what they liked best (and disliked most) about the camp, their experiences and feelings about the labor they performed, how they thought of the camps with respect to rehabilitation, and what they would change about the camps if they could. Despite some fluidity in the exact questions asked (and the order I asked them in), as a general pattern I asked about "prison [racial] politics" approximately three-quarters through the interview, usually just after I asked how the respondent would describe the camp program to someone who knew nothing about it. Yet interviewees spoke about race not merely in response to my question about prison politics; it was a frequent trope that people referenced throughout their discussions of any variety of other topics, too. For instance, questions about camp conditions often led respondents, unprompted, to use race and racialized politics to describe differences between the camps and the walled prisons and to comment on life in the camps. Thus, while discussions around race were purposefully built into the interviews, it was also clear that race is one of the most important axes around which life unfolds in the fire camps.[14]

[13] Statewide, the breakdowns for that year (2006) are as follows: drug crimes (20.7%), property crimes (21.0%), crimes against persons (50.3%), and other crimes (8.0%; California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation 2007, p. 21). Thus those housed in the fire camps were more likely than their peers in walled prisons to be convicted of a drug crime or a property crime and less likely to be convicted of a crime against persons.

[14] There were some limits. For instance, I asked the men and women I interviewed to imagine what they would change about the camp if they were to become lieutenant (the highest-ranking correctional staff in the camp). No one explicitly mentioned race when answering this question. In contrast, many invoked race when talking about what they liked best about the fire camps. Thus while race was a key focal point, it was not all-consuming.

I also carried out ethnographically inspired observations at all of the camps where I conducted formal interviews, as well as several other camps that I visited for shorter periods of time. I ate dinner in the "chow hall" (sitting variously with prisoners and with staff), chatted informally (and "hung out") with staff and prisoner-workers in the light-industrial shops on the forestry side of the camps, stood on the porch outside the correctional offices late at night to talk with prisoners, and took many other opportunities to observe patterns of day-to-day life. Usually I was more or less free to roam about and talk informally with those I met. This included the parts of the camps considered to belong to "corrections," as well as those that are thought of as "forestry" spaces. One area that I did not observe firsthand was the work sites. My knowledge of the firefighting work and manual labor that prisoner crews perform is based solely on what prisoners, staff, and administrators told me during interviews. Sensitive to this, I made a point to spend a considerable amount of interview time discussing the work, such that I was able to hear multiple perspectives, including comparisons between and among prisoners and staff. Future research might benefit from direct observations of the fire lines. Nonetheless, I was afforded considerable (and hitherto unprecedented) access to the fire camps and was able to use that access to interview and observe widely on many issues, including the social production of race and racialized norms.

UNPACKING RACIAL POLITICS

In this section, I describe some of the racialized patterns and norms in three important places: walled prisons, work spaces within fire camps, and prison spaces within fire camps. I also analyze what the differences between the spaces tell us.

The Foil of Walled Prisons

One cannot understand race in California's prison fire camps without having at least some sense of racialized life in the state's walled prisons for men. To that end, I offer a thumbnail sketch, drawn from existing scholarship, my own previous observational research in walled prison reception centers in California (Goodman 2008), and the interviews conducted for the present project. My sketch is partial by design, aimed less at capturing a full suite of nuance and detail and aimed more at offering readers a sense of fire camp prisoners' point of reference.

There is a widespread belief that race has come to dominate nearly every facet of life in men's prisons, especially in California. Tonya Lindsey, in her study of prisoners' attitudes with respect to racial segregation in California prisons, quotes a prisoner as saying, "Well, everything is racially oriented

from who you eat with to who you talk to. I mean everything from A to Z" (2009, p. 81). Striking a similar chord, K. C. Carceral (the pen name of an author incarcerated at an undisclosed prison in the United States) writes, "In prison, the racial divide is always present. America entered the new millennium boasting about racial harmony, but its prisons still remain racial hate factories. We're stuck in the time warp of the '50s and '60s. Racism still determines where you go, how you go, who you go with, what you do when you arrive, who you arrive with, and what you say when finally there. It is a constant part of everyone's prison life" (2004, p. 137). It is a mistake, however, to conclude that there is a total absence of all contact between individuals categorized as belonging to different racial groups. Instead, it is more accurate to think of interactions in men's walled prisons in California as conditioned by a set of unwritten—but well-established—"rules" that require close attention and call for careful coordination among loose groups of people. Navigating race means maintaining an appearance of propriety, not unlike observing one's manners at the dinner table (although with different consequences for violation). Rebecca Trammell, as part of a book describing how prison gangs structure life in men's prisons in California, puts it this way:

> California prisons [for men] have developed three levels of social organization. First, there are the formal rules set up and enforced by the prison administration. Second, there is the norm of racial segregation, which has been in place for decades. Third, there are daily interactions that are guided by formal and informal rules. On the surface, the boys [*sic*] "don't mix." However, the presences of underground businesses, along with the flexibility of some of the leaders, allowed men to communicate and negotiate with men of all races. They went to great lengths to maintain the appearance of racial segregation and then continued having some friends of other races. (2011, p. 49; internal citations removed)

The result is a finely textured set of rules, a circumscribed life. Each prisoner must learn what he can do without any risk of recrimination, what he can probably do, what he probably ought not to do, and what is absolutely forbidden (an example of the last is a strict prohibition in walled prisons against the direct sharing of food or drink with someone of a different racial group.)

Another common motif is that the enforcement of rules in California walled men's prisons is swift and harsh. Reggie,[15] one of my interviewees in the camps (who self-identified as black), explained that on the "yard" (i.e., communal public space inside the walled prison), people who misrepresent their street gang affiliation are "taken to the wolves": they are subject to sometimes severe, physical beatings (for a comparison to how this works

[15] All names used are pseudonyms chosen by participants (or, if people preferred, chosen by me).

"on the streets," see Garot [2007]). Similarly, during litigation leading up to the 2005 decision in *Johnson v. California* (543 U.S. 499), attorneys working on behalf of the State of California claimed that racial segregation is necessary because "the prison gang culture is, above all, violent" and suggested that, in the absence of strict controls, "actively virulent racism and religious bigotry" commonly lead prison gang members to attack, and even kill, people belonging to different races or different gangs (Lockyer et al. 2004, pp. 2–3). The folk wisdom espoused by prisoners and administrators alike claims that male prisoners resort, quickly and frequently, to violence as a means to enforce racial rules.

Considering such statements about interactions across racial "lines," we must be careful not to overstate the case. Trammell (2011) observes that in most men's prisons in California, there is a loose-knit cabal of prisoners (sometimes referred to as "shot callers") who have an interest in maintaining smooth operations in the trafficking of illegal and semi-illicit drugs and other contraband, and who therefore try to keep violence in check. While Trammell's focus on shot callers may lead her to underestimate and undertheorize violence that more closely resembles predation and exploitation, the larger point is that at least some violence in California's prisons for men is purposeful, patterned, and constrained in scope. In a similar vein, Skarbek (2012) argues that prison gangs (in California and elsewhere) have elaborate internal governance structures—including, in some instances, written constitutions—that function to restrict and constrain potential internal violence that might otherwise result in gang leaders and midlevel managers preying on their own (less powerful) members. Clearly the image of walled prisons as Hobbesian worlds of anarchy and unchecked racialized violence—presented in pseudo-documentaries such as *Lockup* and *Prison Nation*—is misleading. Racialized violence is not entirely anarchic, but rather is built into the social web of interactions in prison.

