

## **“Undoing Gender While Doing Time: Men in Prison Arts Programs”**

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### **Abstract**

Although there is a scholarly and institutional assumption that imprisoned men must maintain a hypermasculine image, this performance of gender does not extend to the prison art studio. Rather than buttressing the hypermasculine traits that are rewarded on the prison yard, incarcerated artists are rewarded for devotion to the art program itself. In this paper, I examine the experiences of male prisoner-artists through more than 250 hours of participant observation in a prison art program that I created, as well as 52 interviews with currently and formerly incarcerated artists and prison art program staff. Respondents consider the art studio to be a “safe” space, a sanctuary within a dangerous environment. In the studio, these men are allowed, and even encouraged, to transcend rigid gender expressions and racial divisions in order to become true artists. They regularly socialize across racial lines, sharing supplies and offering encouragement. The men generally agree that they should protect the art program, thereby safeguarding a “freer culture” that does not exist elsewhere in the prison. This has broader theoretical implications for the study of gender and organizations. Just as Ely and Meyerson (2010) found on oil rigs, getting individuals in masculine (and dangerous) workplaces to shift their goals and utilize a new reward system allows them to cast aside the rigid guidelines that formerly shaped their gendered behavior. Creating “alternative spaces” in heavily gendered organizations can reduce members’ necessity to enact this gendered behavior, thereby “undoing” gender. My findings support policy arguments that prison arts programs are beneficial for individual inmates, the prison institution, and broader society but add an important mechanism for how this is accomplished: these art programs allow inmates to drop the hypermasculine imperative.

### **Introduction**

Both gender and prison time are “done.” Time in prison takes on a different character than it does outside of its confines because it must be endured under constraint (Kunzel 2008). The tedium of doing time makes even the smallest, most mundane of details, important. This environment makes the practice of doing gender, and our understandings of gender as simultaneously racialized, much more explicit. Actions that may seem inconsequential on the outside garner more serious reactions within the prison. For example, where one sits and how one eats within the prison cafeteria can have very serious consequences for that individual; as

one of my interviewees, Fernando<sup>1</sup>, a formerly incarcerated man, told me, whites and Blacks are never allowed to eat together in the cafeteria. Racial groups in the prison become extremely important for prison politics, and various alliances and rivalries form. County lines also become all-important, even for individuals who previously did not identify as members of a particular county while they were on the outside. Disobeying these institutionalized norms can result in very serious consequences for that individual, including physical attacks. Prison is a very violent and deadly environment<sup>2</sup>, so gender and race boundaries are much more rigidly enforced, making people hyper-aware.

Prisons are “extreme cases” (Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep 2009), in which phenomena present in broader society are made more explicit. Restrictions in prison are tighter than they are in the outside world; prisoners are very aware that they live within a panopticon, in which they might be watched at any given time. Inmates’ behavior is subject to scrutiny, often by the “shot-callers” of groups that are in power, in addition to being observed by the correctional officers.

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1 All names are pseudonyms.

2 As Arenberg (2009) explains, eating a piece of food that a member of another race already took a bite from can result in being killed. One’s personal possessions become all-important; fights break out if a Ramen soup goes missing. The prison art studio is crowded, so individuals can be protective over their work spaces at times, as Jurgen, one of the formerly incarcerated artists I interviewed, explained to me. Because these incidents, which would be perceived as relatively minor on the outside (and certainly not deserving of death), become heightened and have severe consequences, prison is a very violent place (Gibbons and Katzenbach 2006). In 2002, there were 68 homicides, 482 suicides, and 84 deaths of “other/unknown” cause in U.S. state prisons and jails (Mumola 2005). In 2000, 34,355 assaults among prisoners and 17,952 assaults by prisoners against staff were reported (Stephan and Karberg 2003); however, these statistics are likely conservative, as many incidences go unreported (Gibbons and Katzenbach 2006). Specter (2006) argues that prison conditions promote violence, rather than violent prisoners serving as the sole cause of institutional violence. These same conditions often lead to the return of inmates to such violent surroundings (Gibbons and Katzenbach 2006): in California, 47% of those who are released recidivate within one year and 63.7% return to prison within three years of their release (CDCR Office of Research 2012). Prison is a reflection of life on the outside, but in a much more extreme case.

The behavior being watched includes inmates' performances of their gender and racial identities. Jurgen, a formerly incarcerated artist, told me that, to be high up in the prison hierarchy, one needs to be the "biggest and baddest." Carl, a currently incarcerated artist, told me that while he was on another prison yard, fights would constantly break out: "You gotta throw your toughness around." In prison, hypermasculinity is celebrated; this is an exaggerated version of the masculinity that is rewarded in our broader society. The same goes for race in prison. As Jurgen told me, "It's still the 1950s in there," referring to the institutional racial segregation. Carl, who is Black, explained that prisoners are expected to stand in solidarity only with members of their own race: "You can't fight a white boy without starting a riot."

I utilize the sociology of gender, race, and organizations to analyze the prison as an extreme case. An extreme case is a theoretical tool, which recognizes that a place such as the prison is an archetype, a place in which phenomena that exist in society appear in a more apparent form than they do in much of society. Ely and Meyerson (2010) provide a concrete example of such a case; they analyze the oil rig, a traditionally hypermasculine workplace, and show that an organizational safety initiative changed its culture. They then extend their findings to other dangerous workplaces to demonstrate the "doing" and "undoing" of gender in additional locales.

