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## “It’s Just Black, White, or Hispanic”: An Observational Study of Racializing Moves in California’s Segregated Prison Reception Centers

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Philip Goodman

This article takes as its launching point a 2005 U. S. Supreme Court case, *Johnson v. California* (543 U.S. 499), which ruled that the California Department of Corrections’ unwritten practice of racially segregating inmates in prison reception centers is to be reviewed under the highest level of constitutional review, strict scrutiny. Relying on observational data from two California prison reception centers, this research is grounded in an interactionist perspective and influenced by Smith’s work on “institutional ethnography.” I examine how racialization occurs in carceral settings, arguing that officers and inmates collaborate to arrive at a “negotiated settlement” regarding housing decisions. They do so working together (but not always in agreement) to shape how an inmate is categorized in terms of ‘race/ethnicity and gang/group affiliation, within a framework established by official Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation paperwork and related institutional understandings of housing needs. The findings demonstrate that administrators, officers, and inmates alike have influence over the process by which people are categorized and ‘race’ is produced, even as they derive their power from different sources and are both enabled and constrained by the relationship between them. I conclude that California prisons are, as Wacquant has put it, “the main machine for ‘race making’” (2005:128), and that the fuel for that machine—a series of patterned, negotiated settlements—happens in real time, “on the ground,” and with important consequences for inmates, officers, and administrators.

**I**n February 2005, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Johnson v. California* (543 U.S. 499) that the California Department of

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Corrections' (CDC's)<sup>1</sup> unwritten practice of racially segregating inmates, in two-person cells in its reception centers, is to be reviewed under the highest standard of constitutional review available, namely "strict scrutiny." It is the judiciary's obligation, noted the Court, to "smoke out' illegitimate uses of race" (*Johnson v. California* 2005, 543 U.S. 499, at 506). The case was returned to the lower courts to be reexamined under this new standard of review, and the burden of proof placed on California to demonstrate that its unwritten practice was indeed "narrowly tailored" to a "compelling" government interest. Within a year, the CDCR entered into a mediated agreement with Johnson, rather than face further litigation in the lower courts on this issue.

As a result of this litigation and the settlement and release agreement it generated, the policies and practices of the CDCR regarding racial segregation have come under considerable review by legislators, prison officials, journalists, academics, and the public. Indeed, racial segregation in California prisons is of considerable importance for a number of reasons. First, California operates one of the largest prison systems in the nation, home to approximately 170,000 men and women, an annual operating budget of nearly 10 billion dollars, and more than 60,000 employees (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation 2008a). Second, prisons in California (as elsewhere in the United States) are widely considered to be suffused with 'race,'<sup>2</sup> a situation many see as inherently problematic (e.g., Senate Select Committee on the California Correctional System 2005). Third, racial segregation, as repeatedly acknowledged by the CDCR, and as noted by the Supreme Court, cannot be found in any of the CDCR's policy manuals, but instead is an unwritten practice informed by what might be termed a de facto policy of racial segregation.<sup>3</sup> As such, racial segregation is both relatively open-ended and embedded in larger social forces and processes, which are both observable and worthy of empirical analysis. Fourth, California is also somewhat unusual in the demographic composition of its prisons, with inmates officially categorized as "Hispanic," "Black," "White," and "Other," representing approximately 39, 29, 26, and 6 percent of inmates, respectively

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<sup>1</sup> The CDC has since been renamed the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR).

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article I follow the practice of many scholars who study 'race' of placing that word in single quotation marks, to remind us that we need to take seriously the ways in which the idea of 'race' is socially constructed.

<sup>3</sup> As with other unwritten practices, there is some debate regarding its particulars—including whether all prisons in California are segregated by 'race,' or just reception centers, and also the uniqueness of the CDCR's policy of racial segregation compared with other U.S. state prison systems.

(California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation 2008a). Perhaps related, it is widely claimed that California has one of the worst prison gang problems in the nation, and is the birthplace of many of the most violent prison gangs (Justice Scalia, dissenting, *Johnson v. California*, 543 U.S. 499, at 524; Carlson 2001; Hunt et al. 1993; Petersilia 2006).

The Supreme Court's decision in *Johnson v. California* offers a compelling starting point for thinking about this consequential and—some would add—alarming practice of racial segregation. The Court framed the issue in terms of the legitimate and illegitimate use of 'race'-based classifications, conceptualizing 'race' as a fixed identity: inmates belong to one of several rigid, non-overlapping, preexisting categories, and are separated and segregated accordingly for housing purposes. This conceptualization runs counter to much of the scholarship that asks what 'race' is and how it structures society (e.g., Brubaker 2002; Haney López 1994; Lee 1994; Omi & Winant 1994). In this article I investigate how 'race' is socially constructed through interaction between those categorized and those officially charged with determining the categorization. One purpose of this article, then, is to explore the microdynamics of racial categorization and segregation as it unfolds on the ground, and in real time, inside California prison reception centers.

To this end I ask: What are the routine interactional processes that result in inmates being classified, sorted, and housed such that California's prisons remain one of the last overt bastions of state-enacted racial segregation? How do inmates and correctional officers alike contribute to—and perhaps resist—the racialization of inmates and facilities? And how do official CDCR paperwork and procedures impact and shape these routine interactions?

The central contribution of this article is to illustrate that racial categorization, the building blocks of racial segregation, is what I call a *negotiated settlement*. This negotiated settlement is built upon a complex layering of power between three parties: inmates, officers, and administrators. Inmates—who arrive at reception centers with very little paperwork—are the sole source of much of the information needed to segregate, including their 'race,' gang affiliation (if any), geographical origin, and so forth. Officers and supervisors, in turn, draw on hierarchical power as they make decisions about how to interpret and police inmates' responses during categorization interviews in such a way that is intelligible on official CDCR paperwork and commensurate with their interpretation of local and systemwide practices and procedures. Administrators create the forms (paperwork) that drive, mold, and constrain the entire categorization process: they create the institutional framework within which categorization unfolds. In

summary, officers and inmates collaborate to enact segregation by making decisions, working together (but not always in agreement) to shape how an inmate is categorized, within a framework established by the CDCR and imposed on inmates and officers by the content of official CDCR paperwork.

That these three groups, each with their own source of power, play a central role in the process of categorization has important consequences for how we think about racial segregation in prison, as well as categorization more broadly. In particular, this research instructs scholars to be attentive to the ways in which categorization is influenced by those who are categorized, those doing the categorization, and those who, at the administrative level, create the institutional structures that require distinctions to be made on the ground and shape how that categorization unfolds and for what purposes it is pressed into service. The resulting picture is one that takes into account microdynamics (in this case, interactions between officers and inmates) and larger structural forces (in this case, institutional texts). Seen in these terms, racialization is a layered process that is revealed at multiple levels of social action.

In the next section I discuss some of the theoretical frameworks that inform my empirical examination of how categorization, a necessary precursor to racial segregation, unfolds on the ground in California's reception centers. Next I describe the sources of my data and methods utilized to analyze them, before turning to the findings. These findings are organized around a discussion of prisons and inmates as racialized, an examination of how officers' everyday language contributes to that racialization, and an exposition of the regularities that govern, more or less stringently, the racializing moves that take place within the negotiated settlement that constitutes categorization. The discussion and conclusion section explores themes raised when the findings are examined holistically, and it offers suggestions about how future research might expand and expound upon the data presented in this article—data that are in some ways specific in focus but also critically important to how we think about racial categorization and the policy decisions made in prisons in California and beyond.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

Although largely inductive in its approach, this study is shaped by several theoretical frameworks. At the broadest level are the concepts of 'race' and racialization, the latter being a useful tool for thinking critically about how the former is produced, contested, and reproduced across social settings. At a meso-level is a literature that examines prison social structures and the distribution of

power in carceral settings, which I put to work in understanding the empirical setting of the study. At the most immediate level, I make use of Smith's work on "institutional texts" to understand the particular interactions I observed in prison Receiving-and-Release areas (R&Rs), especially how organizations partially structure the actions of both subjects and agents.

The literature on 'race' and racialization—concepts that are tightly linked empirically and theoretically—is voluminous, contested, and fragmented. For the purpose of this study, one point of near-universal agreement among contemporary social scientists studying 'race' is sufficient: 'race' is constructed and fluid, and changes over time—in contradistinction to a biological 'fact' (e.g., Delgado & Stefancic 2000; Goodman 2001; Haney López 1994; Ignatiev 1995; Jackson 2001; Omi & Winant 1994; West & Fenstermaker 1995; but see St Louis 2005). Distinguishing individuals according to some characteristic—putative or otherwise—is only possible if they are first identified by (and thereafter defined by) that characteristic. This view of 'race' therefore calls for an examination of the forms of racial categorization that necessarily precede racial segregation.

Likewise, a constructionist view of 'race' calls for an examination of the interactional moments during which 'race' is actually produced—the specific, on the ground actions that result in the creation and re-creation of raced bodies and attendant persons as both subjects and objects in social and physical environments. It is here that racialization provides a useful heuristic: it "signal[s] the processes by which ideas about race are constructed, come to be regarded as meaningful, and are acted upon" (Murji & Solomos 2005:1). The term is commonly used as both an adjective and a verb: California prisons are *racialized* places, meaning they are saturated with talk and action in which 'race' takes front stage—and inmates, officers, and administrators engage in *racializing* moves to categorize incoming inmates. Both uses are meant to signal a hyperattentiveness to 'race' as a way of constructing, defining, and symbolizing difference (see Omi & Winant 1994).