Racial Politics at "Work"

In his classic study *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman (1959) argues that individuals and teams work hard at presenting a coherent front of propriety so that observers (or, in Goffman's framing, audience members) believe that the "performers" are who they say they are. Even when the performers stay the same, performances vary according to the setting: words and actions seen as appropriate in one setting may be deviant in another (for an application specific to institutions such as prisons, see also Goffman [1961]).[16]

[16] More recently, scholars in the social sciences have theorized and researched the role of space in shaping everyday life, demonstrating across empirical domains that how people

In fire camps, prisoners and staff agree to a cognitive division of the camps into two sides. (In so doing, they largely ignore the formal legalistic division of authority, under which forestry "owns" the entire physical plant of the camp and corrections provides security and control of prisoners when they are not signed out to the custody of forestry.) More specifically, the barracks, chow hall, visiting areas, television rooms, guards' and correctional supervisors' offices, and hobby craft areas (among others) are universally considered to be under the ambit of corrections. To be physically present in one of these spaces is to be "in prison," and that comes with a whole series of understandings and norms regarding appropriate and inappropriate behavior (see the subsection on prison spaces, below). In contrast, the garages for storing and maintaining crew vehicles, outdoor areas used for fitness training and assembling for work, and forestry employees' administrative offices are all considered the forestry "side" or domain of the fire camp. Also included in the forestry category is everything outside the formal perimeter of the camp, namely, the sites to which prisoner crews travel in order to perform manual labor (or "grade") projects and fight wildfires. Indeed, as soon as someone exits the perimeter with his or her crew, he or she is "at work," under the supervision of forestry.

These liminal forestry/work spaces in which one is still a prisoner, but is temporarily outside of prison, are of great interest. Perhaps the starkest example of how the dichotomy plays out is on the fire line. There—and, to a lesser extent, when sent outside the camp to perform manual labor (how crews are kept busy when there is no active wildland fire to which they have been deployed)—it is possible to do things that would otherwise be cause for serious alarm and might even lead to a violent confrontation. Brian, a male prisoner incarcerated at a fire camp in northern California, explains:

> Well if we're on the fireline and you run out of water, and I've got water, I don't care who you are. You can have some water. If somebody's got a problem with it . . . let them say something right then and we can go handle it [fight over it]. You know what I mean? More or less when you're out on the line, you're a crew and if I fall and break my ankle, you're going to help carry me back. And same goes for me [i.e., I'll carry you back too, regardless of who you are].

To fully appreciate this quote, it is useful to note that when I asked Brian, early in our interview, "What race, ethnicity, or nationality do you consider yourself," he replied succinctly: "I'm white." Combined with the fact that I interpreted Brian's statement "I don't care who you are" to be a clear reference to race, the result is an image of a "white prisoner" sharing a water

understand themselves, and how they understand others, is bound up in physical and social geographies (for one theoretical introduction, see Lefebvre [1991]).

canteen with someone of a different (racial) group. This is a striking contrast to men's walled prisons in California, in which interviewees explained (in line with the literature summarized above) that these behaviors are universally considered violations of racial politics (see also Irwin 2005). Behind the walls, one simply does not "drink after" someone considered to belong to a different race. Ever. That it would be permissible on the fire lines is both a radical shift and a testament to the degree to which firefighting work opens up an entirely new realm of potentially acceptable behaviors.

These permissible behaviors on the fire line are diverse and extensive (many are also tolerated by fellow prisoners/crewmates while working on manual labor projects). In addition to sharing water and helping an injured crewmate, they include things such as overlooking minor insults and faux pas that could lead to serious confrontations "behind the wall" (whether in a walled prison or even in the prison spaces of the fire camp). Likewise, camp prisoners joke around and share sleeping quarters with peers considered to belong to different racial groups (namely, in the staging areas used by prisoner and civilian firefighters and while camping on the land in between firefighting shifts). It also includes taking directions from the two prisoners who work as unofficial crew leaders (known in firefighter parlance as the "dragspoon" and the "swamper"), regardless of the ethnoracial group those men affiliate with.[17]

Lucky, whom I interviewed at a fire camp in northern California and who identified as Hispanic, answered my question about what surprised him most about the fire camp: "You trip out because in prison, races don't really get along. Where here, when we're out there on the fire line, it's all of us. So you trip out watching all of us work all at once, you know? Getting it done." As Lucky and many others made clear, racial politics at work are almost unrecognizable to those familiar with the interactional world of California's walled prisons for men.

But why? Part of the answer is fleshed out below through an analysis of sense-making (and prisoners' pragmatism, in particular). It is also the product of the deep pride many prisoners take in the work they do preparing for, preventing, and combating wildfires.[18] Many prisoners (and

[17] Technically, prisoners in California cannot supervise other prisoners; in practice this is precisely what happens on the fire line. The swamper and dragspoon work very closely with the forestry crew leader (a public employee of the forestry agency) and are unofficially responsible for helping to maintain order and efficiency.

[18] Camp prisoners employed as firefighters have much in common with other wildland firefighters. In his ethnographic study of nonincarcerated wildland firefighters, Desmond explains, "Many of my crewmembers develop a deep, almost spiritual fascination with fire. To them fire is mysterious, powerful, and beautiful; more than an element, more than a

some staff) consider this work nothing short of heroic.[19] Felipe—a prisoner who self-identified as Filipino and who at the time of our interview was "doing time" at a fire camp in southern California—explained it like this:

> We put fires out. And the thing is, too, there is a small sense of camaraderie because we sweat together. We burn together. We take chances together. We fight fires together. So there is that cohesiveness and the little deal you gain from each crew—because you live with your crew. Sometimes we sleep on mountaintops for two or three days at a time with no water and I mean when you're up there, when we fought the Yosemite fire at 8,000 feet, you have nobody but the guys you're with.

When at work, many of those incarcerated in the camps see others on their crew foremost as fellow wildland firefighters and only secondarily as prisoners affiliated with one of the four racial "cars" (or primary affiliations) according to which those same people segregate themselves in the chow hall. They are firefighters first, prisoners second.

Before I present (in the next section) a contrasting image of how race is lived and performed in the prison spaces of the same fire camps, it should be mentioned that forestry staff (who supervise prisoner crews on the fire line and during manual labor projects) play an important, if often understated and overlooked, role in shaping the degree to which race patterns (or does not pattern) the work lives of camp prisoners. Marty, a forestry crew supervisor at a fire camp in southern California, answered my question, "What race, ethnicity, or nationality do you consider yourself?" with "Hispanic, probably." Read in the context of the entire interview, the word "probably" foreshadows Marty's conscious and consistent efforts to paint race as operating differently on the forestry side of the camp, where he works. To drive home his point, Marty told me at length about a "race riot" (as he called it) that had occurred about five years earlier on, tellingly, the corrections side of the camp. According to Marty, dozens of prisoners attacked and fought with one another in one of the camp's dormitories, resulting in some serious injuries. Local law enforcement was called to the scene, and it took them several hours to fully restore order. When I expressed shock that a serious race riot had occurred at the camp (I thought such things occurred only in men's walled prisons in California), Marty reflected, "I think it's different over at CDC than it is on the fire [i.e., forestry] side. Because CDC are obviously the police. But . . . we're there to work them. . . . I think when they're with us, it's a better feeling

combustion of substances, it is a form of life, and a romantic one at that. Many firefighters love fire deeply" (2007, p. 58).

[19] This is despite the fact that many prisoners object to the wages (a dollar per hour for firefighting—much less when performing grade projects) and to the fact that prisoners perform among the dirtiest, most exhausting, work there is to be done when fighting a wildfire.

over here because they're not locked up, per se, and they're not always . . . having every little move looked at. I think it's a little more relaxed [on our] side. So I really don't think they want to bring any tension over to [our] side."[20] To be clear, race riots are exceptionally rare at prison fire camps. Indeed, many prisoners and staff cited the camps' relative quiescence as a reason they preferred to be incarcerated or employed at a camp versus at a walled prison. So it is noteworthy that, when a conflict did occur, it happened on the prison side. People frequently regaled me with stories about the occasional breakdown of order and, in some cases, the ensuing violence on the corrections side of the camps; many were quick to point out that this was unthinkable when at work on the forestry side of their camp.