Prison is actually composed of a number of smaller microcosms; one's identity changes in different sub-contexts of the prison environment. As this paper addresses, inmates negotiate their gender identities differently as they traverse the spaces of the prison. I specifically focus on the art studio, which my respondents regularly compare to "the yard," which is the most public space within the prison. While "the yard" requires hypermasculine behavior of male prisoners, the art studio permits transgressive gender behaviors. Prison, therefore, reveals the extent of the

social construction of identities, especially regarding gender and race. I argue that such extremes make the study of gender in prisons important for all scholars of gender; it can teach us something about the practice of gender (and specifically its fluidity) across society, not solely within the world of the prison itself. Prison art programs allow individuals to reclaim time and space, to use it in a positive way, and inmate artists become very protective of this space.

The research questions for this paper are as follows: How do understandings (or unconscious beliefs about imperatives) affect presentations of masculinity within prison art studios? How are performances of hypermasculinity and racism tempered within prison art programs? How can we use that knowledge to reduce such gender imperatives within the prison, and within other organizations?

To study these questions, I have triangulated the methods of participant observation in a prison art program, interviews with currently incarcerated artists, and interviews with formerly incarcerated artists and prison art program staff members. I founded a visual arts program at a medium/maximum security state prison, which gave me access to incarcerated artists of a wide range of skill levels and arts education backgrounds. The interviews with currently incarcerated artists provide insight to those who are presently engaged in arts practice, either within the art program I run, in another art program, or on their own. Some of them also have experience in multiple arts programs, in prisons throughout the state. The interviews with formerly incarcerated artists and the volunteers or paid workers who lead these programs allow me to access their personal experiences working inside the prison, subject to the constraints of such a life. It gives me both an “insider” (from the inmates themselves) perspective and a semi-“outsider” (from the art program volunteers and leaders) perspective. The formerly incarcerated and staff interviewees have worked in prisons across the state; some have experience at the

prison at which I am a participant observer, but most have worked elsewhere. This allows for comparison amongst arts programs in different facilities. I then proceed to report my findings from these interviews, noting several themes in how both the artists and the facilitators talk about prison art masculinities. I conclude by suggesting how these findings can be extrapolated to other “hypermasculine” environments and contexts, and how such knowledge can help us reduce masculine imperatives within additional organizations.

Multiple studies have noted the positive benefits of prison art programs (Brewster 1983, 2010; CDC 1987). Such programs reduce institutional violence and chances of recidivism. My study adds an important mechanism for why this is the case: these programs reduce the imperative of hypermasculinity for inmate participants. As Ely and Meyerson (2010) acknowledge, not all stereotypically masculine traits are negative; however, feeling the need to prove one’s masculinity can lead to negative consequences.

The findings of this paper suggest that it indeed would be beneficial for prisons to once again regularly institute art programs, and that programs such as these would reduce violence and competitiveness. Providing an alternate primary identity for individuals within particular contexts gives them a new focus, a new way to reestablish themselves in a pecking order. This paper suggests that such programs will help in both reducing the negative aspects of hypermasculinity and overcoming racial barriers.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### *Doing and Undoing Gender*

The “doing” of gender is at the heart of this examination. Gender is embodied in individuals. Scholars of gender recognize how gender inequality is maintained on individual, interactional, and institutional levels (Risman 2004). We must consider our genders as constantly being performed, in even subconscious actions (West and Zimmerman 1987). People do gender as part of their “presentations of self” (Goffman 1959). Using dramaturgical analysis, Goffman argued that people have both a “front stage,” or more public, conscious performance, and a “back stage,” or a more private, unconscious display. A practice that can be conscious, or not, is art-making. Individuals do realize that their art work can be reflective upon them, and therefore may consciously consider what potential audiences may think about them as artists.

At the same time as gender is constantly “done,” it can also be “undone” (Deutsch 2009; Risman 2009; Connell 2009). Everyday behavior can indeed change the gender system that we currently hold as “natural” in our society. An important example is in Ely and Meyerson’s (2010) study of oil rigs; when management puts an emphasis on reducing risk taking and increasing safety, men find a new focus – they shift away from performances of bravado and hypermasculinity and focus on this new goal. They argue that in so doing, gender is “undone” in this hypermasculine space.

### *Masculinities*

Much of the work on gender in sociology has focused on the examination of the differences between men and women, as segregated groups, and how these perceived differences lead to inequality. While it is essential to recognize that women as a group have historically been subordinated to men, there is also much difference within the genders (as noted by Kimmel 1994; Connell 2005 [1995]; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Schilt 2006; Messner 2007). The normative cultural ideal for men is termed by scholars “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 1987,

2000, 2005 [1995]; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). This concept embodies the traits of physical strength, financial success, authority and prestige, and marriage/fatherhood. It is opposed to, and subordinates, femininity. Individual men do not necessarily adhere to all of these tenets, as hegemonic masculinity is a social construct, an ideal-type. However, this cultural norm is pervasive in our society. There is the recognition among scholars today that there exist multiple masculinities, some of which are subordinated to hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

When gender transgression does take place and is studied, scholars find that those with traits most resembling hegemonic masculinity tend to police the behavior of others (McGuffey and Rich 1999). This gender policing happens both via codification through law and by the local community (both by men and women) and has a long history (Heidenreich 2011).