Shorn of context and empirical detail, the concept of racialization can be dangerously vacuous (Goldberg 2005; Murji & Solomos 2005). As such, it is important to recognize that contestation over how to categorize individuals (and what consequences, in turn, those categorizations have) is embedded in larger contexts of power and social structure. Omi and Winant (1994) argue that what they call "racial projects"—an "interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics"—are necessarily about structure, in as much as they "reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines" (1994:56). Similarly, critical race theorists have demonstrated that while members of the legal

apparatus (especially judges) claim they are merely applying preexisting concepts of 'race' to answer legal questions, such claims serve to cover up the ways in which the law is implicated in the production of 'race' (e.g., Crenshaw et al. 1995; Golub 2005; Gotanda 1991; Lee 1994). Just as these scholars are skeptical of judges' claims that they are merely applying preexisting concepts of 'race' to answer legal questions, this article treats as problematic the CDCR's claims that racial segregation is merely the physical separation of inmates who do not see themselves as "compatible" (e.g., Senate Select Committee on the California Correctional System 2005).

For a host of reasons, prisons provide especially fertile ground for the empirical interrogation of racial categorization. First, massive increases in incarceration rates since the early 1970s—resulting in the phenomenon in the United States of hyper-incarceration<sup>4</sup>—have, ironically, been accompanied by a *decline* in scholarly attention to life inside prison walls (see, for example, Simon 2000; Wacquant 2002). Prisons are, to put it simply, woefully understudied locales, and the lack of attention to the construction of 'race' inside carceral facilities is a prime example. Second, what we do know about prison social structures provides mixed hypotheses about what the racializing nature of prisons might actually look like.

On the one hand, there is a venerable tradition of scholarship (though relatively little of it produced in the last several decades) that describes the nature of social order and organization inside American penal facilities as the product of compromises between prisoners and guards (e.g., Clemmer [1940] 1958; Sykes 1958). As Western put it, looking back half a century in his introduction to the 2007 edition of *The Society of Captives*: "For order to prevail, guards must moderate their reliance on coercion and inmates must actively cooperate in their own incarceration" (Western 2007:xiii). This literature suggests that analyses that frame segregation as something done *to* inmates (as in the Supreme Court's claim that racial segregation is a constitutionally suspect attempt to use 'race' as a proxy for dangerousness), or as something done *by* inmates to themselves, are equally misguided: both rely on a one-sided conceptualization of power, ignoring the fact that inmates and officers must negotiate common physical, cultural, and interactional terrain to create order inside carceral facilities. Based on these foundational works of the 1950s and early 1960s, it is reasonable to expect that racial categorization would unfold in reception centers relatively smoothly, with inmates and officers cooperating (to use

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<sup>4</sup> On the distinction between mass incarceration and hyper-incarceration, see Wacquant (n.d.).

Western's word) to categorize incoming inmates in such a way that meets both groups' interests—in terms of creating order and reducing violence, and reducing the “pains of imprisonment” (Sykes 1958) by allowing people some control over what category of person they are housed with. Such a view is helpful in understanding the process of categorization in California's prison reception centers; however, it is also seriously flawed insofar as exclusive attention to cooperation obscures the everyday micro-level interactional negotiations and contestations between officers and inmates that are consequential in terms of how particular inmates are categorized.

On the other hand, in contrast to these early works on prison social structures, much of the scholarship during the 1970s that examined American carceral institutions began noting significant levels of racial division and racialized strife. Specifically, with the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and the penetration of street gangs into prison life (Jacobs 1977), scholars studying prisons finally began paying attention to ‘race.’ For instance, in *Hacks, Blacks and Cons* (1974), Carroll examined the routine activities and focal concerns of white and black inmates, concluding that despite some functional “links across the racial line,” “in all routine, day-to-day activities there is a clear pattern of racial avoidance and segregation” (1974:195). Although much of this scholarship is more than a quarter of a century old, it raises the specter of prisons as highly racially charged (i.e., racialized) spaces, an idea explored in the findings section below.

Given the paucity of contemporary literature that examines the nature of life inside prisons and other penal institutions (Simon 2000; Wacquant 2002; but see, for example, Bosworth 1999, Owen 1998, and Rhodes 2004), and the virtual absence of scholarly work directly studying the *construction* of ‘race’ inside carceral facilities, a framework is needed for thinking about the interactions in California's prison reception centers that result in the forms of categorization that make segregation by ‘race,’ ethnicity, and gang/group possible. Smith's work on “institutional ethnography” (2005) is just such a framework because she offers an analysis of texts as a way to uncover and better understand what she calls “ruling relations”—“forms of consciousness and organization . . . constituted externally to particular people and places” (2005:13)—and how such relations orchestrate lives and govern interpersonal interactions.

Drawing from Smith's work, then, at the heart of the approach underlying the empirical study in this article is an effort to think of power and influence as being shared and ultimately negotiated not just by inmates and guards (as sociologists writing during the 1950s and 1960s proffered), but also by administrators acting on behalf of

the CDCR, as an organization. According to Smith, institutions have power because they have the capacity to use texts to control and mobilize people's work: "textually sanctioned agency produces a power that is generated by the concerting and mobilization of people's work" (2005:183). As such, Smith's notion of power encourages us to do three things relevant to this project: pay careful attention to the role of texts in coordinating people's activities, recognize that such coordination is a form of power (texts, as Smith puts it, "can be seen as inserting the institutional into people's activities" [2005:181]), and interrogate how institutional categories necessarily alter individuals' own labels and self-identification in an effort to feed the regulatory machinery to which we are all subject.

In the next section, I offer an overview of the research sites studied for this project. This is followed by a discussion of the data and methods utilized to conduct fieldwork at those sites.

## **Research Sites, Methods, and Data**

### **The Research Sites**

California, with its 33 prisons and an institutional population of approximately 170,000 people, competes with Texas for the dubious distinction of having the largest state prison system in the nation (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation 2008b). Despite an annual budget of nearly 10 billion dollars, nearly 70 percent of those released from prison in California return, and California has relatively little in the way of educational, vocational, substance abuse treatment, and rehabilitation programs (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation 2008a; Fischer 2005; Petersilia 2006).

Of the 33 prisons in California, 12 have one or more facilities that function as reception centers—the first stop a prisoner makes when sentenced to a state prison term. According to the CDCR, staff at reception centers evaluate "inmates' criminal records, life histories, medical and physiological histories, and social histories," in order to "determine the inmates' custody score and to identify any specific placement needs the inmate may have" (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation 2007: n.p.). Inmates are generally housed at the reception centers for up to 60 days, but delays in processing are not uncommon when an appropriate bed is unavailable at a nonreception-center facility.

Upon arriving at a reception center (usually by bus or van), inmates are first processed through the "R&R" area. Focusing my observations on these R&Rs was both a substantive and an instrumental decision because it is here that the initial people-

processing occurs when inmates step off the bus or van from county jail. It represents then, a new institutional environment, qualitatively different from county jail or nonreception prisons. In addition, inmates are segregated even within the R&R building, so categorization often occurs almost instantaneously.

Procedures within the R&R areas vary between reception centers, but they typically include an initial housing interview, a strip search, receipt of institutional clothing, a medical and mental health screening, screening of incoming property, a "sack" lunch, photographing and fingerprinting, and so forth. The entire process often includes considerably more waiting than processing, and inmates are generally held in some sort of holding cell or "tank" in between stages of processing. Despite the fact that inmates often arrive at R&Rs early in the morning, they are usually not released to their housing units until the afternoon or evening.

I did the bulk of my data collection in two men's facilities, one in southern California and the other closer to the central region of the state, which I will refer to as "South" and "Central," respectively. Central is located several hours' drive north of Los Angeles in a largely rural county. With approximately 6,000 inmates, Central is at nearly double its designed capacity. I spent nine days, spanning three weeks and about 60 hours, observing at Central. During my observations Central processed as many as 500 inmates a day. As a result, in only three weeks I was able to observe several thousand inmates get categorized. The second institution where I observed R&R categorization is South, located in the vicinity of Los Angeles. South also houses approximately 6,000 inmates, and it too is at more than twice its designed capacity. Here I observed for 10 days, over a span of two weeks, for a total (again) of about 60 hours. Although South processed considerably fewer inmates per day, while I was there, than did Central, I was still able to observe the processing of more than 1,000 inmates.