The exceptional riot thereby demonstrates an important, if quotidian, pattern: staff and prisoners agree that work and forestry spaces are to be treated as distinct places in which racialized violence, arguments, and tensions are all discouraged—displaced, if need be, to the prison side of the camp. And just as the situation on the fire lines reflects prisoners' cherishing and honoring their firefighting labor, so too does the racial détente witnessed in all forestry spaces serve the interests of forestry staff. In particular, forestry crew leaders (like prisoners) see themselves foremost as wildland firefighters; they do not relish the task of having to police "inmates." Instead, they focus on getting the work done as quickly as possible, in a manner that other (civilian) firefighters will consider to be quality work. As a result, they benefit from the absence of "drama" and the lack of violence that occasionally envelops the prison spaces (and that can be rampant in walled prisons). Thus while Marty puts the onus (and credit) on prisoners for creating a better atmosphere on the forestry side, it seems equally clear that forestry staff expect (and perhaps even, in some cases, outright demand) crew members to behave; in the case of the fire camps, forestry staff largely get their wish—precisely because prisoners and staff share the same goals.

Racial Politics in the Prison Spaces of the Camps

The third space, namely the "prison" areas of the fire camps, is subject to its own set of rules—not quite as strict as "behind the wall" but not as lenient or progressive as what can be observed when prisoners are at work. Paul, a prisoner at a camp in southern California, serves here as a useful guide. He self-identifies as being of mixed race, specifically "half Mexican, a quarter

[20] In 2005 the official name of the department was changed, with the word rehabilitation added to what became the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. Marty dropped the R (using the old acronym), a common practice among some staff and prisoners. This is sometimes intended as a wry way of suggesting that prisons punish and cannot rehabilitate; it may also be an old habit given that Marty, like many other staff members, had been employed as a forestry crew supervisor for quite some time.

Cherokee, and a quarter Scots-Irish." Despite this nuanced and thick ethnoracial identity, Paul told me that, in walled prisons and while at camp, he chose to affiliate with "the white car."[21] In so doing, he conforms to the stricture (coming from walled prisons and policed there by prisoners, staff, and administrators) that male prisoners in California are supposed to adopt one—and only one—ethnoracial identity from one of the main, recognized, groups (see Goodman 2008). But Paul is also a self-styled rebel who wants to "run my own program," including distancing himself from peers he considers racist.[22] While I found Paul's forthright style and willingness to think out loud about identity winsome, Paul's "playing" (his word) with the rules caused him no shortage of stress during his term of imprisonment. After telling me that he has a black workout partner, he went on to explain:

> I'm not a violent person, but I can certainly take care of myself. And you're going to want to [get into a physical altercation with me] because of a decision I made to work out with—another man? [Incredulously] *Another breathing human being?* [I recognize that] there's certain things that you don't do . . . [but] working out with him is totally different because [while] it's kind of stepping over the line, [it's not totally out of line]. I'm not going to sit there and spread [i.e., prepare a meal] with him, that's a real no-no. [Eating together is] like giving the finger to my car, saying, "I don't care." That's out of character for me, number one. I don't do that. You just don't do that . . . because a lot of these guys . . . really are racists. They . . . will not associate with you or talk with you if they think you're eating after a guy [who affiliates with a different racial "car"]. And they will [literally and figuratively] wash their hands. It's really wild, man. That's pretty wild.

There are a couple of lessons here about how race is lived in the prison spaces of the fire camps. First, there are some behaviors that—while openly condoned when at work—are the source of considerable tension (perhaps even danger) when engaged in back at the camp. Working out with a partner who affiliates with one of the other major racial groups is an example. And while in Paul's case he had yet to be directly confronted about it, Paul knew he was on proverbial thin ice. The lack of overt confrontation might have been due to people's general wariness around enforcing racial norms

[21] Recall that I asked people how they identified in terms of "race, ethnicity, or nationality." In practice, interviewees conflated the terms and spoke exclusively (or almost exclusively) about "race."

[22] In the context of California's prisons, the word "program" has a multiplicity of meanings. As a noun, it can be used to refer to an intervention or rehabilitation-style program (such as a GED course or addiction therapy). But it also refers, more generally, to one's everyday routine in the prison. As a verb, it refers to people who, generally speaking, follow the rules and are not the source of tension and conflict. Thus "to program" is to stay out of trouble. Paul's statement that he runs his own program is a way of claiming that he thinks for himself and makes decisions on the basis of his own internal compass rather than blindly following the dictates of powerful compatriots.

in the camps (see the section on boundary work below). It also helped that there was a semblance of privacy in that camp's workout room: the space is busy and people are constantly coming and going. Unlike the camp's sleeping, eating, and television areas, the workout room was not spatially or temporally segregated: everyone was welcome to use it, whenever he wanted. Thus while people apparently objected to the concept of Paul and his partner working out together (and it was, indeed, the first time I had ever heard of or witnessed such behavior), it was not visually aberrant. Regardless of why no one had (so far) directly confronted him about it, Paul's ongoing concern—and recognition that he was, at minimum, bending the rules—is clear indication of a stricter set of racialized norms more akin (but not identical) to those said to govern walled prisons.

Another important understanding is that there are some actions even self-styled "rebels" like Paul acknowledge are categorically off-limits. While sharing food and water is openly tolerated on the fire lines, it would be, as Paul explains, a "real no-no," a sort of "fuck you" to one's group back on the corrections side of the camp.

Many prisoners and staff are convinced that, at the end of the day, the racial politics in the fire camps are permanent. That is "just the way it is." Some of those I interviewed appeared genuinely confused (and, in a few cases, even perturbed or outright hostile) that I considered the camp's politics deserving of attention and discussion. Rick, an officer at a camp in southern California, for example, seemed annoyed when I asked him about racial politics at the camp, retorting "you just can't change those things." Similarly, Poopy,[23] a prisoner serving time at the same fire camp where Rick worked, told me racial politics are "something that happened when prison started." Although a provocative statement, many criminologists would take issue. Most scholars point to the 1950s and 1960s as the turning point for race relations behind prison walls, the time when contemporary racialized politics appear to have taken hold (e.g., Irwin 1980). Nonetheless, Poopy's statement captures a popular notion that the camps' racial politics are so tightly woven into the fabric of imprisonment that they are seen as immutable.

One task remains before continuing to a discussion of sense making: to recognize the important role of staff in shaping what race looks like in the prison areas of the fire camps (just as in the forestry spaces, as described above). The camps' dining rooms serve again as fertile terrain for thinking through how this works. Although the modal practice at most camps is tables that are completely segregated according to the four main groups (with "others" sharing with "blacks"), I visited one camp in which staff had recently decided to integrate the dining hall. They required people to sit

[23] Poopy chose his own pseudonym.

at tables with their work crews, even occupying seats around the tables in the same order in which they worked on the fire line (referred to as "hook line order"). The result was—at a demographic level, anyway—a completely integrated chow hall.

With this change, staff demonstrated an important counterfactual: the segregation that occurs in most fire camps is at least partially the product of staff inaction. By not doing anything about it, staff allow segregation (cf. Massey and Denton 1993; Charles 2003). This does not explain the underlying causes of segregated dining spaces in the camps (any more than it explains de facto segregation of high school cafeterias [Tatum 2003]), but it does remind us that staff actions have real impacts on daily life.

Learning about this integrated camp chow hall provided a useful tool for my subsequent camp visits and interviews with correctional guards and supervisors. Word travels from camp to camp: many prisoners and staff were aware that at least one camp had forced racial integration in its dining room. Consider the following excerpt from my interview with Marco, who worked at a fire camp in southern California. A lieutenant—the camp's highest-ranking correctional official—Marco identified himself to me as white.

Phil: How do you see the prison politics at this camp, compared to [what happens] at the institutions—compared to "behind the wall"? What are the (big) differences?

Marco: Well, the big difference is it's not that racially motivated [here] or gang-motivated. But there still is prison politics [in this camp]. You still won't cross certain lines. And those aren't dictated by the CDCR. Those are dictated by the inmates. I don't care what court or what person says [presumably referring to the Supreme Court in the *Johnson* case], we can't do it. It's not us doing it. And I can't control the inmate saying, "I'm not going to eat lunch over there." Well, I [suppose I] can. But do we really want to get to that? Because at a camp setting we're not supposed to have to.