Hegemonic masculinity is tied to heterosexuality (Kimmel 1994). Pascoe (2012) talks about the “specter of the fag,” the notion that heterosexual men and boys use epithets such as “fag” or “gay” against other heterosexual men and boys to police their masculinity (called compulsory heterosexuality). Homosexuality is identified as un-masculine. She illustrates this point by citing an example from the film *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, in which two men taunt each other while playing a video game: “‘You know how I know you’re gay? ... Because you macrame’d yourself a pair of jean shorts’” (Pascoe 2013: 7). Here we can see both the usage of homosexuality as an insult against “true manhood,” and also the notion that a type of art or craft can be gendered. Pascoe argues that they are policing masculinity, rather than homosexuality. Cutting others down and testing their masculinity allows the taunter to increase their own position on the hierarchy of masculinity. This policing of masculinity is heightened within the prison environment, where there is widespread homophobia.

### *Prison as a Gendered and Raced Organization*

Literature on prison masculinities has often focused on “hypermasculinity” (Rhodes 2001; Evans and Wallace 2008) or “dangerous masculinity” (Curtis 2011). Prisoners must appear to be “manly men,” with snitching, or telling on others, considered the worst offense (Toch 1998). The consequences of showing weakness can result in rape (Kupers 2001). Holmberg (2001) notes a “cult of muscularity,” where masculinity encompasses a certain physicality; here, regular exercise, rather than art creation, would seemingly lead to dominance. Holmberg also discusses the prison hierarchy as based around conviction; at the top of the hierarchy is violence committed against police, which seems to support this institutional hypermasculinity.

Many occupations are gendered, with the assumption that somehow men or women are uniquely suited to perform the required tasks (Padavic and Reskin 2002). Oftentimes work itself is identified as masculine, which can be seen in the “separate spheres” ideology and in the notion of the “ideal worker” that have historically pervaded our society.

The prison is also an organization considered to be masculine, as it is viewed as a place of violence and crime (Newburn and Stanko 1994; Collier 1998; Sabo et al 2001). The majority of prisoners in the United States are also male. Men are in prison at a rate 14 times that of women (Carson and Sabol 2012). For this reason, as Rhodes (2001) realizes in her review of anthropological and sociological research regarding prisons, there has historically existed an unquestioned assumption of prisons as being masculine: “This suggests that ‘rather than looking at men as prisoners we might look at prisoners as men’ (Sim 1994, p. 101; cf. Howe 1994, Naffine 1996). Such a perspective, so far barely visible in the expanse of prison literature, opens up questions of the prisons’ various displays of masculine power, men as victims of violence in prison, the influence of gendered popular representations of crime and prisons, and the



exploration of unconscious gender assumptions in criminology and penology (Naffine 1996, Sim 1994)” (2001: 74). Prisons in the U.S. are also sex-segregated, meaning that men who are in prison often have very little contact with women. This then leads to a show of “hyper” masculinity, in which the machismo present in the outside world is heightened and various symbols take on new meaning.

A few recent studies have addressed issues of gender within prisons, but none have questioned how masculinity is negotiated and sometimes successfully deconstructed. The concept of the male prison as a hypermasculine environment has been discussed by a number of researchers<sup>3</sup>. In her study of male inmates participating in fathering programs, Curtis (2011) describes the existence of a pervasive, gendered understanding of prisoners entrenched within the prison structure which she terms “dangerous masculinity.” This means that male inmates are viewed as violent, hypersexual, predatory, and uninterested in or disconnected from their families. This dangerous masculinity is essential to the institutional logic regarding the organization of prison life, allowing the category of “prisoner” to become more salient than the category of “race.”

Levit (2001) describes the reinforcement of masculinity through various legal institutions, in which men’s aggressiveness is assumed; as Heidenreich (2011) describes, the penitentiary has a history of encouraging conformity to gender norms, going so far as to incorporate sewing and knitting as part of the program for women offenders. This extreme situation provides the

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<sup>3</sup> Comfort (2003) has also written on the experience of women in the waiting room at San Quentin. She finds that the women are subjected to what she calls a “second prisonization,” in that they are “subjected to the masculinity (and masculinizing) authority of the prison” (Wacquant 2002: 390). This is very useful in setting the scene of the prison as itself a masculine institution, but does not analyze the transgression of gender boundaries within the prison itself. The acknowledgement that prison inmates have “loved ones,” however, is a very important point, as it allows for some humanizing aspects of the traditional conceptualization of the “criminal” to peer through.

backdrop for Holmberg's (2001) analysis of how the homosocial environment affects the hierarchy of power within the prison—he notes that exercise becomes central to inmates to deal with the “subordinating sexual order” (83). The sports situation is an interesting one because it creates a quandary for prison staff—participation in sports can make inmates more compliant (and enforces gender norms), but also provides inmates with a sense of freedom and self-expression (Sabo 2001). And the sexual hierarchy means that objects become imbued with far more meaning within a prison than they may outside of it, as they can symbolize ownership and power relations (Holmberg 2001).

### *Racialized Masculinities*

There is a racial element to this as well, recognizing the intersection of gender and race. Pitt and Sanders (2010) argue that hypermasculinity encompasses marginalized masculinities, while hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987, 2000, 2005 [1995]; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Kimmel 1994) is the dominant white masculinity. In fact, the organization of the prison itself segregates by race, as Jurgen and all of my respondents explained to me (see page 3).