The two institutions varied in several interesting ways. First, Central has a reputation among officers I spoke with as being well managed and a relatively "smooth program" compared with other similarly situated facilities. The reception center at Central had a rate of reported assaults/batteries on inmates, staff, and visitors during the 2004 calendar year similar to the average that year across all male reception centers of approximately 6.1 incidents per 100 average daily population (Offender Information Services Branch 2005). By contrast, the assault rate at South's reception center was approximately twice that number in 2004, one of the highest of any reception center in the state that year, and more than two standard deviations from the mean. Not surprisingly, the reception center at South has a reputation as being unstable and

somewhat unruly, according to officers with whom I spoke at several institutions.<sup>5</sup>

### **Methodology and Data**

The methodology for this study is drawn loosely from two areas. First, I adopt an interactionist perspective, and in particular utilize the idea that identity does not inhere in one's body but instead is produced as people interact and negotiate (shared and/or contested) meaning (e.g., Blumer 1969). I am also influenced by institutional ethnography, which calls for attention to how institutional texts control and mobilize people's lives.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, I examined relevant forms created and used by the CDCR to record information on incoming inmates. By observing the workings of institutional paperwork—how it is used on the ground in routine interactions and the ends to which it is put to service—it becomes possible to see the internal logic of the institution, to see categorization as a negotiation designed to arrive at a settlement that is consistent with the demands of the formal organization, imposed from above.

Although I conducted no formal interviews, I did frequently speak informally with officers, asking questions and engaging them in conversation about their work and the interactions I observed. While future research should use interviews to understand how inmates and officers think about categorization and segregation,<sup>7</sup> interviews are not necessary to understand the patterns that define the routine interactions that result in the enactment of racialized inmates and racialized prisons.

Another methodological decision was made shortly after I began observations. Namely, I decided to take very few notes while "in the field." I did occasionally jot down an idea on a napkin, or covertly write down pieces of a conversation I thought particularly important (for example, while in the bathroom). Taking copious notes while in the field (or so I thought) would have alarmed officers and inmates, and almost certainly would have altered the

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<sup>5</sup> Given that the two primary sites were selected for convenience, no claim is made here as to the statistical representativeness of these two facilities compared with all reception centers in California. I made several short visits to other reception centers in California, including a women's prison in southern California, a juvenile facility in southern California, a men's prison outside the Bay Area, and another men's prison in the vicinity of San Diego.

<sup>6</sup> According to Smith, institutional ethnography is "a *sociology*, not just a methodology" (Smith 2005:2; emphasis in original). Nonetheless, it carries with it a number of methodological suggestions, some of which are adopted here.

<sup>7</sup> Tonya Lindsey, Ph.D. candidate at the University of California, Santa Barbara, is conducting interviews with inmates and officers as part of a dissertation studying racial integration in California prisons.

interactions I witnessed. “Open jotting,” Emerson and colleagues explain, “has to be carefully calibrated to the unfolding context of the ongoing interaction” (1995:23). As a result, all of the conversations, exchanges, and interviews reported below consist of my best attempt to reconstruct the dialogue to which I was privy. Although the gist is certainly accurate, readers would be well advised to recognize that words may well have been different.

The section that follows reports my findings, which are presented in three parts. The first draws on my own data as well as other scholars’ research on prisons to make an important (if general) point: prisons and those who are incarcerated in them are racialized. The second part examines officers’ language to demonstrate that officers are intimately involved in creating racialized prisons. The heart of the findings is contained in the third part, which presents the regularities that govern the racializing moves made by inmates and officers during the categorization process that makes racial segregation possible. It is here in the third section that the notion of racial categorization as a *negotiated settlement* becomes most clear.

## **Findings: Producing ‘Race’ Inside California’s Prison Reception Centers**

### **Racialized Prisons**

California’s prisons, by all accounts, are highly racialized locales. According to incarcerated author K. C. Carceral (a pen name), racism in prison “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” (Bernard et al. 2004:137). Scholars have documented how men’s prisons (in California and elsewhere) have been transformed in the last half century into places where gangs drawn on racial lines dominate prison life and engender violence (Hunt et al. 1993; Irwin 1980).

‘Race’ is one of the most important factors—if not in certain locales *the* preeminent factor—organizing and structuring contemporary American prison culture in men’s prisons. Wacquant summarizes the situation:

The relatively stable set of positions and expectations defined primarily in terms of criminal statuses and prison conduct that used to organize the inmate world has been replaced by a chaotic and conflictual setting wherein “racial division has primacy over all particular identities and influences all aspects of life” (Irwin 1990:v . . .). The ward, tier, cell and bed-bunk to which one is assigned; access to food, telephone, television, visitation and in-house programs; one’s associations and protections, which in

turn determine the probability of being the victim or perpetrator of violence: all are set by one's ethnic community of provenance. (2001:109–10)

Among my own observations, the pervasive character of 'race' in California prison reception centers is perhaps most starkly revealed in a single incident that leaves little doubt that these are extraordinarily racialized places. While on a tour of Central, months before I formally began the current project, I was walking through one of the dormitory housing units. It was the last housing unit we visited that day, and on our way out, I noticed something that caught my attention. Along the wall were three small metal boxes, none bigger than a small residential mailbox. Below each box was carefully printed: "Black Barber," "White Barber," and "Hispanic Barber." I asked about these boxes, and the lieutenant who was leading our tour informed me that inmates refuse to use hair clippers that have been used by someone of another 'race.' According to this lieutenant, when an inmate wants a haircut, he puts a request in the appropriate box and will then get his hair cut by an inmate barber of "his own" 'race' and using tools that have not been used on someone of a different 'race.'

It is difficult to imagine a more powerful symbol of the extent to which California prisons are polarized on racial lines than these boxes. In addition to evoking images of Jim Crow-era segregation of public facilities, these boxes symbolize the extent to which officers and inmates perform an understanding of 'race' as fixed and immutable. After all, there were only three boxes: those who consider themselves "Other" or "Asian" or "Native American" (and so forth) presumably choose the box with which they most closely affiliate. In addition, important for our analytical purposes, there is no room for liminality here—one chooses a box, and only one box. Just as "white only" water fountains and separate "colored only" cars on passenger trains served to do the work of cultural representation, proclaiming the biological validity of 'race' as a fixed entity even in the face of court battles demonstrating the difficulty of reliably and validly determining someone's 'race' (e.g., Golub 2005), these boxes demonstrate to all who care to gaze upon them that 'race' can (and should) be understood as a tripartite division of people into fixed, real, and culturally important categories that define and symbolize difference.

Just like separate water fountains of the Jim Crow era, racial segregation in California prisons signals a belief in the dangerousness of racial contamination. Furthermore, the fact that the labeled barber boxes are displayed publicly, where tours and other visitors like us might happen to notice them, indicates the public nature of this racialization: little effort is made to cover up the prison's

embrace (grudgingly or otherwise) of the fact that inmates draw bright lines separating “their” ‘race’ from other ‘races.’ There is no evidence that the presence of these boxes is treated as problematic by inmates or officers. Indeed, as I describe in the next section, there is considerable evidence that the operation of reception centers is suffused with racializing language.

### Officers’ Racializing Language

‘Race’ is a fundamental organizing device that officers use in everyday speech, both when speaking to inmates and when speaking to other officers; officers use ‘race’ as a device to describe and interpret the world around them. One powerful and revealing example of this is the speech given by an officer at Central to most incoming inmates. As inmates disembark from the bus at Central, they are first unshackled and their handcuffs are removed. Those who are being kept separate from the main group—that is, those inmates who are deemed by prison officers (working in conjunction with transportation and/or county officers) to be in need of protective custody—are told to get off first, and are immediately interviewed and sent into R&R. The remaining incoming inmates—those slated for the “mainline” population—are then lined up just outside the entrance to R&R.

Once all the inmates are lined up, the officer who does the initial interviews at Central then launches into a well-rehearsed orientation speech. First the officer explains a number of institutional rules and nuances, after which he takes the opportunity to give what he considers “advice” to the incoming men. The speech typically goes as follows:

Just some friendly advice, men. Whites, Brothers, Northerners, Southerners, Paisas, listen up. The Bulldogs are bombing on you.<sup>8</sup> They don’t care—three on one, four on one, it doesn’t matter to them. So keep your eyes open. You don’t have any problems with the cops here. You got problems with the dogs. Now I’m not giving you a green light to go and retaliate, but go talk to your peoples and see what’s up.

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<sup>8</sup> Here the officer is using colloquial terms that may be unfamiliar to the reader. “Whites, Brothers, Northerners, Southerners, Paisas,” could be loosely translated as: Caucasians, African Americans, Hispanics from northern California (often operationalized as north of Fresno or Bakersfield), Hispanics from southern California (conversely, often operationalized as south of Bakersfield or Fresno), and Mexican nationals or Mexicans (sometimes operationalized as speaking Spanish as one’s primary language). “Bulldogs” (later in the passage, just “dogs”) are considered to be a “gang” of Hispanic inmates mostly from the vicinity of Fresno. Of course, these translations are at least as problematic as the terms themselves: the section on “racializing moves” explores the process by which these various terms are negotiated and adopted.

This speech, which over time became recognizable to me as a mantra, effectively and concisely establishes 'race' as the foremost guiding principle around which conflict is organized in prison.