Phil: I'm sure some camps do. They say, "well, at dinner, we want to make sure people don't group [a reference to racial segregation]. So we're going to force them to sit in hook order," or something.

Marco: Some camps do. You line up by crew and you come eat in a crew.

Phil: . . . Is it worth it?

Marco: If it was a big issue . . . the race [relations] in the camp, then I would say you do that. For the same reason we, that society, integrates. It's to try to get people to educate each other and

> understand the other person's viewpoints and all that. If it was a big issue in the camp then we might push that, and just tell them "you're going to eat by crew."

Marco's first instinct, tellingly, is to adopt the party line: staff do not segregate and prisoners segregate themselves (see also Lindsey 2009). Yet when I brought up the fact that administrators at some other camps do control seating patterns, Marco changed his tune. Instead of racial segregation being the inevitable practice of biased, if not racist, prisoners, he now framed integration as a practice that staff can implement if necessary to control a larger race problem. Marco adroitly reestablished his role as lead correctional officer at the camp, suggesting that segregation is not a sign of poor management, but a conscious (and rather innocuous) choice made by prisoners. As Marco would have it, he chooses not to engineer integration because his camp is otherwise well run and free of racialized problems. An impressive pivot away from potentially discrediting information, Marco's comments offer support for the broader consensus as lived and experienced by prisoners: interact and integrate along racial lines, but only when required by camp rules or safely within work contexts.

"WEAK SAUCE": PRAGMATISM AND SENSE-MAKING AROUND RACIAL POLITICS

So far I have focused on the nature of prison fire camps as racialized places. Missing from my account, and from much scholarship on race and prisons, is sustained attention to how rules or norms are subjectively experienced and made sense of by those whose lives are most intimately affected by them. In this section, I argue that by explicitly asking people what they think of the camps' racial politics, it becomes possible to conceptualize racialization not as an abstract phenomenon but instead as something that prisoners both live with and help create; it is also clear that prisoners' experiences of race and racialization cannot be divorced from how they conceptualize the relationship between camps and walled prisons (and the nature of punishment, more generally).

An overarching theme is that prisoners and staff often spoke in pragmatic terms when I asked them to explain, justify, and make sense of the racial politics at their camp. This is not unique to race; pragmatism is a theme that ran throughout my research in the fire camps. Indeed, whether talking about rehabilitation, work, or race, participants frequently invoked cost-benefit analyses; they rationalized and understood their own actions, and the actions taken by peers, as individual and collective attempts to make their time at the fire camp a bit more comfortable (cf. Sykes 1958).

Something that is unique to race, however, is the manner and degree to which fire camp prisoners so often understood racial politics in relative

terms. Specifically, many interviewees said the camps' racial politics were "weak sauce" (as Michael put it) compared to practices in walled prisons, insofar as one can do things at a fire camp that one cannot do at a walled prison. The reason is that, as I show below, prisoners view race and racialized norms as a mechanism for keeping people safe, especially in terms of conflict avoidance at camp and afterward. I explore both of these types of safety below, then turn my attention to a discussion of what was left out of the sense-making narratives that prisoners shared; not even one interviewee claimed that racial politics are intrinsically good, just, or right.

Keeping Safe and Out of Trouble While in the Camps

Television shows and popular films often depict male prisoners as either violent, aggressive types who seek out conflict or as hapless individuals who try, often unsuccessfully, to avoid being victims behind bars (e.g., Mason 2006; Rafter 2006). Neither image is a very accurate portrayal of life in the fire camp context. Instead, many interviewees told me that they just wanted to "do their own time"—stay out of trouble and maintain the "good time" credits (or sentence reductions) that accrue for those who are eligible.[24] Many sought to avoid involvement in confrontations, especially violent confrontations that could get them sent back to a walled prison. But this does not mean that their peers in walled prisons viewed them as weak or passive, and no one admitted to wanting to be placed in a fire camp because he felt unable to deal with life in a walled prison. More typically, interviewees proclaimed an ability to stand up for themselves and to fight, if need be. This makes sense given that many of those housed in fire camps were previously housed in medium- (or, sometimes, maximum-) security prisons and given the physical fitness requirements of fire camp eligibility. Most interviewees positioned their decision to "program" in the camps as a choice.

Closely related, many spoke about the camps' racial politics as necessary for ensuring that the camp program ran smoothly (recall Marty, above, on why the forestry side of the camps seemed to have less racial tension than the prison side). More generally, interviewees spoke about their desire to fight fires and their sense that if people began violating the racial status quo, it would lead to conflict and tension. In turn, that might cause the firefighting work to suffer. Because many camp prisoners were deeply invested in combating wildfires, causing problems with other prisoners (by violating shared notions of appropriate racialized behavior) was just not worth it.

[24] Some of the people I interviewed were statutorily required to serve at least 85% of their original sentence. For them, there was no advantage (in terms of their release date) in being housed in a fire camp vs. a walled prison.

Focusing in particular on safety and how racial politics help stave off large-scale racial conflict, Paul—quoted above regarding his actions in the workout room—explains:

> We're not allowed to horseplay with the other races because it can lead to other problems. If someone is accidentally hurt, or someone happens to be—just all of a sudden snaps . . . you don't know who those people are, the history of them, or who they are. So we're not allowed to do that. It's for [everyone's] safety, which I totally understand. Behind the wall, we're not really even allowed to play games with them—checkers, basketball, things like that. We do it here [at camp]. A lot more lenient here, it is.

This pragmatic acceptance that racial politics keep people safe is all the more remarkable given that Paul thinks of himself as a rebel, opposed to the racist ideas and actions of some of his peers.

But do racial politics succeed on this front? Do rules and norms about who can do what and where actually lessen conflict? It is difficult, perhaps even impossible, to know, in part because there is no obvious "control" setting in which prisoners hail from highly racialized places (such as walled prisons) but have few, if any, strictures around racial interactions. Trammell (2011) certainly believes that a "convict code"—policed by gang members and shot callers—patterns and restricts violence. Perhaps something similar is at work in the fire camps.

Arguably, it matters less whether racial politics lead to quieter, safer camps than the widely held perception that it does. Indeed, as long as people like Paul—the very individuals who might otherwise choose to anger their peers by pushing the boundaries of what is considered appropriate behavior—believe that the rules are useful, those rules are likely to remain hegemonic.

Keeping Safe and Out of Trouble after the Camps

Echoing the same pragmatism, many of those serving their sentences in fire camps see the racial politics as necessary given that they could be—at virtually any time, and with scant notice—"rolled up," or sent back to a walled prison. This occurs when camp prisoners are charged with an infraction, such as possession of contraband (including cell phones, drugs, or alcohol), or when someone needs medical attention that cannot be provided in the camps, including for something as mundane as a shot of steroids to treat a poison oak infection. It is also common for prisoners nearing their parole date to be sent back to a walled prison so that they are not deployed to a fire or other emergency when their parole date arrives (that would require camp staff to make special arrangements to transport them off the fire line). Finally, if those housed in camps have their parole revoked or are sentenced

for a new crime in the state, they will return to a walled prison (not uncommon, given an overall recidivism rate of about two-thirds in California).

Along with the fairly constant traffic of people between camps and walled prisons, there is a constant flow of information, and those in the camps are keenly interested in reputation management. This includes a concern among people regarding how they think peers judge their behavior. There is also a collective effort to avoid a situation in which those within walled prisons consider the fire camp to be a "PC" (protective custody) yard. There is a widespread belief that the former could lead to the individual being confronted, even beaten, when back at a walled prison and that the latter could result in everyone housed in a fire camp being forced to seek protective custody any time they set foot in a walled prison on this or another sentence (given the carceral logic that once someone is housed on a PC yard, he is "weak" and no longer welcome in a "mainline" unit). Terry, incarcerated at a fire camp in northern California (and who answered my question about race, ethnicity, and nationality by saying only "white"), recounted, "When I was at [prison name omitted] before I came to camp, the yard was shut down [i.e., put on lockdown] because some white guys jumped on some other white guy . . . because he bunked with a black guy [i.e., occupied the bed directly above or below the other person at one of the fire camps]. And so it got back to the yard [at the walled prison]." It is hard to know if Terry has all the details right. But what is clear is that Terry echoes a perception common among his peers that being seen as a "race traitor" could put someone in danger upon his return to a walled prison. Understandably, few are willing to risk it.