Evans and Wallace (2008) analyze the narratives about masculinity used by nine men in a London prison. They found three distinct groups: one which was fully accepting of the ideal of hegemonic masculinity; another including those who had previously internalized hegemonic masculinity but had been able to reevaluate their own masculinity and had therefore adopted a more “balanced” view of their masculinity; and a third composed of “softer, gentler men” (498) who felt themselves to be outside hegemonic masculinity. They also noted that “[h]egemonic masculine identity appears to soften over time in many cases” (Evans and Wallace 2008: 497). They found that even those who do not accept the ideal of hegemonic masculinity do still wholeheartedly consider a man's job to be the provider. However, the task of defining

hegemonic masculinity itself is complicated; hegemonic masculinity encompasses both positive and negative traits, is not a fixed concept, and does not deal solely with a unitary subject (Messerschmidt 2001; Sabo 2001; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

If gender expression is indeed so highly scrutinized within prison, then why can men seemingly disobey this rigid guideline when they create art? This transgression is especially interesting, because “femininity” is often equated with “weakness.” It is possible that the prison environment simply has different “rules” regarding what is masculine and what is feminine. Because a total institution is designed to strip an inmate of his or her identity, the inmates may have developed a new system in which behaviors inside of prison are perceived differently than they are on the outside merely in order to maintain some kind of identity. The lack of an “other” as a constant reference point may make the notion of “women’s work” lose some of its novelty; this lack of the “gaze” by women may provide the freedom necessary to act in whatever manner deemed necessary. This might be similar to the ability of men to have sexual relations with other men in prison without taking on a “homosexual” identity. However, the visible absence of the “opposite” gender may make men hypersensitive, in effect creating gradations in which very small gender-transgressing actions become more taboo than they would in a world with men and women. This then makes art an especially interesting case.

### *Prison Arts Programs*

The majority of research on prison arts programs focus on the products created (Kornfeld 1997; Bliss et al 2009; Meadows 2010). California used to have the statewide Arts-in-Corrections program, until it was de-funded in 2003 and completely dismantled by 2010. The program provided for an Artist Facilitator in each institution, who was paid a salary to oversee the entire program. This Facilitator was a trained artist, and the programs centered on fine arts.

Multiple studies have noted the benefits of such prison arts programs. They reduce institutional violence, reduce recidivism, increase prison safety (Brewster 1983, 2010; CDC 1987) and can also provide therapeutic benefits (Liebmann 1994).

There are books that detail the products created within prison art programs (Kornfeld 1997; Meadows 2010) and inmate economies (Kalinich 1980). However, no studies exist regarding how gender is performed within prison art programs. This is the aim of my study. Any such analysis relies heavily on the literature within the sociology of gender, specifically on how gender is “done” and how masculinities are performed within hypermasculine environments.

## **Methodology**

For my study, I used both participant observation in a prison arts program and interviews with participants of prison arts programs (see Table 1). Because California de-funded its Arts-in-Corrections program in 2010, I had to find a prison arts program to do this research. I have spent over 250 hours in 2014 with the art program, which began with 20 inmate-artists in a collaborative mural project and then continued with two groups of 16 incarcerated artists in a drawing, painting, and sculpting class. I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews (1.5 to 3 hours) with currently and formerly incarcerated artists and volunteers in prison art programs. I completed a total of 52 interviews (31 with currently incarcerated artists, 8 with formerly incarcerated artists, and 13 with prison art program volunteers and staff members). These interviews were conducted in 2013 and 2014. All of these individuals worked or were incarcerated in California prisons; all of the former inmates were incarcerated in state-run facilities from a wide range of security levels, but one of the program workers has worked in both state and federal institutions. They engaged in a variety of programs (some state-funded,

some volunteer-led), such as painting and drawing (acrylics, watercolor, pencil), bookbinding, block printing, music, etc. Many had been involved for years.

The currently incarcerated men had sentences ranging from a few years to Life Without the Possibility of Parole (known as LWOP). The formerly incarcerated men had spent from 5 to 21 years (an average 10 years among the four of them) as participants, and the prison art program workers had spent 1 to 25 years (an average of 15 years among the six of them) as volunteers or paid staff members, in various prison art programs. The majority of these individuals had spent time in multiple prisons. Therefore, they could speak to not only what they saw as their own work as artists, but also to the experiences of the other members of their classes. I spoke with each of the respondents about their own art practices, their beliefs about prison masculinities, and their experiences specifically within the prison art studio as it compared to their other prison experiences. Each of my respondents has been given a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality.

*Table 1: Characteristics of Incarcerated Respondents*

<b>Data Source</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years Served</b>
<i><b>Ethnography with art program participants</b></i>	56	17.86% Black 46.43% White 28.57% Latino 7.14% Asian/Pacific Islander 0% Native American	26.79% >50 46.43% 30-50 26.79% <30	TBD
<i><b>Interviews with currently incarcerated artists</b></i>	31 (25 are also art program participants)	22.58% Black 38.71% White 29.03% Latino 6.45% Asian/Pacific Islander 3.23% Native American	19.35% >50 58.06% 30-50 22.58% <30	TBD
<i><b>Interviews with formerly incarcerated artists</b></i>	8	0% Black 25% White 50% Latino 12.5% Asian/Pacific Islander	37.5% >50 62.5% 30-50 0% <30	TBD

		12.5% Native American		
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The majority of the art program staff were involved in this work for decades, so they had the ability to observe multiple cohorts of artists, and to see artists grow over time (see Table 2). Many of them also worked in multiple prisons, providing them with an additional vantage point in order to speak to what they witnessed.