Instead of simply exhorting, "just some friendly advice, men," the officer expounds by listing what he considers to be each of the major racial and gang affiliations at Central. By doing so he communicates that those six groups<sup>9</sup> are the dominant groups at Central and engages the process by which many inmates will be encouraged to adopt one of these racial ("Whites," "Brothers") or 'race'/gang ("Southerners," "Northerners," "Bulldogs," "Paisas") categories for purposes of housing and identification. The phrase "your peoples" is borrowed from street talk, and references affiliations with one's gang or racial group—conflating the two in the process—thereby illuminating the officer's tacit approval of the importance and legitimacy of these sorts of divisions. Lest this example of the officer's welcome speech be taken as trivial, note that usually more than 100 inmates hear this speech daily at Central, and that it is for some their first impression of the state prison "system" (or, for others, their first contact upon reentry).

### **Racializing Moves**

By the time inmates leave R&R they will be officially labeled and categorized; these labels determine with whom they will be housed during their residency at the reception center, and likely affect their housing at their more permanent institutions as well. These determinations are made via a series of interactional moves (see Coutin 2000) by inmates and officers; both groups are party to the process by which incoming inmates are assigned a racial category and (sometimes) also a gang/group affiliation. These are moves because inmates are not processed in absentia; rather, they have discretion to affect how they are categorized, within the structure established by officers and prison administrators. Prison administrators affect the process remotely by determining the structure and content of the housing form (see Appendix A). The result is therefore a *negotiated settlement* between prison administrators at the highest levels, frontline officers charged with making housing assignments, and inmates who are the subjects of such assignments.

To reveal the dynamics of this negotiated settlement requires delineating what I am calling the "regularities of engagement" (or, just "regularities"). They are the constituent features of the prison environment with regard to categorization: taken together they

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<sup>9</sup> There are six groups to which he refers, including the Bulldogs. The officer skips this part of his welcome speech when speaking with a group of inmates coming from the Fresno county jail.

aim to capture the core essence of the process by which categorization is enacted and segregation made possible.

### *The 1882 Motors ... and Matters*

The first regularity that structures the categorization process is that a housing form (referred to by its internal CDCR numerical designation: the 1882) must be completed: for every inmate who passed through the R&R during my observations, an 1882 was filled out.<sup>10</sup> Although officers on occasion supplemented the form (recording additional information on separate sheets of paper, for example), the form itself loomed large in every categorization interaction I witnessed; officers often invoked the need to fill it out. With fields for an inmate's "ethnicity," "gang/disruptive group," "group affiliation," and so forth, the form itself dictates an institutional mandate to categorize and further suggests the dimensions along which that categorization is supposed to occur.

The universe of options available to officers and inmates is limited to those expressed (or capable of being expressed) on the forms. The form used at Central, for example, says "ethnicity," not "ethnicities" or "races." Likewise, although it has a space for an unlisted category ("Other: \_\_\_\_\_") under "group affiliation," the delineated categories ("Skinhead," "Crip," and "Blood") function as examples of what sort of categories the CDCR as an agency privileges as the most important or typical: categories listed on the form are those perceived to be sources of danger and institutional unrest. The tacit message of the form seems to be that categorization is a matter of safety and security.

The 1882 is also important for what it does *not* contain. To quote Smith, institutional texts, as a form of discourse, are important for "what is simply not made present" (2005:18). The CDCR signals that 'race' and ethnicity are the categories of social differentiation that should be determined *first*, with other distinctions held in abeyance; when these later distinctions are applied, the purpose is to distinguish people *within* the racial/ethnic/gang categories. For instance, although there are fields on the form for "commitment offense" and "prior commitments," this information may or may not accompany the inmate from county jail, and, regardless, there is no significant assessment inside R&Rs of the individual's risk and needs using variables such as social history, circumstances of the offense, history of past offenses, and so forth. Those assessments occur later during an inmate's tenure at a reception center, but even after this evaluation occurs, the

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<sup>10</sup> The 1882 has since been modified as part of the CDCR's efforts to begin preparations for racially integrating cells in its reception centers; the form reproduced in Appendix A is the version used in 2005 during my fieldwork.

inmate will continue to be segregated inside the reception center along the racial, ethnic, and gang dimensions determined at the outset. Because racial classification is a primary “move” in the R&R, two inmates with identical classification scores who are considered ideal candidates (that is, completely “compatible”) to be housed in the same cell will (virtually) never be housed together at a reception center if, for instance, one is categorized as “Black” and the other “White” (unless, for example, both identify as members of a “Crip” gang). In other words, the racial, ethnic, and gang/group affiliations decided upon in R&Rs routinely eclipse later forms of categorization and classification.

Although it is the 1882 form that drives the categorization process, the particulars of how individual inmates are categorized must be negotiated during interviews in which officers question inmates about their demographics and group affiliations. The remaining regularities, then, shift from the institutional level to the micro level of interaction and negotiation of identity.

#### *Must Declare One (and Only One) ‘Race’ and Housing Category*

All inmates must be placed into a single housing category and must declare one and only one ‘race’ to be recorded in their file. The ethno-racial categories are labeled “ethnicity” on the official form (see Appendix A), but on the ground they are referred to mostly as “race.” Available to inmates at reception center South are “White,” “Black,” “Hispanic,” and “Other”; at reception center Central categories also include “Asian” and “Native American.” Although the situation is more complex, inmates and officers often speak of gang/group affiliations as belonging to certain ‘races.’ Therefore, one can summarize the ‘race’ and gang/group affiliations as shown in Table 1, recognizing that these divisions more closely represent prison-folk conceptions of how ‘race,’ gang, and group affiliations break down than a nuanced, accurate depiction of the complicated nature of prison identities.

It is important to differentiate between the two parts of this regularity: housing category and ‘race.’ In both instances, inmates must choose one and only one option. It is also important to remember that the table is intended to reveal how the various categories are talked about, not necessarily how they actually work.

Officers generally ask inmates first their ‘race’ and then their gang affiliation.<sup>11</sup> The following interaction at Central is typical:

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<sup>11</sup> Categorization interviews were almost always conducted in English. Nonetheless, each of the officers I observed conduct these interviews spoke at least some Spanish, and on occasion conducted part of an interview in Spanish. This occurred at most a few times a day, and when it did I relied on my own extremely rudimentary knowledge of Spanish, occasionally asking officers to clarify afterward.

**Table 1.** ‘Race’ and Gang/Group, Oversimplified to Match How the Categories Are Talked About

Step One: Inmate Instructed by Officer to Report His ‘Race’/Ethnicity	Step Two: Inmate Instructed by Officer to Report His Gang/Group Affiliation	Step One: Inmate Instructed by Officer to Report His ‘Race’/ Ethnicity	Step Two: Inmate Instructed by Officer to Report His Gang/Group Affiliation
<b>Reception Center Central</b>		<b>Reception Center South</b>	
Black	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Crip</li> <li>● Blood</li> <li>● Unaffiliated</li> </ul>	Black	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Crip</li> <li>● Blood</li> <li>● Unaffiliated</li> </ul>
White	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Unaffiliated</li> <li>● Skinhead</li> <li>● Aryan Brotherhood (AB)</li> <li>● Nazi Low Riders (NLR)</li> <li>● Other prison or street gang</li> </ul>	White	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Unaffiliated</li> <li>● Skinhead</li> <li>● Aryan Brotherhood (AB)</li> <li>● Nazi Low Riders (NLR)</li> <li>● Other prison or street gang</li> </ul>
Hispanic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Northerner</li> <li>● Southerner</li> <li>● Bulldog</li> <li>● Paisa</li> <li>● Unaffiliated (rare)</li> </ul>	Hispanic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Southerner</li> <li>● Northerner</li> </ul>
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Unaffiliated</li> </ul>	Other (includes Asian and Native American)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Not a stand-alone category—must also choose one of three above categories (Black, White, Hispanic) to house with</li> </ul>
Asian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Unaffiliated</li> <li>● A prison or street gang</li> </ul>		
Native American	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Unaffiliated</li> <li>● A prison or street gang</li> </ul>		

Officer: Race?  
 Inmate: Black.  
 Officer: Crip, Blood, or Unaffiliated?  
 Inmate: Unaffiliated.  
 Officer: OK, old CDC number . . . .

The failure of an inmate to name one (and only one) racial category is deemed absolutely unacceptable. Indeed, the only inmate I observed evade racial classification was quickly (re)labeled “crazy,” instantly presumed to have a serious mental health problem. One morning a bus arrived at Central with more than 50 inmates who were “new commitments” (by contrast to parole violators). Typically, county officers remove from the bus first those inmates who in county jail were believed to be behavioral problems, in need of protection, severely mentally ill, and so forth. At Central these inmates are referred to by correctional officers simply as

“separates” (elsewhere such inmates are called “keep-aways,” “protective custody,” “walk alones,” and so forth). The first inmate brought off the bus was, in the patois of county officers, kept separate because he was “crazy.” Immediately upon getting off the bus, inmates at Central are interviewed by an officer standing just outside the entrance to R&R: they are asked their name, date of birth, ‘race,’ gang affiliation, and if they have been to state prison before.