Similarly, Dana—an officer at a prison fire camp in northern California who told me "I consider myself white"—made sense of the camps' racial politics as a necessary evil. Without the racial lines, she felt that prisoners would be at risk. She regaled me with a lengthy story of one prisoner who made a Herculean effort to avoid the stigma of violating racial norms. The new, "white" prisoner (as Dana classified him) was unlucky as he happened to arrive at a moment when the camp had only one spare bed, and the top bunk was taken by someone affiliated with the blacks. Dana explained that the prisoner decided that he could not risk being perceived as "bunking" with a "different race," and so he instead stayed up all night for three nights in a row, walking in circles (catching only a sporadic nap during the day). While it is technically against the rules for prisoners to be out of their beds at night, Dana and a coworker overlooked the new man's perambulations because they sympathized with his plight. He was protecting not only his reputation but the perception that sleeping quarters at their camp were properly racially segregated. Staff such as Dana saw themselves as only indirectly involved in this reputation management (it was not their

own futures on the line), but they recognized it as sufficiently important that they went to considerable lengths to help facilitate it. They contributed to a sense of the camps' racial politics as a pragmatic compromise that would keep people safe, even as they made no moral commitment to racial segregation.[25]

Gaps and Silences: The Absence of a Moral Defense

Related to this lack of moral commitment, it is striking that during more than 70 interviews with prisoners, staff, and administrators, not a single person ventured principled or moral support for the camps' racial politics. Although people tended to accept the rules as useful, no one was willing to acknowledge that he liked the rules or saw them as having intrinsic value. In some ways this fits into a broader neoliberal turn in the United States toward color blindness. Many people, even those who think and talk in overtly racial ways, nonetheless proclaim themselves as anything but racist (cf. Bonilla-Silva 2006).

Of the 45 prisoners I interviewed, if there was one person who I might have guessed would express moral support for the camps' racial politics, it would have been Billy. Self-identifying as white, he was 40 years old, was single, had no children, and was currently incarcerated on a robbery charge. Billy divulged to me his ostensibly inactive affiliation with a skinhead prison gang (confirming what an officer had told me the day before, when he indicated Billy had been a shot caller for a gang when "behind the wall").[26] During our interview, Billy quickly steered the conversation to race and began a lengthy, confessional-style speech. He told me about serving his time at camp as a sort of penance, a way to change his racial outlook and atone for his racist past. Racism, Billy explained, "got me nowhere. I mean I still have certain feelings, you know, toward certain people. But it's not necessarily certain races now. Because there's good people in all races. But I don't know, I just—I'm just trying to be a better person." Throughout the interview Billy described the camp's politics in a matter-of-fact manner, declaring them to be "more lenient" than in walled prisons. Yet he was also quick to clarify that under no circumstances would he "eat with a black person out of the same bowl" for fear of "doing something that is going to get me in trouble back on the yard."

[25] The fact that a racialized notion of safety is understood differently across spaces is evidence of my larger argument about race and space being inextricably intertwined (or coconstitutive). At an abstract level, this is not unique to prisons or prisoners; indeed, this sort of variegation is a foundational observation of, among others, symbolic interactionists (e.g., Blumer 1969).

[26] Recall that prisoners, in order to be eligible for placement at a fire camp, cannot have active affiliations with prison gangs. Billy, as will become clear, was trying to distance himself from his past.

So, while hoping he had left behind his racist past and while atoning, in his mind, for past actions now that he was in the fire camp, Billy sidestepped any discussion of the justness of the camp's racial politics. Instead, he fell back on pragmatic statements of necessity, just like so many of his peers. Once a leader of a white supremacist prison gang, Billy now adopted an agnostic position: he was unwilling both to defend the politics and to deviate from them.

BOUNDARY WORK AND NORM ENFORCEMENT

As with the above exploration of "sense-making," thinking more carefully about boundary work and norm enforcement provides a way to delve into the origins and ramifications of racialization. A theme that runs throughout this section is that both categorization and norm enforcement are affected by the camps' particular (and relatively stable) position in the penumbra of the walled prison.

Categorization, Race, and Boundary Work

In my previous research on California's walled prison reception centers, I argued that racial categorization in men's prisons is best described as a site of shared power and influence. Specifically, prisoners exert some control over how they are categorized but are policed by frontline staff. Both parties operate within a framework shaped and molded by institutional concerns (Goodman 2008). As corroborated by other scholars, men in California prisons must pick one of several institutionally recognized categories, namely, black, white, Hispanic, and, in some cases, other (see especially Lindsey 2009; Trammell 2011).

Prisoners and staff import many aspects of this approach to race and categorization into the fire camps. Because virtually everyone housed in a fire camp was previously incarcerated in at least two walled prisons, people are knowledgeable about racial politics in those locales. As they may return, they have a vested interest in maintaining at least the appearance of doing race in a similar fashion in the fire camps. One clear consequence is that those incarcerated in the camps almost invariably choose one (and only one) group with which to formally affiliate. Thus Michael (a prisoner incarcerated at a camp in southern California), for example, told me that while he considers himself "half-white" and "half-Hispanic," he chose during his entire prison term, including while at camp, to affiliate with the Hispanic group. If you are looking for Michael at dinner, you will find him at one of the tables seen as belonging to the Hispanic car.

This way of thinking about race and racial categorization both underlies and reinforces the camps' racial politics. In particular, the fact that everyone picks a primary group with which to affiliate sends a clear message that

race is a self-evident, valid way of slotting people (even just on the basis of observations of phenotypical appearance) into one identity or another. While some people (like Potter, described below) publicly announce more complicated identities, they, too, are expected to pick a table and to announce their affiliation with a group (most likely the same group with which they affiliated when at a walled prison). It turn, the fact that race is seen as a relatively stable, individual-level trait presumably makes people more likely to find it natural and reasonable when they are told they must interact in proscribed ways in specific settings. As a counterfactual, if race was instead seen as a messy, constructed category that reflected social and political forces and had little use in signaling who people "are," fewer people would be likely to find the demands of policing and managing racialized behavior palatable or acceptable. I suspect the near-absence of voices calling for progressive ways of thinking about race (even dispensing with racial categorization altogether) explains, at least in part, the persistence of de facto segregation and pervasive race-based understandings of who can do what, where.

To avoid overstating the relationship, it is worthwhile to consider a complicated case. Potter, a charismatic young man in his mid-20s, was imprisoned at a fire camp in southern California and exhibited (indeed, insisted on) ontological and interactional flexibility. Before getting arrested, Potter owned a clothing store in the greater Los Angeles area. He described his background as "upper-middle-class" and self-identified as both Persian and Jewish.[27] When he first arrived at a walled prison reception center, Potter told me he was forced to make a decision about which racial group to affiliate with; despite "looking white" (Potter's words), he opted to affiliate with the "others" because he saw his real identity as Persian (not white). When I asked about this choice, Potter explained that it allowed him to interact with a more diverse array of people: "I don't do well with people trying to tell me what I can and can't do. I have black friends on the street, [and] if I want to eat with a black guy, or hang out with a black guy, or play chess with a black guy, [then] that's what I'm going to do." It clearly gave Potter some satisfaction to speak this way; like Paul, Potter enjoys being able to express a thicker ethnoracial identity and takes pride in refusing to interact only with whites. He opted instead to choose an identity that allowed interaction with the very group (blacks) with which white supremacist prison gangs are most often in conflict. Not surprisingly, his behavior and decisions were also a source of tension. Potter told me that fellow prisoners (at the walled prison) constantly harassed him, making him explain over and over why he chose not to affiliate with the whites.