*Table 2: Characteristics of Art Program Staff Respondents*

<b>Number of Respondents</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years Worked</b>
13	53.85% women 46.15% men	15.38% Black 76.92% White 0% Latino 7.69% Asian/Pacific Islander 0% Native American	46.15% >50 53.85% 30-50 0% <30	69.23% >10 15.38% 5-10 15.38% <5

Of course, there are limitations to my sample. I had to fill multiple roles in the prison art program, including director, facilitator, and researcher. The currently incarcerated artists who are in my program may feel the need to speak highly about the program. The formerly incarcerated men are reflecting back upon their time in prison, which may have been traumatic for them, and which they may not wish to talk about. However, the men in my sample often appeared very excited to talk about their work, which they saw as a symbol of their progress and their inherent goodness, despite what other members of society might think. Many of the men shared their artwork with me as well, and talked me through their process. The art program workers and volunteers are also often reflecting back upon their previous experiences, which they may not remember in their entirety. They also have to rely on assumptions, or what they talk about with

inmates or overhear, but many did feel free to say they could not speak to a particular question if they did not feel confident about understanding a prison situation entirely.

## **Findings**

The art studio has become a “safe space,” as much as a space within a prison can be “safe.” This can be seen in the participant observation and interviews I have conducted, along with numerous other accounts of prison art, music, and theater programs. I will discuss both the implications of this in terms of gender and also of race.

### ***Undoing Gender in the Art Studio***

The men report both the ability to express gender in a multitude of ways, including those they might consider “feminine” on the outside (and in the yard), and to interact across races. These behaviors are not allowed outside of this space, and the men have a silent understanding of this – their playful joking in the art studio immediately disappears once they step outside of the room. Below I discuss each of the themes that recurred in my interviews. All of my respondents reported that individuals were “more free” to express emotion within the confines of the art studio as compared to the other areas of the prisons. However, there were two general types of explanations that individuals provided to explain this phenomenon. I then proceed to discuss the findings regarding race and sexuality that came up during the interviews as well.

### ***The Art Studio as Safe Space***

Overall, I find that the art studio is deemed a “safe space,” where both artistic and personal experimentation can occur. This is contrasted with the yard, which is seen as the public prison space. The art studio is the private. In an interview, currently incarcerated artist Jose explained to me that he had actually tried to do one of our class exercises while he was hanging

out in the dayroom, where inmates are able to spend time outside of their cells: “I tried to do the still lifes in the dayroom, but I can’t. I can’t do it outside of the program... It’s too crazy in there. Everyone wants to know what I’m doing.” This was corroborated by a discussion we had during the art program one night. Rodel spoke up, explaining, “This is the comfort zone here. We come here every week. The dayroom is not like that.” Kevin added, “In the dayroom there are a lot of personalities and people are always standing over your shoulder, making you feel uncomfortable. Here it’s more relaxed; you can relax and have a good time.” This has been found in other art programs as well. As Linda, a program staff member for 25 years who had spent time in prisons throughout California state prisons as well as national federal institutions, told me, “The art studio is a refuge, a kind of sanctuary, from the outside, the rest of the prison. You can relax a bit more in the art studio, do something wacky, something unconventional. It’s a collegial environment... it’s all about the culture.”

The art studio goes beyond art creation itself; it’s about the space itself, that allows people to let down their guard much more so than they can in other areas of the prison. As Fernando, a formerly incarcerated man, explained: “You can create art anywhere. The art program is something else.” The studio takes that ability to create art a step further.

Formerly incarcerated Jurgen compared the prison art studio to a high school art class he took. He had been enrolled in the beginner class, but the instructor told him he qualified for the advanced course. When he went over to the upper-level course, the teacher had a negative response: “I got kicked out. She said, ‘You’re not an artist.’ That’s the problem with those artsy people.” However, this did not deter him; he found the prison art studio to be relatively welcoming, and did identify as being involved in an artistic process.



This sentiment appears to extend across California prisons. In a southern Californian prison, art program worker Dennis talked about the freedom of the art studio; when asked whether someone might be chided for coming in with a pink feather boa, he responded that no one would even raise an eyebrow. In a northern California prison, individuals regularly mentioned the jovial vibe of the room; artists would joke around with each other, poke fun in a gentle way, or provide supportive commentary on works.

Respondents also expressed strong beliefs that there are few penalties for utilizing feminized iconography or media within the prison art studio, as compared to “on the yard.” As Sam, a formerly incarcerated man, says, “What happens [in the studio], stays in there... You can pretty much do whatever you want [in the studio], but not on the yard. People will say, ‘What are you doing?’ It’s all about where you do it and who you do it in front of.”

In the art program one night, we had the men do portraits of each other in pairs. This meant that they needed to sit still for ten minutes while another man drew them; then they would need to draw their partner for another ten minutes. We had a discussion about this during the following class meeting, originated by participant Jermaine, who said, “You don’t really see what someone looks like until you do a portrait of them. It’s like that saying, ‘You don’t know someone until you walk a mile in their shoes, you know?’ And, and I’m secure enough in my masculinity to say this, you can see the beauty of another human being.” This comment prompted Andrew, who said, “In prison, eye contact is a challenge. It wasn’t like that for me out there [outside prison] – I used to look people in the eye. Here it didn’t work out so great. It’s who is going to break first.” Bringing up the fact that the art studio space is much safer than the yard, Eddie said, “it didn’t mean anything for me to do it [stare at another man] in here, so it was no problem. If I was out there [pointed out the door, to the yard], it would be a big problem.”