This inmate, after his shackles and handcuffs were removed by officers, strolled up to the podium where the officer who does the initial interviews was perched. The officer asked him his name and date of birth, and the inmate gave both without incident. However, when the officer asked the inmate his ‘race,’ the man answered with a litany of identities, including “Black,” “Native American,” “French,” and several others. He rambled through the list, and his tone and mannerisms suggested that he was aware that he was annoying the officers around him but enjoyed doing it. Although current census designations allow for people to indicate multiple racial and ethnic categories, the same cannot be rendered intelligible at Central. Before the man could finish answering the question, everyone within earshot (including several R&R officers and several of the county officers) began laughing and heckling him. The officer doing the interview responded, “You’re on psych meds, aren’t you?”

The interpretation here appears to be that only someone who is severely mentally ill could fail to understand the imperative in prison of choosing a ‘race’ with which to be affiliated. It is unacceptable to officers for an inmate to claim multiple ‘races’ and nationalities in this manner, as it indicates that the person cannot even abide by what are assumed to be the most fundamental of norms. Hence, from the point of view of the officer, the person must by default be mentally unhinged.

More mundane, but equally revealing of the hegemony of racial classifications, was the following exchange:

Officer: Black?

Inmate: Yeah, duh [rolls eyes].

Officer: [defensive, angry tone] How did I know you weren’t Jamaican or something. These questions are important, so take them seriously, alright!

The inmate nodded compliantly and finished the rest of the interview. The irony here is that by exhorting the inmate to take the questions seriously, the example the officer gives—that is, that the inmate might have been Jamaican—is not a legitimate racial category; had the inmate said he was Jamaican, he likely would have been coerced into redefining his ‘race’ as “Black.” The lesson

from this exchange is that inmates are not usually allowed to depart from the normative script, which here dictates that an inmate must, under most circumstances, offer a 'race,' and not a nationality; by contrast, officers have, at least linguistically, considerably more latitude.

After choosing one 'race' to be recorded in their file, inmates are then asked whether they have any affiliations. Many said they were "Unaffiliated," others said they were members or affiliated with a street gang (e.g., "Crips" or "Bloods"), and still others mentioned large-scale divisions/gangs (e.g., "Southerners," "Northerners," and "Paisa") that are often talked about as if they were intra-ethnic groups. Many of the details and nuances of these affiliations are revealed in the next section, but my purpose here is to make the argument that everyone must identify one specific gang/group or, alternatively, declare himself "Unaffiliated." The latter option, in and of itself, is considered a "group" in prison. No inmate tried to say he had two affiliations—for example, both a "Northerner" and a "Crip"—and to do so almost certainly would be deemed unacceptable by officers.

There is one important addendum to this requirement that inmates choose one 'race' and housing category: inmates who identify their 'race' as "Other" fulfill the requirement of naming a single racial category. At the same time, they maintain the option of privately considering themselves to be multiracial or of a 'race' not recognized at that facility. It is striking how infrequently this occurred. During my observations at reception center South, for example, only two inmates claimed their 'race' to be "Other." One, who identified himself as "Portuguese," was persuaded by officers to change his 'race' to "White." The second—an inmate from Hawaii—was allowed to have his 'race' recorded as "Other," but he was made to also choose a 'race' to be housed with while at South (he said he was willing to house with "White" or "Black," but the sergeant simply wrote down "house with Whites," without comment).

Use of the "Other" category was a bit more common at Central but still occurred very rarely. At Central I observed half a dozen or so inmates successfully classify themselves as "Other." Unlike officers at South, officers at Central told me that inmates who say they are "Others" are housed together (i.e., assigned a cell with another inmate who also has been categorized as "Other"). At Central it is therefore a legitimate housing category.

This difference between South and Central in terms of the "Other" category demonstrates that racialization is not uniform in nature across reception centers but rather is localized in particular ways. Although the 1882 form creates an institutional mandate for categorization, and shapes the dimensions along which that process occurs, there is nonetheless substantial room for officers and

administrators at specific prisons to make decisions about which categories to deem legitimate. Thus throughout these findings I highlight aspects of categorization that varied across reception centers, and in the last section of the article I make an argument about what patterns of consistency and variation across reception centers tell us about larger questions of racialization and power.

### *Negotiated Settlement, Within Policed Bounds*

Although inmates must be placed into a single housing category, including only one 'race,' they have some ability to negotiate the category to which they are eventually assigned. Inmates' power comes in the form of influence—the ability to change the particulars of how they, as an individual, are categorized (a power, we see in the next section, that does not always extend to being categorized with whatever group they wish). They do so within bounds policed by officers and commensurate with the institutional logic codified on the 1882 that informs officers and inmates alike. Perhaps the most compelling evidence of inmates' discretion is the fact that I observed more than a dozen inmates who looked to officers like they might be labeled (based on physical appearance alone) as "White" successfully claim membership as a "Southerner." According to officers and administrators, "Southerners" are defined as Hispanics from southern California, who supposedly do not get along with either "Northerners" (defined as Hispanics from northern California) or "Bulldogs" (often referred to as Hispanics from the greater Fresno area). Sometimes the "White"/"Southerner" combination led to ridicule or teasing from the officer doing the interviews (especially at reception center Central), and other times it led to outright hostility (especially at reception center South). Nonetheless, it is notable that inmates who declared their 'race' as "White" were able, in every instance attempted, to successfully convince officers that they indeed "ran with" the "Southerners." Although the group "Southerner" is defined by prison officials according to the 'race'/ethnicity of its members, clearly those boundaries are at least partially permeable.

Although it is possible for an inmate to identify his 'race' as "White" and still be a "Southerner," doing so often amused and/or upset officers. At Central, the officer who usually conducts the initial interview often teased inmates who said they were "White" and a "Southerner." The officer said things such as, "Alright, but you look pretty White to me." By doing so, the officer simultaneously acknowledged that the situation is permissible, while reinforcing that "Southerners" should *normally* be "Hispanic." At reception center South, this situation often invoked more hostility

than amusement. The sergeant there one day exclaimed to an inmate, "Man, you're whiter than me. What the fuck is up with that!" Although the sergeant was clearly angry, the inmate merely shrugged his shoulders and replied, in a firm tone, "I'm a Southerner." Without further ado, the sergeant marked his housing slip as "Southerner," and recorded on the housing form, "White" and "Southerner." Although this sergeant responded with anger rather than amusement, the end result was the same—the inmate was categorized as both "White" and a "Southerner." He earned the designation, through the negotiation, to house with the group for whom he expressed a preference.

The fact that inmates were able to categorize themselves as both "White" and "Southerner" makes intuitive sense on a structural level. After all, officers and administrators in California are deeply concerned about prison and street gangs, and they devote considerable resources to controlling gangs within prison walls. Many officers with whom I spoke informally portrayed gangs as a direct threat to their personal safety. As such, to deny an inmate the ability to self-declare his gang affiliation might conceivably risk inciting the wrath of the gang—whereas to allow an inmate the ability to define his 'race' as "White," despite the fact that he has also defined his affiliation as "Southerner," damages only the linguistic coherence of the notion that "Southerners" are a "Hispanic" gang.

A different sort of combination of identities is considered more problematic by officers, namely inmates who say their 'race' is "White" but who claim to be a member of the "Crip" gang (a gang that is commonly thought of—inside and outside prison—as a "Black" gang). What makes this more troubling to officers is a fear that inmates who appear to be "White" but are housed with "Black" inmates will cause institutional unrest. For instance, several officers and managers at one prison told me that the facility was on "modified program" (a euphemism for a partial lockdown) because of a racial incident. According to officers, "White" inmates became upset that a "White" inmate was living with "Black" inmates and as a result started a 'race' riot, attacking "Black" inmates. Notwithstanding this concern, I observed a few inmates at reception center South successfully convince officers to record them as "White" and a "Crip" affiliate. While the officers expressed some concern to me about this (calling it a "potential problem"), they also expressed a belief that they had no alternative. One officer explained that, in his opinion, it would be extremely dangerous to force a "White Crip" to house with "the 'Whites,'" who would surely beat him up. It was better, according to this officer, to house such inmates with other "Crips," who, he believed, ought to be able to protect the inmate.

These examples of inmates choosing gangs that might otherwise be thought to be at odds with their stated 'race' were most common among inmates who identified themselves as "White." For instance, I never witnessed an inmate declare his 'race' to be "Black" and also claim membership in a "White" prison gang or other white affiliation (e.g., "Nazi Low Riders," or "Aryan Brotherhood"). In fact, every inmate who said he was "Black" also said he was a "Crip," "Blood," or "Unaffiliated" (sometimes inmates mentioned specific street gangs, but they still then identified whether it was a "Crip" or a "Blood" gang). Likewise, those inmates who said they were "Hispanic" never declared themselves members of gangs considered to be "'White' gangs" or "'Black' gangs." At Central, the four major housing categories for "Hispanic" inmates are "Northerner," "Southerner," "Bulldog," or "Paisa"; on occasion a few inmates at Central successfully convinced officers to record them as "Hispanic" and "Unaffiliated." No categories other than these five (i.e., "Northerner," "Southerner," "Bulldog," "Paisa," and "Unaffiliated") were ever used by inmates who identified themselves as "Hispanic." In those instances when inmates convinced officers to record them as "Hispanic" and "Unaffiliated," officers told me they would be housed with "Paisa." One officer at Central told me that there were very few "Unaffiliated Hispanics" at reception center Central because of extreme pressure and violence by Fresno "Bulldogs" who, according to the officer, will not "tolerate" "Unaffiliated Hispanics."