[27] In this prison context, the fact that Judaism is a religion, not a nationality or ethnicity, is muddied. Potter certainly spoke of being Jewish in a manner that conflated it with what he identified as the other marker of his identity, namely, being Persian.

When moved to a fire camp, Potter was able to interact more freely with a variety of friends and acquaintances. Fewer people harassed him about his affiliation. Although still presenting himself to his peers as "other" (as he did when behind the wall), Potter now played chess and other games at the fire camp with people who were affiliated with the black group or the white group (whereas in the walled prisons, he was able to play chess only with people categorized as other). At the fire camp, Potter told people he considered himself both other and Jewish. This became clear (and personal) when, one Saturday during my fieldwork, he loudly wished me "Good Shabbos" (a typical Jewish greeting on the holy day of rest) in the chow hall. Compare this to David Arenberg's (2009) essay describing his imprisonment at an unnamed prison in the West in which he describes being the last person to eat at every meal (having "reached an accommodation with my Nazi tormentors") and the fact that he is, "and will remain, a pariah." Potter, in contrast, moved about the prison fire camp freely and appeared to be at least tolerated (if not moderately well liked) by his peers. And so while Potter was still required to eat dinner only at the table designated as being shared by the blacks and the others, he was far from a pariah.

What do Potter's behavior and decisions tell us about the relationship between categorization and racialization? For one thing, the fact that Potter was somewhat freer to express what he saw as his "true" ethnoracial identity is indicative of a theme that runs throughout this article: there is a more lenient, or looser, racial regime in the fire camps as compared to walled prisons. Still, while he was no pariah, Potter was considered an oddity by many of his peers; he stated that people still occasionally challenged him about his racial affiliation. Likewise, other prisoners in the camp still insisted that Potter follow the rules regarding segregation patterns while he was present in the prison side of the fire camp. Requiring Potter to follow the same behavioral dictates as everyone else (despite Potter's public proclamations of his complex identity) meant that there was little noticeable effect on hegemonic ideas about race, racial categorization, and racial politics. Perhaps people such as Potter are the proverbial exception that proves the rule.

Enforcing the Rules

Potter's experiences are also relevant to the second substantive focus of this section: the comparatively lenient enforcement of racial politics in the fire camps. Consider the following excerpt from my interview with Ziggy:[28]

[28] I interviewed Ziggy at a camp in central California, but the audio file from the first 20 or so minutes of our interview got corrupted, and I have been unable to recover it. Thus

> Before I came here [to camp], I knew a kid from my neighborhood. He was 20-something years old. The politics on the yard [at that prison] was we don't have any interactions with any race when it comes to sports (except the Hispanics). This kid was . . . really good at basketball. Aficionado, whatever you want to call it. We told him time and again, "Don't do this" [i.e., don't play basketball with people affiliated with other racial groups]. Myself, I don't care. You're young: do what you want to do. I'm not playing games anymore [i.e., I'm not interested in drama and interpersonal conflict]. I just follow the rules. And so to make a long story short, the kid got beat up. Three guys went and attacked him on the yard, beat him up, and told him, "You've got to get off this yard." [Prison staff] took him and moved him to another prison. If the same incident [were] to take place here [at camp], that wouldn't happen. The physical punishment wouldn't happen. You'd be shunned, verbally shunned, but no physical confrontation would happen.

Many potentially objectionable acts that occur in a fire camp elicit a tongue lashing rather than a literal lashing. So while it is not completely unheard of for someone to be punished by his peers for breaking racialized rules while in a fire camp, punishment is more likely to be deferred until the offender returns to a walled prison (or, perhaps in some cases, forgotten). When sanctioning does occur in the camp, it is typically in the form of verbal warnings and censuring. This is in stark contrast to what people told me occurs in men's walled prisons in California. Ziggy, for instance, describes a violent confrontation and a prison transfer, while Terry's story is one of deferred punishment meted out in a walled prison for an infraction at a fire camp. People can, and do, get away with a greater variety of racially suspect behavior in the fire camps, but not because the behaviors are universally seen as permissible; it is the result, instead, of less, or deferred, enforcement.

In trying to understand why there is less use of violence to enforce racial norms in the camps, it is profitable to think about risks and benefits, using what we know about the camps' racial norms and how people try to make sense of the camps' "politics." The risks, or costs, of being a norm enforcer are almost certainly greater in a fire camp (for some context, see Axelrod [1986]; Heckathorn [1988]; Horne [2004]). Perhaps most consequentially, if camp staff observe a prisoner in a violent confrontation (regardless of who instigated it), he is likely to be sent back to a walled prison, quickly replaced by someone else who would rather be in a fire camp. That prisoners prefer placement at a fire camp makes it possible for staff to adopt a zero-tolerance policy toward many types of infractions, especially those involving physical violence. What is more, many camp staff and prisoners expressed appreciation for the camps' relative quiet and peacefulness; I

I have no record of Ziggy's answer to my question about race/ethnicity/nationality. The excerpt printed here comes from later in the interview, when the audio recorder was working properly.

would not be surprised if this caused camp prisoners to report more confrontations to staff (doing so in a walled prison could be very dangerous, as being labeled a "snitch" can make one a target). For all of these reasons, norm enforcement is risky business in the fire camps.

Likewise, if the risks of using violence to sanction racially deviant behavior in the fire camps are greater than the risks of doing so in a walled prison, the average rewards are also considerably more modest. In many walled prisons for men in the United States, participating in the physical beating of a rule violator is said to accord status (and, in some cases, staff respect; Carceral 2004; Irwin 2005; Hassine 2009). This is certainly the case in California men's prisons, given the power of prison gangs and the relative dominance of comparatively strict racial codes (e.g., Trammell 2011). In the fire camps, moral boundaries around potentially deviant racialized behavior are murkier. Would-be enforcers in the fire camps would likely receive little, if any, approbation from their peers, insofar as some of their peers would prefer that the behavior had been overlooked or sanctioned only with a verbal warning. Whereas rule enforcement in walled prisons might result in peers' praise, doing so in a fire camp might draw criticism and "drama." These men have to live and work together in often-dangerous conditions. Enforcing norms around permissible cross-group racial behavior may be of less concern when each prisoner needs his fellow to back him up on a fire line.

Regardless of the exact constellation of causal factors, it is quite clear that camp prisoners perceive racial boundary enforcement to be more lenient, and it is one of several reasons why the fire camps are unique carceral worlds. Race matters in fire camps, but in different ways and with different consequences than behind the wall.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this section I revisit the questions with which I opened this article, drawing several conclusions about race and California's prison fire camps. Next, I ask what we can learn about prisons and punishment from studying exceptional penal spaces. In the last subsection, I distill several key broader lessons about race as a concept that structures and shapes daily life.

Explaining Puzzles

This article began (in part) with a series of empirical questions or puzzles. I asked why race—as a category and as racialized patterns of normative behavior—appears to be lived so differently in California prison fire camps compared to walled prisons. Subsumed within this question was another: What explains the considerable spatial and temporal variation in how race structures everyday life within the camps? That is, why would men im-

prisoned in prison fire camps fight fires on racially integrated crews but, back at the camp, refuse to break bread together?

The answers provided in this article revolve around three related dimensions: (*a*) the manner in which prisoners and staff alike valorize firefighting work, and see race, in that setting, as a distraction; (*b*) the pragmatic concerns for "safety" that, for many prisoners, call for quite different behaviors in different spaces; and (*c*) the role staff play in shaping racialized patterns of behavior. With respect to the first dimension, my research makes clear that the men who are serving part of their sentences in prison fire camps are not as different from their nonincarcerated peers as popular stereotypes about prisons and prisoners might suggest (e.g., Rafter 2006). Specifically, wildland firefighters—whether serving prison sentences or not—tend to be deadly serious about and deeply committed to protecting life, property, and nature (see, generally, Thorpe 1972; Desmond 2007).