Many of the also volunteers mentioned art creation itself as being inherently personal, and therefore providing the ability for individuals to be more free in their self-expression. In fact, the more you explore with your art, and move away from what some would call “obvious” or “standard,” the more the veteran inmate artists (and the free artists) respect you. Paul, a long-time prison art photographer, told me, “Fine arts needs a part of the artist. There’s a lot of growth that happens.” Lou, who has witnessed art programs in prisons across all of California, said, “There is absolute respect for those willing to be personal.” Anna, another long-term prison art program staff member, said, “They’re vulnerable as artists. Artists are revealing something personal and special to themselves – it’s more sensitive and emotional.” Because art pushes individuals to look deep within themselves, this becomes one of the criteria for becoming a “true artist” and being at the top of the hierarchy within the art studio. This type of emotion, honesty, and exploration is in fact often not rewarded in hypermasculinity; however, within the art studio, it is viewed as necessary for fine arts.

This is not to say that the men did not enact any sort of hypermasculine behavior. Just as Pascoe (2012) found, the men sometimes “jokingly” called each other gay, or, as staff member Linda put it, “They are constantly laughing about being ‘in the closet’ when they go to get materials out of our supply closet.” Currently incarcerated Jose said to me in our interview, “I wouldn’t take a dance class because the guys would think I was being girly.” He went on to explain that he believes the dance class would attract a lot of homosexual inmates and would develop a reputation. However, again as Pascoe found, the respondents do not actually support bigoted ideas on a larger level. The men in my sample went one step further than the teenagers Pascoe studied though. Jurgen told me there were multiple men who were openly gay and transgendered individuals who regularly participated in the program, and that this was not seen

as a “big deal” by any means. The men in the art studio practiced acceptance within the space, engaging on a personal, individual level, rather than simply in the abstract and hypothetical.

While the artists and volunteers regularly discussed the openness of the studio space, there were three themes that some of them drew upon to justify or “explain away” what might be perceived as gender-transgressive behavior: 1) “the piece leads,” 2) “he’s just skilled like that,” and 3) “it’s not for me.”

### *Listening to the Piece*

Some of the decisions are portrayed as actually being out of the artists’ hands. Mateo, a currently incarcerated artist, told me, “I feel so much peace working on drawings. I am so addicted... It’s like something comes from nowhere... I can express the moment.” During our art program, Mateo has often seemingly gotten lost in his work – he has been the last person working on many occasions. He explains, “I can’t help it!” Sam, one of the formerly incarcerated artists, told me, “You’ve gotta listen to the piece, listen to the canvases... it can be weeks or months. Something will come to mind – it can be anything or it can be several things... The piece chooses me to represent it.” John, another formerly incarcerated artist, said, “Art is doing more than being something to sell... It’s not about me. I want to help other people appreciate it... It’s less about money and more art for art’s sake.”

### *It’s About Skill*

Sam said, “There are a lot of artists within prison, but if you’re really skilled, you will stand out.” Tom, another former inmate-artist, said, “What you’re allowed to do really depends on how good you are.” Jurgen, a man who was sentenced to seven years, talked about the distrust he faced when he first joined the program. Some of the veterans of the program were lifers, and saw him as not as much of an artist originally because he specialized in block printing, rather

than painting. He told me that in fact he stayed away from the painting class because it had more of a competitive feeling. In the block printing class, he said he was easily able to prove to the older guys that he had what it took to be a true member of the program; he regularly produced beautiful linocuts that brought in a lot of money for the program, which he explained really felt good to him. One of the things that most helped Jurgen was that he was good friends with an individual who had been a long-time member of the arts program; this friend really encouraged Jurgen to get involved, and helped ease his way into the class.

Even Christina, a less seasoned art program volunteer, recognized how strong artistic skills allowed individual artists to act how they wish: “There is a hierarchy in the studio, based on skill level. There is some teasing, mostly about being gay or liking someone, but it’s a really communal, friendly, and open environment.”

#### *It’s For Someone Else*

Currently incarcerated Eddie explained to me that he most liked making art for others: “I usually like to surprise people... If I just hand it to them, they say ‘you did a really good job’ and that makes me feel really good. It makes me want to do more.” Eddie has put this practice many times. Not only has he donated many works of art to the program (to display and sell for fundraising), Eddie has brought in art he is creating for his friends and family. During class one evening, Eddie pulled out a portrait he was working on of one of his close friends; he regularly creates pieces for her. Ron, one of Eddie’s friends, told me, “I tried to explain to Eddie that she is his muse.” Eddie responded, “She has always been there for me. I like to make her smile.”

Bobby, another current prisoner, said in his interview, “My wife and daughter are my biggest fans. I love the ‘oohs’ and ‘ahs’ I get from her. It’s the approval I had been wanting.” Tom, a formerly incarcerated artist, agreed, saying, “I want to paint for that person, to make other

people happy. I don't like painting for myself, but rather for the love of art." Tom continued, "If you teach someone else, it becomes a commodity. Then it's no longer feminine. Capitalism reigns." Both Jurgen, another artist, and Linda, a program staff member, said that inmates would regularly draw pictures of "girly" things, such as fairies, flowers, and cats, but that people would say they were for their wives, girlfriends, mothers, daughters, nieces, etc. As Jurgen said, "You paint something that the other person likes. It's nice to be able to give a gift."

However, ultimately, whatever one created would be accepted; perhaps the individual might feel the necessity to justify the particular piece, if he felt like it crossed too far into feminine territory, but he was still able to create what he wanted, without repercussions of any kind. And, in fact, he might even be rewarded for it, for stepping outside of his comfort zone and exploring emotion (as indicative of an "artist"), for demonstrating impressive skill or sharing a new technique, or for showing care for the recipient of the piece.