At reception center Central, about one-fifth of those inmates who said they were "Hispanic" also said they were "Paisa." This contrasts sharply with South, where I never witnessed a single inmate declare himself to be "Paisa." The question of whether an inmate considers himself to be a "Southerner" or a "Paisa," according to officers, is often a question of discretion by the inmate. The following exchange reveals some of the dynamics of the "Paisa"-versus-"Southerner" categorization:

Officer: Nationality, Hispanic?

Inmate: Yes.

Officer: Who do you roll with?

Inmate: I don't play those games anymore, I'm too old.

Officer: OK [nods]. Southerner?

Inmate: [polite, but insistent] No, I don't play like that anymore.

Officer: OK, so who should I put you with? Do you speak Spanish?

Inmate: Not very well, but I can go Paisa.

Officer: You sure?

Inmate: Yeah, I was with them back in '92 when I was at Soledad.

Officer: OK, fine.

Here the inmate expressed considerable discretion to determine the group with which he identifies. “Paisas,” according to officers, tend to be less involved in prison politics and violence; therefore, those inmates who choose to identify as such are, according to officers, trying to distance themselves from some of the pressure to commit violent acts that “Southerner” leaders impose on subordinates.

In some instances, whether a certain racial category is permissible varies from one reception center to the next—another example of how the particulars of racialization vary across reception centers. For instance, at reception center Central, it is acceptable for inmates to identify their ‘race’ as either “Asian” or “Native American,” and to be housed with other people who consider themselves “Asian” or “Native American.” At reception center South, officers sometimes comply in marking these inmates’ ‘race’ as “Asian” or “Native American” on their official paperwork but invariably make them choose a ‘race’ for housing purposes. In order to do this, the officers have devised a system whereby in addition to filling out the 1882, they also give a small piece of paper to the person in charge of making the housing assignments, on which they sometimes write additional information. For example:

Officer: Race?

Inmate: Filipino.

Officer: Asian, right?

Inmate: Yeah.

Officer: OK, I’ll mark it, but we don’t really do Asian here. You need to pick a race to house with in the unit.

Inmate: I’ll house with Blacks.

Although the inmate said he was “Filipino,” he was asked to recast his ‘race’ as “Asian.” Then he was further asked to choose a ‘race’ to house with because officers and administrators at South refuse to “accommodate” (their word) “Asians”—that is, they refuse to go to the trouble of housing people who consider themselves to be “Asian” with others who also consider themselves to be “Asian.” This inmate’s paperwork indicated this bifurcation, with “race” recorded as “Asian” on the 1882, and a note on the separate slip sent to the person in charge of making actual bed allotments that said “houses with Blacks.” The officer doing the interview later told me that at the inmate’s permanent prison, it might be possible for the inmate to house with other “Asians,” but that South just did not have the capacity to “accommodate” that particular request. It is important to note that this is a local decision: nothing about the organizationally approved form (the 1882) dictates the exact number of racial categories considered legitimate for housing purposes.

Sometimes the categorization process is structured less like a negotiation and more like two people working together to figure out how to navigate the particular culture of a given prison. I observed one such example on my first day at reception center Central:

- Officer: Race?  
 Inmate: White.  
 Officer: Who do you run with?  
 Inmate: I don't know, I don't really run with anyone.  
 Officer: So, you're Unaffiliated?  
 Inmate: Yeah, I guess.  
 Officer: Well, if I cell you with a Black guy, are you going to be able to get along with him?  
 Inmate: Sure, I guess. I'm fine with that.  
 Officer: OK, Unaffiliated, then [pause].  
 Inmate: Um, is that a bad thing? I'm new . . . um, I mean, I really don't know what's going on.  
 Officer: [pause, body language seemed to soften] Well, yes, it probably isn't a good thing. [pause] Do you want me to put you as with the Whites?  
 Inmate: Yeah, fine. With the Whites.  
 Officer: By the way, you're going to be asked a lot of questions out there by the Whites, so be ready.  
 Inmate: OK.  
 Officer: Alright, go over there [points inside the main area, where inmates are stripped and searched].

What makes this exchange simultaneously telling and confusing is that I later witnessed dozens of inmates present themselves as "White" and "Unaffiliated"; doing so occurred without incident. One possible explanation for this discrepancy is that this interview was conducted by a different officer than the one who normally did the interviews (that officer was sick my first day). Another possibility is that it was conducted at least partially for my benefit—the officer's effort to demonstrate to me that it is unacceptable for an inmate not to declare affinity for one particular group. A third possibility—and I think the most likely—is that the officer was pressuring the inmate to not merely identify his 'race' as "White," but to self-identify as *a White*. That is, the officer saw the inmate as a sort of prison novice, and wanted to school him in the ways of prison—namely that in prison 'race' takes on a cultural significance, in terms of dividing and structuring interpersonal relations, different and greater than on the outside. Perhaps what was being discussed and contested during this exchange was not the inmate's label (he began and finished with "White, Unaffiliated"), but instead the inmate's racial orientation. The officer communicated to him his belief that inmates ought to stick with their own 'race,'

understood in fixed and immutable terms, and should not admit (even if they privately believe) their willingness to interact freely with people of a different 'race.'

*Not All Housing and Racial Categories Are Permissible*

Inmates' power to influence how they are categorized is not absolute; rather, it is limited to those categories officers and administrators decide are permissible. Inmates routinely proffer 'races' that are deemed by officers to be too specific and therefore impermissible, and certain group affiliations are not taken seriously by officers. The effect is to make it difficult for certain inmates who might otherwise wish to house together to do so. In general, officers do not accept nationalities as a 'race,' unless (as we will see) the inmate's gang/group affiliation trumps their 'race.' Either way, inmates are sometimes not able to negotiate in such a way that they are necessarily housed with someone else of the same nationality (some presumably are, purely by chance). For example:

Officer: Race?

Inmate: Portuguese.

Officer: Portuguese? [pause] You mean White?

Inmate: Nah, I'm Portuguese, not White.

Officer: Sure, but who do you house with?

Inmate: Usually with the "Others."

Officer: We don't fuck with that here. It's just Black, White, or Hispanic.

Inmate: Well, I'm Portuguese.

Second officer, looking on the whole time: Put him with the Negros, then ["Negro" pronounced in Spanish].

Inmate: What?!

Second officer: Oh, now you're serious, huh. So you want to house with the Whites, do you?

Inmate: Fine, with the Whites.

Officer: OK, with the Whites it is.

In this instance, the inmate attempted to present his 'race' as "Portuguese," but the officer ruled this designation unacceptable. Likewise, the inmate's suggestion that he usually houses with "the Others" got him nowhere. When the second officer thought the inmate was challenging the officers' power/authority (namely, "well, I'm Portuguese"), he decided to threaten the inmate with being housed with a group that might not accept him and potentially threaten his safety. Then, and only then, did the inmate concede defeat, agreeing to the racial label of "White" as originally suggested by the officer. The officer filled out the paperwork as "White," with no mention of "Portuguese," cementing this new identity in the official record and eliminating all evidence of the inmate's resistance to the label.

Another inmate at South on a different day also attempted to resist the initial categorization the officer attempted to impose:

Officer: Black, right?

Inmate: [clearly very angry] Fuck no. I'm not Black. Why the hell do you have to go disrespecting and assuming like that! I don't talk about other races. Why are you putting me in a box like that?

Officer: Chill, alright. What race are you then? 'Cause the sheet says Black.

Inmate: I'm half Mayan and half Jamaican. I ain't Black.

Officer: Fine, but I'm putting Black, because that is what the sheet says.

Inmate: Well, I house with Others or nonaffiliated Blacks. But I ain't Black.

Officer: Fine, look [points at paper, on which he has printed "house with Others or nonaffiliated Blacks"], I put that down on your housing sheet.

When the inmate stepped away, the officer doing the housing interview exclaimed loud enough for the inmate to hear: "Now that fucker has an identity problem." While this inmate was somewhat more successful in determining how he was labeled—after all, his housing slip said house with "Others" or "nonaffiliated Blacks"—his 'race' was still recorded on the official 1882 as "Black." His efforts to recast his 'race' as "Mayan/Jamaican" failed. Other examples I observed were inmates who presented their 'race' as "Cuban," "American Samoan," and "Laotian," to name just a few. In each instance, officers used the conversation to pressure the inmate to choose an alternative category.

Sometimes officers accept and record an inmate's nationality as his 'race,' but only because the inmate also offers a group membership that trumps his 'race' for housing purposes. For instance, on several occasions I observed inmates coming from the Fresno county jail evade the need to choose either "Black," "White," "Asian," "Native American," "Hispanic," or "Other," precisely because their gang affiliation—"Bulldog"—trumped their 'race' for housing purposes. In these instances, the inmates' "race" was recorded as originally stated (e.g., "Puerto Rican"), but group membership was also noted (e.g., "Bulldog"), for it trumped 'race' and made it possible to have a 'race' noted on paper but not acted upon with regard to housing assignments.