To be clear, staff and prisoners in the fire camps are not quixotic: they are realistic about the fact that camp prisoners perform among the dirtiest, most repetitive, and most exhausting work on the fire lines (see also Goodman 2012*b*). But they were also nearly universal in viewing the firefighting work as important (perhaps even heroic); as detailed in this article, they believe that the fire line can—indeed, must—be treated as a separate social world from the walled prisons and prison spaces of the fire camps. Many prisoners' jobs inside walled prisons (e.g., light maintenance, cleaning, assisting officers) are structured such that the work site is in, or near, the unit or building in which she or he is incarcerated. In the fire camps, by contrast, wildland firefighting occurs in a space that is both physically removed from the fire camp and seen as a special, valued place. On the fire lines and grade projects, sometimes hundreds of miles from the camp—where prisoners are treated, at least for a time, as both firefighters and criminals—the rules change, and prisoner-firefighters construct a set of social norms regarding racialized behavior that are remarkably different from those of walled prisons (and of the prison spaces of the fire camps).[29]

In this way, the fire lines (and, to a lesser extent, grade projects) are exceptional spaces. Racial tension, racialized conflicts, and social rules delineating permissible cross-race relations are mostly put aside in order to create spatial and temporal zones in which one of the men's primary statuses becomes, at least for a while, firefighter. With this in mind we can turn on its head the question of why people segregate in the dining halls of the fire camps; after all, informal segregation is the norm in settings as diverse as urban (nonprison) fire stations (Chetkovich 1997) and high

[29] Similarly, "civilian" wildland firefighters engage in one set of behaviors when living and recreating at a camp or outpost and another set of behaviors when deployed to a fire (Desmond 2007).

school cafeterias (Tatum 2003; on the persistence of the "color line" at workplaces, more generally, see Vallas [2003]). Instead, we can ask how and why prisoners create racially integrated places, such as the fire lines, that are characterized by relative harmony and, comparatively speaking, racial amity.

One answer is embedded in the second dimension—the varied ways in which prisoners understand, and perform, "safety." In the prison spaces of the fire camps, the primary imperative is to hew closely enough to a version of the "racial politics" that dominate the state's walled prisons, such that camp prisoners can claim to be within the spirit (if not always the letter) of the rules. In this sense, prisoners (with the tacit approval of staff) work hard to place the fire camps within the penumbra of the walled prison. This does not require adopting all the same rules or enforcing them in an identical manner. Indeed, a considerable amount of space has been devoted herein to exploring flexibility in how camp prisoners define themselves, whom they interact with, and the varied consequences for perceived violations of norms. But it does, as Paul so memorably suggests, require avoiding explicitly "giving the finger" to one's "racial car." Insofar as this is successful, the fire camps are not labeled "PC" yards, and fire camp prisoners can assume that they will be safe when they return to "mainline" units in walled prisons on their current, or a future, sentence.

Safety at work (especially on the fire lines), in contrast, seems to prisoners to call for quite a different set of behaviors. As Brian tells it, it is dangerous—and nonsensical—to worry about a crewmate's racial group affiliation when he desperately needs a drink of water under the scorching heat of a nearby wildfire or when his leg is broken miles from base camp. That necessity provides an opening that at least some fire camp prisoners seize to engage in a series of behaviors that, while not strictly speaking necessary for fighting fires, nonetheless are tolerated under the same umbrella, such as sharing a cigarette during a break. Racial détente therefore prevails on the fire lines, out of both necessity and principle, even as the latter is folded into the former.

A final layer of my answer to explaining why, where, and how fire camp prisoners segregate—and, more generally, how race is lived, experienced, and understood in the fire camps—is uncovered by examining the role of staff. Like prisoners, staff make sharp demarcations between forestry/work spaces and the prison/corrections side of the fire camps. When at work, forestry staff in charge of supervising camp prisoners expect prisoner–crew members to be focused on the job at hand. Racial conflicts (and prison politics, drama, or conflict more generally) are seen as a distraction, and many forestry crew supervisors take umbrage if they perceive prisoner–crew members to be organizing or, worse yet, fighting among themselves along what staff perceive to be racial fault lines.

In the prison spaces, in contrast, correctional staff expect a considerable degree of segregation. They consider conflicts that unfold along racial lines inside the camps "normal" racial politics (even the rare race riot). Like forestry staff, they too get what they expect; for example, since most correctional supervisors do not demand the integration of dining halls, tables remain visibly segregated. Similarly, whereas forestry staff expect (and demand) efficiency and hard work, correctional staff anticipate (and, implicitly, condone) misbehavior and race-based conflict. The result is a pair of self-fulfilling prophecies. While it is unclear whether correctional staff could end all de facto segregation if they wished, it is clear that staff share power and influence with prisoners in shaping what, where, and how racialization unfolds across California's prison fire camps.

In sum, California's fire camps are distinctly racialized places—even as the way in which they are racialized varies across camp spaces and even as the nature and consequences of that racialization differ from the tropes prisoners share about experiences and practices in the state's walled prisons.

Understanding Prisons and Punishment

In this subsection, I zoom out to make the case for a series of ways this research can be applied to understand prisons and punishment writ large, as well as investigations of culture, structure, and agency in particular social settings. First, there is the question of how best to understand and where best to focus our analytic gaze when studying prisons. In the half century or so since Erving Goffman wrote *Asylums* (1961), criminologists and sociologists interested in prisons and punishment have debated how to understand the social forces that structure daily life inside what Goffman called "total institutions." This is partially captured in a decades-long debate over what is referred to as the "importation" versus "deprivation" (or "prisonization") models.[30] But too often implicit in these debates over life in prisons is what I see as the real genius of Goffman's analysis: the foundational observation that the culture of a total institution is largely a product of that institution's structure.[31]

[30] Scholars such as Erving Goffman and Donald Clemmer (1940) identified with the latter camp. They posited that prisons become worlds unto themselves and that prisoners respond in kind by adapting individually and in groups to prison conditions. Identified with the former camp, John Irwin and Donald Cressey (1962), among many others, bristled at the idea that prisoners were blank slates molded by total institutions into new people. Instead, they offered sophisticated explanations about how people's preprison identities are brought into prisons—and, once inside, how these identities influence power and hierarchical relations on the inside.

[31] I thank an anonymous reviewer of this manuscript for drawing my attention to this point. Here I am operationalizing "culture" as the nature of everyday life, including

Putting this central insight to work to understand the fire camps—and prisons more generally—consider the tripartite relationship between race, prison conditions, and interpersonal conflict behind bars (see fig. 1).

Because racial politics (i.e., racial norms, racial categorization, and norm enforcement) are more flexible (one could also say more progressive) in fire camps, people are less worried about "messing up" or getting censured for violating a racial norm. Prisoners therefore perceive the camps as having better conditions. Likewise, because of those better conditions (which also include things such as better food, better work, and better relations with staff) and the more flexible racial politics, prisoners are less likely to enforce violations when they do occur (they have less to gain and more to lose by enforcing racial norms). The loop continues: because there is less (and less violent) enforcing of norms, the conditions of the camp seem less austere, and camp prisoners are less likely to make rigid claims about permissible racialized behavior. They know that few of their peers are willing to back up those claims with force (insofar as they prefer to work in the camp, and a violent outburst might send them back to a walled prison). In short, the three vertices of the triangle are, as suggested by Goffman's (1961) account of total institutions, inextricably intertwined.