### ***Race and Gender***

Tom, a former prisoner who specializes in painting pastoral scenes, says, "What is 'feminine' depends on who makes it. For example, [American] Indians [making jewelry] aren't seen as feminine, but rather spiritual." Here we can see that Tom recognizes how race and ethnicity change understandings of masculinities.

Multiple interviewees also noted that whites in particular have more freedom to express masculinities other than hypermasculinity. John, a white inmate who was incarcerated for decades, recognized his own privilege by saying, "You have a lot more freedom if you are white and older." There does seem to be a respect for elders that is a part of the prison life, which was also noted by Linda, one of the program staff members. *Prison Terminal: The Last Days of Private Jack Hall* (Barens 2013) is a recent documentary film that delves into prison hospices, in

which elderly prisoners are taken care of by younger inmates, who report enjoying their jobs. Part of this respect may also be that, within the prison hierarchy, those with longer sentences tend to be towards the top – many of these older men likely committed their crimes when they were much younger (Chettiar, Bunting, and Schotter 2012), and will be in the prison until their deaths. They are also the “old hands,” those who know the inner workings of the prison, and can serve as mentors for the younger men. Sam told me, “There’s no blanket rule about it [masculinity and homosexuality]... it all depends on race. There are different by-laws in each section...” Currently incarcerated Carl concurred: “For Blacks, respect is important, you know ‘excuse me.’ You better be polite. Southsiders, they do their own thing. Whites too.”

Jurgen followed up on this same point. When I asked him how masculinity and manhood are defined within prison, the first thing he told me was that it’s about how many tattoos you have, how big your muscles are, and how long and how many times you’ve been in prison. Then he stopped and said, “Well, it varies among races. For African Americans, it’s manly to have a baby mama. They’re really proud to be pimps. I had a hard time relating, because I thought that would be embarrassing. Whites are more concerned about child molesters and rapists. They check paperwork.”

Gangs run much of the daily life within prison. California has a policy of segregating prisoners by race, which is defined along gang lines: Blacks (Black Guerrilla Family, Crips, Bloods), Whites (Neo-Nazis, Nazi Lowriders, Aryan Brotherhood), Southern Hispanics (Sureños, Mexican Mafia), Northern Hispanics (Nortenos, Nuestra Familia), and Other. This is by no means an accurate representation of races and ethnicities within California prisons, but it does show how integral race is to daily life. Single races can be placed on lockdowns. Prison officials often justify this practice by saying that it reduces gang and racial violence, and that

“they would self-segregate anyways,” but others criticize this practice for continuing racial segregation and heightening racial tensions (Kaye 2006).

In my ethnography, I saw that the participants would work together across racial lines. Linda, the art program staff member for the past quarter century, told me that race still does come into play in the art studio, but in a very different way than on the yard: “Thinking about race is part of the process inmates go through in exploring their identities and cultures. It’s this personal experience about connecting with where you come from and then bringing it to the studio with a diverse group of people. It fosters a cultural understanding, and a lot of openness. It’s a safe space.” She went on to say that the studio is by no means “paradise” though, pointing out a recent incident she witnessed. At a prison in northern California, there was a slight racial confrontation, in which an individual had been upset by a racially-charged comment that another inmate made. The following week they had a discussion about it; a white inmate brought up the point that people wanted to be able to joke around and have a light-hearted atmosphere within the studio, while an African American inmate explained that he wanted to feel comfortable in the space and felt like he should be able to speak up if he felt uncomfortable. They were able to get past the comment and ended up shaking hands. Linda talked about this as the inmates “speaking up for the culture” of the studio. Here the inmates are actively negotiating and structuring this particular space of the art studio, of which they feel protective. They are constructing the atmosphere, making it one that is both jovial and one in which serious issues can be discussed, which is indeed a delicate balance. The fact that these inmates can find a space in which to discuss such charged events is very special, however, and Linda attributed this ultimately to their “policing within participants to preserve the sanctuary.” She also recounted her experience working with multiple overt members of white supremacist gangs; however, they did not bring

any such activity in to the studio, avoiding the usage of any racist imagery in their pieces and regularly interacting with artists of other races. Jurgen reiterated this; he referred to some white supremacist gang members who were in his art class as well, who actually joked about how “things would be different outside the [art studio] door.”

Lou, one of the program volunteers for multiple decades, told me about two inmates who had been interested in playing guitar and learning how to make them. One of the men, who was white, ended up learning first, and invited the other man, who was Hispanic, to learn; Lou called this “bridging an unbridgeable gap.”

My findings about race are echoed by the experiences of others. In an interview, Jack Heller detailed the following experience:

“In 2011 the Shakespeare Behind Bars men in Kentucky were working on *Romeo and Juliet*. One of the men arrived at my summer seminar announcing that he had already memorized all of the lines and that he was going to play Juliet, end of discussion. As far as the other men were concerned, he could have the role. Not that the men are reluctant to take on female roles, but Juliet is more romantic and ‘girly’ than most of Shakespeare’s female roles. I later learned that this inmate had been a white supremacist, with a number of neo-Nazi tattoos, serving a life sentence for murder. When I returned to the prison with a group of Huntington University students, I asked him why he had chosen the role of Juliet. He said that he had been raised in and lived in an environment of hatred, and now he wanted to learn what love is. He wanted Juliet to be his mentor for love. He said this choking back his emotion. When I saw the men perform *Romeo and Juliet*, the revelation came when I saw how many scenes Juliet has with Friar Laurence, who was performed by an African American man. I think the former supremacist’s performance of Juliet working collaboratively with Friar Laurence has helped him to come to terms with and move beyond the racist hatred of his past” (Starbuck 2013).