Occasionally inmates choose a 'race' that is deemed implausible by officers and therefore rejected, resulting in the inmate being labeled "crazy" (in a manner similar to the way in which the inmate who tried to claim multiple racial identities was categorized as "crazy"). One such exchange took place during a two-day visit to a reception center (one of the short visits I conducted to augment my longer observations at South and Central). In this instance, an

inmate was brought into the sergeant's office for a housing interview. The inmate in question was a parole violator and had been previously incarcerated in administrative segregation when last housed in California state prison. His file apparently indicated that he was on psychotropic medication. As part of his interview, the officer asked the inmate his 'race' and affiliation. According to the inmate, he was a "Blood." When the officer doing the interview looked at him in disbelief (the inmate appeared, judging from the color of his skin, to be "White") and several other officers in the room began snickering, the inmate became defensive. "Well, I'm a cross-Atlantic Blood," he told the officer. This evoked more laughter, and even the officer doing the interview—who, up to this point, appeared like he was trying very hard to appear professional—joined in. The officer asked whether he had any "enemy concerns," and the inmate responded that all the "Crips" were out to get him, and most of the "Bloods" too because they did not like that he was a "Blood." The officer printed a lockup order sending the inmate to Administrative Segregation (i.e., "the hole") due to "enemy concerns reported by the inmate."

What made this encounter so interesting is that, on some level, it is plausible that the inmate could have been affiliated with the "Bloods." At other reception centers I witnessed several inmates who said their 'race' was "White" also identify as a "Crip." In this instance, however, the officers had already expressed a belief that the inmate was mentally unstable, so when the inmate—who looked "White" to the officers—said he was a "Blood" it was taken as proof of his insanity. This was merely confirmed in the minds of the officers when he further claimed to be "a cross-Atlantic Blood," a term the officers had never heard before and which they assumed the inmate invented in a state of delusion.

Other categories that inmates offer regarding 'race' or gang affiliation are recognized as plausible, but nonetheless summarily dismissed and/or derided. One of the more offensive examples of this occurred when inmates at Central declared their 'race' to be "Chicano." For instance, one interview went as follows:

Officer: Race?

Inmate: Chicano.

Officer: OK, how about we put down Hispanic?

The inmate shrugged his shoulders, said "Sure," and went inside the R&R. After the inmate went inside the R&R, the officer turned to the county police officer and joked, "Do you remember driving by that country, Chicano?" The county police officer replied, "Yeah, it's right next to Merced, right?" Both of the officers found this to be extremely funny.

Clearly, the officers were derisive of this politically laden self-identity. At this particular reception center, "Chicano" was considered an illegitimate category, and those who identified as such were re-labeled "Hispanic" and housed with other inmates who consider themselves Hispanic (as opposed to the smaller subset of inmates who consider themselves "Chicano").

Another group affiliation ignored by officers is "Christian." At South I did not observe a single inmate identify his affiliation as "Christian"; however, more than a dozen inmates did so at Central. One officer at Central told a colleague of mine (on our first visit to the R&R there) that he considers the "Christians" to be a "nonviolent prison gang." But most officers appeared to find it funny when inmates told them they "run with the Christians," indicating their belief that the group failed to amount to any sort of gang, violent or otherwise. The officers doing the interviews (and the sergeant doing the housing interview) never wrote down "Christian" on these inmates' housing forms, thereby erasing any official institutional record of the response. As such, inmates who identify themselves as "running with the Christians" will be housed (at least initially) with any other "White, Unaffiliated" inmate: they are denied the privilege of living with other inmates who claim the same membership.

This regularity that not all housing categories are acceptable, including the rejection of nationalities and the denigration of categories such as "Christian" and "Chicano," is important because it tempers the observation that inmates have influence over the particulars of how they are categorized. When the officer at South quipped, "We don't fuck with that here. It's just White, Black, or Hispanic," he demonstrated the power of officers to police the categorization process. At the same time, we have seen repeatedly that within these boundaries—as policed by officers—inmates enact considerable amounts of influence and agency. Sometimes these boundaries can plausibly be traced to larger institutional structures. For example, it makes sense that officers would allow inmates to determine at will their gang/geographic group affiliation, regardless of whether those gangs/groups accord with the 'race' normally associated with that group; in other instances, boundaries might more plausibly be linked to officers' stereotypes and assumptions about specific groups (e.g., "Chicano," "Christian"). Either way, it is the interaction between the inmate and officer in which categorization is born, and that makes racial categorization and segregation possible.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The modern scholarly literature on prisons can be roughly divided into three periods. Classic works during what has been

referred to as the “golden age” of prison sociology (Simon 2000) peaked in the late 1950s and largely ignored ‘race.’ During the 1970s, scholars examined how people considered to be of different ‘races’ interacted inside prisons, part of a larger literature studying “race relations.” And in the most recent era, from about the 1980s to the present, researchers have largely moved away from detailed, often ethnographic, explorations of various facets of life inside prisons in favor of more distant analyses of the impact of hyper-incarceration on offenders, families, neighborhoods, and society at large (Simon 2000; Wacquant 2002). ‘Race’ looms large in this contemporary era, as researchers study the impact of incarceration, but the focus tends to be on differential rates of incarceration and its impacts across racial and ethnic groups in the United States, and is largely silent on the contribution of prisons and other carceral facilities to the penal formation of ‘race.’ Similarly, scholars exploring the legal construction of ‘race’ have consistently looked to the role of courts’ interpretation of the law as the source of the legal production of ‘race’ and racialization, systematically ignoring the contribution of penal institutions. The current study is an important first step in the direction of creating such a literature.

Having laid out in considerable detail how California’s prison reception centers—like prisons elsewhere in the United States—are racialized spaces, how officers contribute to that racialization through their speech and actions, and how inmates and officers alike contribute to the process of categorization (that gives rise to racial segregation) against a backdrop of institutional texts produced at the agency level, a final consideration remains: what happens when we consider these findings together, rather than as isolated regularities of carceral life? Three themes become apparent: (1) prisons are spaces of making ‘race’ and manufacturing racialization; (2) relations between inmates, officers, and administrators in the realm of categorization can be understood more deeply if we think about power and its sources; and (3) racial categorization/segregation is ingrained in the very fiber of how California punishes those it incarcerates in its state prisons. The role of the law is clear in all three: although California’s practice of categorizing inmates and then segregating them according to ‘race’ occurs in the absence of formal, written law, those processes occur in a highly institutionalized context, subject to the legal gaze of courts.

The interactions analyzed in this study demonstrate that prisons are not just a product of a racialized society (as scholars such as Wacquant have made abundantly clear)—they are also places in which ‘race’ is made and remade. We have seen, for example, that many inmates enter California reception centers with identities that are amalgamations of various ethno-racial

elements, gang ties and affiliations, gang and pseudo-gang geographic affinities, and so forth. Yet they exit the zone of classification with one, and only one, racial identity cemented in their file, and some indication with respect to secondary affiliation (gang, geographic, unaffiliated, etc.). As such, prison reception centers in California function not just to reshape identities, but more specifically to collapse and distort people's identities until they accord with a pervasive institutional logic as particularized at each reception center.

A second theme is that categorization, at its core, is a negotiation in which inmates, officers, and administrators have access to distinct sources of power that enable and constrain the range of possibilities for outcomes. To point out that each of these parties has some ability to impact the result of the negotiation does not, of course, mean that the parties are on equal footing, either across or within groups. Inmates who, for instance, during my observations at Central identified as "Christian" and wanted to live in a cell with another "Christian" person, could do nothing to persuade officers and local administrators who had decided to reject that request (a rejection made possible, but not required, by the nature of institutional paperwork and practices). On the other hand, regardless of how frustrated it made them, and how fearful they were of the consequences, officers felt they had no choice but to allow inmates who identified as both "White" and a "Crip" to house with others who identified as "Crips."

Seen in this context, is the negotiation that results in categorization better thought of as "enforcement" or "construction"? By enforcement I mean gaining the compliance of inmates in subjecting themselves to an institutional schema that understands 'race' in narrow terms ("Black," "White," "Hispanic," and perhaps "Other"), and by construction I mean the shared effort to create identity, including 'race,' in a particular setting. The answer, of course, is both. To the extent that institutional texts privilege 'race' and communicate the perceived need to limit contact between members defined as belonging to different racial groups, inmates and officers alike appear to be molded by what Smith (2005) refers to as the "ruling relations." And here, the "ruler" is, in the first instance, "agency" (i.e., the administration for the CDCR). On the other hand, to the extent that the manner in which particular individuals are categorized is very much open to negotiation (even if the categories themselves are relatively rigid), inmates and officers appear to be engaging in a contest over how to construct particular labels. This is power in its most basic form: person A getting person B to do something that person B would not otherwise do (Lukes 2005:16). The result is that inmates can influence how they are categorized, and officers can police those categorizations by

pushing and prodding inmates toward certain labels and away from others. Construction and enforcement are two facets of the same phenomena; indeed, one could say they are co-constitutive in the most insidious way (see Lukes 2005).