Future research could profitably use this framework in other penal settings, with other axes of difference and different measures (e.g., substituting intimacy for interpersonal conflict).[32] Additionally, note that this conceptualization of the tripartite relationship leaves open the question of the precise nature of agency in specific settings at specific times. In the case of the fire camps, rather than simply importing a system directly from the walled prisons (or, as many guards see it, from the "streets"), prisoners in fire camps establish what sorts of interactions are "normal" in this different setting, which are permissible but unsettling, and which are deviant. They establish which deviant interactions warrant a response (and of what sort). And yet, it is equally clear that race and racial norms in the camps are strongly conditioned by the structure of the fire camps, in particular, by how prisoners and staff imagine the camps in relation to the larger, more culturally dominant, walled prisons. The conceptualization here is of norms as scaffolding: a conceptualization that could be applied to attempts to understand phenomena as diverse as rehabilitation (see Goodman 2012*a*), violence,

power struggles among prisoners and between prisoners and staff; by "structure" I mean, among other things, the relationship between the specific carceral institution and the penal field in which it is embedded (on the penal field, see Page [2012]).

[32] For example, while several scholars have studied sex and intimacy in women's prisons (e.g., Bosworth 1999), more work could be done to further unpack how sex and sexualized behaviors are constructed differently in diverse settings; thinking about the interplay of gender, sex, and prison conditions could be quite generative (see also Hunter 2014).

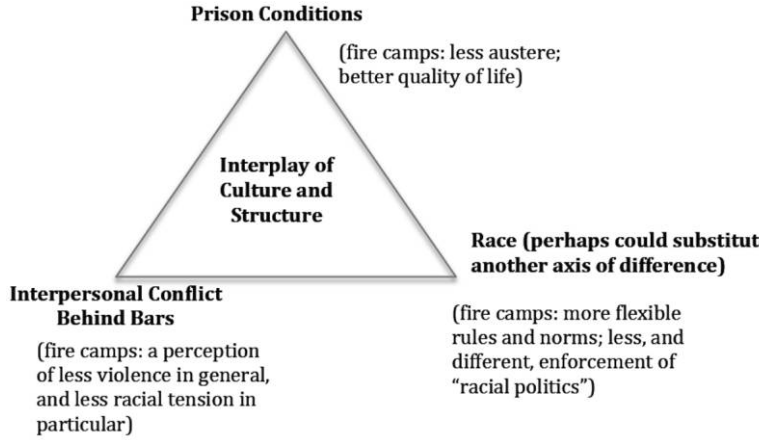

FIG. 1.—

and the performance of gender behind bars (see Jenness and Fenstermaker 2014).

Here, there are several lessons for punishment and policy that are worth stating explicitly (if briefly). One is that scholars ought not overgeneralize the nature of prison life. They should embrace the variegated nature of prisons and punishment, which vary across time and place, and according to the many nested and overlapping fields in which people and institutions are embedded. There is no single "prisoner code." Scholars' efforts would be more wisely spent trying to understand the interplay of culture and structure and its many outcomes than in looking for a single (and therefore overly reductionist) characterization of imprisonment.

Second, scholars should neither ignore nor romanticize (or exaggerate) prisoners' agency. Commentators and news reporters almost invariably celebrate California's fire camps as exceptional—even utopian—spaces (e.g., Current 2008), but the truth is more complex and more interesting. Fire camps are exceptional places, but not because camp prisoners are somehow a different species of incarcerated people. Instead, camps are exceptional because the relationship between camps and walled prisons helps create unique social worlds in which rules are bent and "played with" and in which enforcement is deferred (sometimes forgotten entirely), but only so far and only in delineated ways. It is hard to know whether it would be possible to import some "flavor" of the fire camps into walled prisons. Nor, for that matter, is it clear under what conditions the fire camp program should or could be expanded.

Understanding Race

Just as exceptional penal sites are fertile terrain for understanding prisons and punishment more generally, so too does the current case study shed light on race as a concept that patterns and colors everyday life. In particular, there are three conclusions that, I believe, are warranted. First, we see that race and space are coconstructed. In particular, using space as a lens both brings into relief that there is considerable microlevel variation in how race is lived and provides a way of understanding why race varies from place to place and across time (for some examples that relate to prisons and punishment, see Gilmore [2007]; Fleury-Steiner, Dunn, and Fleury-Steiner [2009]; Bonds [2013]). If the fire camps are any indicator, future research could benefit from attending to the nature and causes of this variation, both to understand specific empirical settings in richer detail and because that variation is at the heart of how race is constructed and lived.

Second, institutions, and institutional boundaries, shape, and condition, race as both category and action. In the case of the fire camps, I have demonstrated—as have other scholars in their research on diverse social settings (e.g., Jackson 2001; Farah Schwartzman 2009; Obasogie 2010; Morning 2011)—that race is negotiated and dynamic. But it is also clear that the ability of individuals and groups to change racial categorizations and the unfolding of racialized patterns of behavior are constrained (and, more generally, shaped) by institutional boundaries. Thus while people have at least some influence and power in how they are categorized and while their actions shape how their and others' race-thinking affects their lives, few people wield unbridled power to do as they please with respect to race and racialization, at least not without consequences (see also, e.g., Omi and Winant 1994; Hartigan 1999; Markus and Moya 2010).

The third conclusion is less about the empirical details of this study and more a call for future research. Specifically, more research is needed (on prisons and punishment and other social settings) that treats race in a thoroughly sociological manner. In other words, we need to do more to understand race as a category and behavior—in the process uncovering and unpacking how race is lived, experienced, and negotiated.

As noted earlier, there is already a robust and sizable literature that examines racial disparities in the criminal justice system. Michelle Alexander's recent book *The New Jim Crow* (2010) capitalizes on this line of research, concluding that, as the title suggests, the contemporary American criminal justice system functions much the same as the Jim Crow system of the mid- to late 20th century. While the new Jim Crow analogy has some major flaws and drawbacks (see especially Forman 2012), it has been enormously influential in the media and among Americans more generally (e.g., CrimeCents 2012). In part because key actors on the political right are try-

ing to claim prison and criminal justice reform as their own, hardly a day goes by without at least one major news or magazine story about America's bloated criminal justice system; many of these focus on race and racial disparities.

Research on racial disparities—and the macrolevel critiques they inspire—alerts us to the fact that the criminal justice system is the product of (among other things) race and racialized ways of thinking about people and places. For another, it is politically powerful, especially in galvanizing people against a neoconservative color-blind mythology. Of course, even politically progressive, well-meaning research can inadvertently reify race as a static, biological entity (cf. Zuberi 2000; Martin and Yeung 2003; Morning 2011; Gómez 2012).[33]

With that perspective in mind, it becomes clear that the problem is not research on racial disparities per se, but that there is so little research on prisons and punishment that fully and faithfully takes up a notion of race as socially constructed. Here we can return to Jackson's *Harlemworld* (2001). While the political and normative implications of Jackson's ethnography are not as obvious for criminology as, for example, an investigation into whether black and Hispanic people are more likely to lose procedural appeals and be executed by the state (e.g., Jacobs et al. 2007), we learn a considerable amount regarding how those who live and work in Harlem struggle to create spaces in which their blackness is contested but is their own. Similarly, my research on race in the fire camps does not yield a clear conclusion about the racial justice of imprisonment in the fire camps and beyond, but it may, for those who are so inclined, offer a starting point for thinking about what prisons ought to look like. If, as I argue, prisons produce and are the product of race, they cannot be reimagined without careful attention to race.

[33] I have been tempted to offer a stronger critique of research that uses race as a fixed variable or static entity as being part of the problem, either because it diverts attention from the type of research I advocate (namely, studies of how race is lived in diverse social settings) or because it clouds our analytic understanding of race and racialization. But to what end? As suggested earlier, research on disparities plays a key role in highlighting present and past injustice. Likewise, it is politically powerful. What is more, the argument about diverting attention (as tempting as it is) likely gets the empirics wrong. Most of those who study racial disparities are not doing so in lieu of research on the lived experience of race; they are quite different frameworks. Scholars' training, preferences, and tastes are likely the key factors shaping who researches what, and with what orientations. Finally, without research on racial disparities and critiques of the system as racist, we risk tacit approval of the noxious political ideology of color blindness. For these reasons (and others), I have been convinced by several colleagues that it makes more sense to view the two lines of inquiry as locked in some form of (hopefully productive) tension (cf. McCall 2005).

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