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

This analysis shows that there are more masculinities being performed in prison than is often assumed in the scholarly literature. The “doing” of masculinity in prison very much depends upon the sub-context, just as it does in oil rigs (Ely and Meyerson 2010). When the men have a new focus, which in our case is the protection of their prized art program (and which



allows them to fill up some of the copious amount of time they have in prison), they can overlook slight, and sometimes even more serious, transgressions of gender norms. This is not to say that men no longer care about masculinity at all – there is still a loose hierarchy in the prison art studio, based upon skill, and there is slightly unequal access to resources based upon this. But the notion that bravado and machismo will get you ahead does not hold sway in the art studio like it does on the yard; this is a reconstruction (and deconstruction, or “undoing”) of gender norms. No longer are men required to be violent to prove themselves; rather, their dedication to the program is of the utmost importance. The men are far more concerned about protecting their ability to relax in a safe environment than they are about upholding a hypermasculine image, and will therefore break the “code” that rules the prison yard if they are in the confines of the art studio.

Part of what makes the space of the art studio so special is that art is already seen as being personal; being able to create art is already a step toward vulnerability. This was pointed out by the newer art instructor, who noted that art requires at least some level of vulnerability of the artist.

Overall, the men are more willing to discuss and overcome issues of race than they are issues of sexuality; my findings corroborate those of Pascoe (2012), who argues that usages of derogatory terms regarding non-heterosexual sexualities is really a demonstration of compulsive heterosexuality. This means that heterosexuality is assumed to be a proxy for masculinity, which is indeed of prime importance in prisons.

### *Reducing Issues within Prisons*

Knowing that art programs can have this positive effect can potentially help to reduce the negative aspects of hypermasculinity within the prison itself, which leads to institutional

violence, gang activity, and further crime (Newburn and Stanko 1994; Collier 1998; Sabo et al 2001). Small changes within the prison itself could potentially vastly reduce institutional issues, and save taxpayers money. It could also improve the safety of the prison; unfortunately, California's prisons have a reputation as violent places. It might also be able to reduce the amount of solitary confinement that is currently used (Gibbons and Katzenbach 2006). Art therapy has noted benefits for confined individuals (Liebmann 1994).

By providing the men an alternate emphasis, in this particular case art, they can focus on "getting the job done" by whatever means necessary, rather than maintaining a particular hypermasculine image, which they might need to do in a gang subculture. This also explains the shift away from focusing on race, which is all-important within the public prison sphere. Prison politics are run by gangs, but has no bearing whatsoever in the hierarchy in the art studio.

Many of the interviewees emphasize the process of art creation, or letting the piece lead, or having to complete it in a particular way for the customer, which does allow the inmate to give up some agency. Regardless of how the men explained it though, they were very much allowed to *do* it no matter what. This shows that this gendered act takes on a sacrosanct character, a sort of holiness. If individuals can easily justify non-gender-normative acts, then they can very easily institute a new norm.

### *Protecting the Program*

A common theme discussed by the program participants and interviewees was that men remained calm and worked together, despite perceived differences (and differences that indeed caused trouble on the yard) in order to protect the program. They were all very aware that the program could be shut down at any moment, even if what might appear to be the slightest issue arose. The reason they were so concerned about this is because the art studio created this safe

space for them, and the last thing they wanted to do was to be “on guard” 24 hours a day. For these men, the art studio was a “life raft,” as Jurgen called it.

Jurgen, the artist who had a relatively short sentence, explained to me why the white supremacist gang members were friendly to individuals of other races within the confines of the art studio, but openly acknowledged that they might act differently outside of this safe space: “You’re in a different mode within the art studio. When you step inside, it’s like a sanctuary, or a church. Otherwise they’re not going to be welcome. They joke about it, ‘It’s going to be different out there.’ It’s about survival. Their livelihood is in jeopardy too.” Jurgen explained to me that a lot of the racial politics are not actually about racism; rather, various races and gangs have various business ventures within the facility, and they are protecting their ability to make money.

#### *From the Prison to Other Organizations*

Realizing spaces in which individuals can drop the gender accountability and imperative in these extreme cases (Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep 2009) can help men to refrain from acting in ways that are dangerous to themselves and others. This is also found by Acker (2006) who notes that workplaces can be the sites of changes for what she terms “inequality regimes,” considering how inequalities tend to persist in organizations.

Ely and Meyerson (2010) studied oil rigs, realizing that men felt freed from exhibiting stereotypically masculine behavior when the organizational context supported safety and effectiveness. Proving “manliness” no longer became a primary concern for the men on these oil rigs. My findings are very similar, replacing the oil rig with the context of the art studio.

In contrast to prisons and oil rigs, which are all-male environments, there are also implications for mixed-gender sites. Reducing hypermasculine imperatives can increase safety overall by minimizing destructive behavior and harassment. For Vandello et al (2013), such

masculine expectations create stigmatization of male workers who take advantage of flexible workplace opportunities by other men, thereby reducing the chances that men will utilize such policies. Berdahl and Moon (2013) show that men who defy gender stereotypes by providing a caregiving role for their children face increased harassment at work. Masculine imperatives are problematic for men in a wide variety of settings; limiting negative hypermasculine behavior could increase productivity and comfort for both men and women. Providing new ways to have individuals shift their focus within hypermasculine institutions can lead to positive benefits overall. It is especially useful that these programs do not explicitly set out to change men's notions of masculinity – such an explicit purpose might deter many of the men who would most benefit from such a program.

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