Another way to think about power in terms of the observations described in this article is to examine consistency and variation across the reception centers studied in this research. As described in detail throughout this article, a racialized environment and the 1882 form as an engine for the categorization process are common to the adult male reception centers studied; likewise, it was observed at both reception centers that inmates must choose one and only one 'race' and housing category, that the "Other" category is seen as an option of last resort, that inmates have some influence over the particulars of how they are categorized (but that such influence is racially stratified), and that some groups are not accepted as legitimate housing categories. At the same time, however, South and Central vary in which racial categories are acceptable as stand-alone designations ("Asian" and "Native American" are acceptable at Central, but not at South). The "Other" category is somewhat more common at Central, and inmates who identify as such are not (as at South) required to choose another category to be housed with. "Paisa" is not uncommon as a categorization at Central, but it is nonexistent at South. Inmates who identify as both "White" and a "Southerner" tend to evoke amusement from officers at Central, but hostility from officers at South.

Looking across these similarities and variations, a clear pattern emerges. The structure of power between administrators, officers, and inmates is largely the same across reception centers. Specifically, administrators create the forms that demand categorization and shape the process in such a way that people can be divided into distinct, non-overlapping groups that are understood foremost as racial divisions. Officers routinely, and seemingly without choice, accept and implement this mandate, even as they have the power to decide the precise number of legitimate categories as well as to police individual inmates' responses. Inmates, in turn, routinely, and seemingly without choice, accept the fact that they must be categorized along racial lines (the agency mandate) and will be policed by officers, even as they have considerable influence over whether they are categorized one way or another. At the same time, variations across reception centers demonstrate that within this broad power structure, there is room for specific groups of individuals to gain more (or less) influence. An inmate who considers himself "Native American" and wants to be housed in a cell with another "Native American" has the opportunity to be successful at Central, but not at South: success in getting categorized and housed as one wishes depends, in part, on which

reception center one is sent to. Power is not a totalizing force: within the division of power between administrators, officers, and inmates, there is room for negotiation of the particulars of how specific people are categorized, as well as somewhat more broadly whether members of a group are successful in getting what they want, namely being housed together.

From these two themes—prisons as producing ‘race’ and racialization, and categorization as being influenced by a layering of power that contains elements of both construction and enforcement—derives a third theme, namely that racial categorization, and later segregation, is a fundamental element of how California currently punishes those it incarcerates in its state prisons. The institutional logic that racial categories (and not other ways of distinguishing individuals) are the appropriate ground for separating people in an attempt to achieve safety and security is so pervasive that it is difficult to predict what will happen as the CDCR begins the process of racial integration it agreed to in its settlement-and-release agreement with Johnson. The CDCR has designed new forms and processes to be used during intake procedures in its reception centers. Specifically, CDCR administrators created a new housing form (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation 2008c) that classifies incoming inmates according to their eligibility to be housed with someone considered to be of a different ‘race.’ California has borrowed largely from a system used in Texas that consists of a series of codes, such as “RB” (“restricted Black”) for someone who is eligible to be housed with anyone who is *not* labeled “Black” (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation 2008c). California may well change the demography of its prison cells, but will the undergirding forces of racialization and racialized understandings of how people ought to be separated in order to increase “compatibility” change—and if so, how?

In conclusion, the research reported in this article can be characterized as exploratory. Typical of exploratory studies, this research raises as many questions as it answers, and suggests a number of approaches that might be fruitful for future research. What, for instance, are the implications of (racial) classification in R&Rs on people’s interactions and experiences in other areas of the reception centers? How do the findings reported here compare with what occurs in women’s prisons, as well as prisons in other states and countries? How does the process by which people are categorized as either male or female in prisons in California and elsewhere compare with the processes described above? And how do individual characteristics of inmates and officers (for example, gender, age, language, sexuality, ‘race,’ ethnicity, personality, and so forth—both self-described and ascribed by others) affect the

categorization process? How will California's plans to alter the racial demography of cells in its reception centers change the process of categorization? How do inmates, officers, supervisors, administrators, and others understand the process of categorization—how, in other words, do they think and talk about their experiences? How do experiences during categorization affect participants; for instance, do inmates who struggle against officers who they believe misclassified them harbor feelings of resentment (Campbell & Troyer 2007), and does contestation cause them distress? How does one's classification—as well as one's experience with the process—affect other activities, conditions, and experiences in prison? How do physical structures of the R&Rs (and the physical design of reception centers, more generally) affect categorization? Clearly there is much more work to be done.

Future research might also systematically compare the results discussed here with other types of people-processing institutions. What is peculiar about the process discussed in this article as it unfolds in prisons, and what is common to all types of people-processing institutions? How does the extent to which a setting is racialized affect the process? Does the balance shift more toward construction, or more toward enforcement, depending upon the relative power of the parties in a given institutional setting? Do participants subject to categorization at the hands of multiple institutions negotiate or behave differently while at different institutions? Are the findings and arguments made in this article peculiar to 'race?' What happens when we consider the production of gender as it unfolds in the carceral context?

It is clear that the exodus of social scientists from prisons and other penal environments (Simon 2000; Wacquant 2002) must be reversed: it is time to reengage on a variety of questions that are more important than ever given the extent of hyper-incarceration in American society today. We need to bring scholarship up to date on what prisons and other carceral environments look like in our contemporary era, making use of substantive, theoretical advancements in related areas of scholarship, including 'race,' ethnicity, gender, class, and other key ways of "doing difference" (West & Fenstermaker 1995).

## Appendix A: 1882 Form as Used at Reception Center Central

STATE OF CALIFORNIA  
CDC 1882

DEPARTMENT OF CALIFORNIA

### INITIAL HOUSING REVIEW

NAME OF INMATE	CDC #	Institution
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The above inmate has been screened prior to housing. An inmate interview and available documents indicate the following

New Commitment   
  PVWNT   
  FYRTC   
  Layover   
  OTC/RTN   
  MED/RTN   
  Other

Ethnicity	Date of birth	Age	Place of Birth	County of Commitment	Sending Jail / Institution
CSR Endorsement	Class Score	<input type="checkbox"/> Paroled	<input type="checkbox"/> Discharged	<input type="checkbox"/> OTC From	<input type="checkbox"/> LAYOVER <input type="checkbox"/> CCF RETURN
Enemies at	Name / Number	Gang / Disruptive Group	South	Bulldog	North
DM Claims	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes	Group Affiliation	Skinhead	Crip	Blood Other
CDC-812	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Affiliated	<input type="checkbox"/> AKA		
Health Concerns:	<input type="checkbox"/> Wheelchair <input type="checkbox"/> Mobility Impaired <input type="checkbox"/> Asthma <input type="checkbox"/> Diabetic	Psych Concerns:	<input type="checkbox"/> No		
<input type="checkbox"/> Vision Impaired <input type="checkbox"/> Hearing Impaired <input type="checkbox"/> Seizures <input type="checkbox"/> Other	Yes: <input type="checkbox"/> CCCMS <input type="checkbox"/> EOP <input type="checkbox"/> Other				
Prior Single Cell Status:	History of In-Cell Assaults:	History of Aggression towards Other inmates:			
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No/Unknown	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No/Unknown	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No/Unknown			
When: _____ Where: _____	When: _____ Where: _____	When: _____ Where: _____			
<input type="checkbox"/> Per Inmate	<input type="checkbox"/> Per Inmate	<input type="checkbox"/> Per Inmate			
<input type="checkbox"/> Per Documentation/Jail Personnel	<input type="checkbox"/> Per Documentation	<input type="checkbox"/> Per Documentation			
Problems in County Jail:	Commitment Offense:	Terms:			
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No/Unknown					
When: _____ Where: _____	Prior Commitments:	Parole Violation:			
<input type="checkbox"/> Per Inmate					
<input type="checkbox"/> Per Documentation/Jail Personnel	Comments/Inmate Comments:				

Based on the review above I have determined that:  
 The inmate is suitable for the indicated dorm / cell housing with no special restriction.

Facility  C/H  B/D  ADSEG

Assigned Housing
------------------

The inmate is suitable for the indicated dorm / cell housing with the following restriction(s)

Housing Legend: MHDS = B 1,2,3,4 D 1,3,4 H 1,2 Sensitive Needs = B 1,2,3,4 Wheelchair = B 1, H 1, 2 Northern Hispanic = D 3	Additional Comments: _____ _____ _____
---	---

There are placement concerns that may require single cell assignment. These concerns are based upon the following documentation:

Screening Authority: Signature: _____ Printed Name: _____ Title: 2 <sup>nd</sup> Watch R&R Sergeant	Signature: _____ Printed Name: _____ Title: 3 <sup>rd</sup> Watch R&R Sergeant
Approving Authority: Single Cell Status is: <input type="checkbox"/> Approved <input type="checkbox"/> Disapproved <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable	Signature: _____ Printed Name: _____ Title: _____

Cc: C-File (Original)  
 Housing Assignment Authority

Initial Housing Review

General Chrono

Note: See footnote 10 above.

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**Philip Goodman** is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Criminology, Law and Society at the University of California, Irvine. His dissertation research investigates the changing nature of punishment in the United States by examining the history and current working of California's prison fire camps. His research has received awards from the American Sociological Association and the Law and Society Association.

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