Resist With Care: The Complexity of Masculinity in Men's Prisons

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This paper investigates how incarcerated men in the United States utilize counter-hegemonic masculinities to resist the dehumanizing aspects of the carceral system as a whole. Literature on hegemonic masculinity, prison masculinity, and hybrid masculinity explore how dominant forms of masculinity shape behaviors and identities in different contexts. In this paper, 30 stories written by 27 incarcerated men for the Prison Journalism Project are analyzed using the content analysis method to identify themes of emotional expression, crossing racial barriers, acts of kindness, and animal companions. These narratives are contrasted with the dominant literature on hypermasculinity within prisons. The paper reveals that expressions of emotion, empathy, and generosity serve as forms of resistance against the prison system's modes of control. These findings challenge harmful and rigid perceptions of incarcerated men in both literature and public discourse by highlighting their own writings. Additionally, the findings suggest that the development of programs that promote and encourage counter-hegemonic masculinity can potentially improve the lives of incarcerated men and contribute to their rehabilitation.

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Introduction

"*Toughness is mandatory, brutality a virtue, as we resist — are forced to resist — the human urge for comfort*" [1]. – Cameron Terhune

What masculinity is expected in men's prisons? What masculinity is accepted in men's prisons? It is not a masculinity that manifests through portrayals of love and care, nor a masculinity that allows for tears and hugs. Outside of prison, men can perform masculinity by being tough and suppressing emotions, amassing wealth and showing off what money can buy, and providing for women and families. Inside, many of these outlets do not exist. Once incarcerated, an individual can no longer use material possessions, class, women, or families as signs that they are masculine; all they have is how they act and how they look. When left with only the power to control what emotions you show and how your body looks, the attention to emoting toughness through both is exacerbated. The norm of masculinity, then, becomes hypermasculinity. Discussions of this masculinity in men's prisons are extensive. Discussions of different types of masculinities that exist in men's prisons are not.

This paper will be looking at: *How does the subliminal employment of counter-hegemonic masculinity by incarcerated men resist the carceral system as a whole?* The goal of asking this question is, first, to understand prison masculinities that have been overlooked, and second, to analyze how the use of counter-hegemonic masculinities– those that are unexpected from incarcerated men by both their peers and the institutions that seek to control them– serve as a form of resistance to incarceration. This paper will detail accounts of typical hypermasculinity and explore how other forms operate alongside it. In existing literature, descriptions of non-hypermasculine performances are primarily limited to marginalized sub-populations, such as LGBTQ+ individuals, but are rarely discussed when it comes to the experiences of incarcerated men more generally.

The lack of safety, autonomy, medical resources, and care from prison staff reflects the structure of a system that, for over a century, has prioritized punishment over rehabilitation. The first section of this paper will include frameworks from the scholarly literatures on hegemonic masculinity, prison social norms and expectations, and emotional and hybrid masculinity. This is followed by an analysis of stories written by currently incarcerated men for the Prison Journalism Project, a non-profit organization that offers training to incarcerated writers and provides them with a platform to publish their work. These stories, though all connected to counter-hegemonic masculinity, are organized into subsections pertaining to staff reinforcement, puncturing the emotional veneer of masculinity, the complexity of caring and kindness, crossing racial barriers, and creatures that comfort.

This paper will argue that just as incarcerated men are not a monolith, neither are their performances of masculinity. Men resist the carceral system by employing types of masculinity that undermine the foundation of incarceration, which is control and dehumanization.

The following terminology will be used in this paper: *Hegemonic masculinity* refers to the dominant form of masculinity in a society, while *hypermasculinity* describes an exaggerated form of hegemonic masculinity. The term *carceral system* refers to institutions associated with punishment and control, including but not limited to prisons, jails, probation, and home confinement.

Masculinity Studies and Hegemonic Masculinity

Studies of women and femininity, which rose in quantity and prominence during second-wave feminism, led, in part, to the importance of studying masculinity. In the field of women's studies, it became increasingly apparent that in order to produce sociological works about women, men had to be studied too [2]. Though literature and history had been and continued to be dominated by male narratives, there had not yet been significant study about men as gendered selves [3]. The academic discipline of masculinity emerged in prominence during the late 1980s and early 1990s, which necessitated the creation of masculine-specific terms, constructs, and themes to describe the role of and relationships to masculinity in society [4].

Coined by R.W. Connell, hegemonic masculinity describes the "configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" [5, p.77]. Adding "hegemonic" in front of masculinity implies that there is a subset or quality of masculinity that is consciously or unconsciously utilized to ensure the subjugation of women. Masculinity is not hegemonic in itself, but rather in its relations to women and other masculinities [6]. Men benefit from hegemonic masculinity, making it especially difficult to overcome or transgress [6].

The term "hegemonic masculinity" was initially constructed to analyze a practice, not an expectation or identity [4]. This practice allows the persistence of patriarchal systems, norms, and customs. Within masculine culture, hegemonic masculinity is the ideal and most socially accepted masculinity situationally and institutionally [2]. Though hegemonic masculinity does not align with how most men identify their own traits and practices, it does influence and inform all masculinity performances due to its historical and subsistent dominance [7].

The existence of hegemonic masculinity cannot be maintained without other types of masculinities. Though hegemonic masculinity is definitely normative, only a minority of men can employ it, and those who cannot have their masculinities informed by what hegemonic masculinity is not [4]. Social positioning in structures of race, class, sexuality, and gender creates power differentials between men. Only those with access to hegemonic masculinity through social structures can receive the rewards from patriarchy and dominance, though masculinities are easily subject to change [2], [4].

Prison Masculinity

Crime in the United States is predominantly committed by men and boys, and in 2018, men made up 93 percent of incarcerated individuals in the United States [2], [8]. Due to the lack of privileges and the need to avoid danger and vulnerability, incarcerated men are forced to present a hypermasculine front that lacks emotion and hides weakness [9]. Expressions of love, kindness, affection, sadness, and care are deemed as weaknesses in prison, and are therefore rarely embraced, shared, or shown [10]. Hegemonic masculinity dominates society outside of prison and is only intensified and reinforced in the environment that has a focus on discipline and control [11], [12].

Though incarcerated men enter prison with their own type of masculinity and their positioning in society outside of prison, they are immediately confronted by a space that lacks all of what was prevalent in their lives prior to incarceration, whether that be family, meaningful relationships, work, community, or hobbies. The traditional resources for expressing hegemonic masculinity, like money, education, and relationships with women, are either non-existent or the social structure that positions certain individuals at the top of hierarchies are not organized in the same way as they are on the outside [11]. Faced with a new reality and entirely different environment, incarcerated men are forced to adapt quickly to the social rules and hierarchy of this society. In the short term, fear and sadness can be masked and partially relieved by exaggerated masculinity [10]. Prison masculinity, therefore, is a coping mechanism for men stripped of autonomy, family, privacy, affection, and meaningful work [10].

The persistence of hegemonic masculinity in prisons stems not only from incarcerated men to manage social status and safety, but also from the correctional employees who reinforce it. The significance of hypermasculinity among incarcerated men is evident in how correctional officers and wardens use masculinity as a tool for control, punishing inmates by designating jobs that are not deemed masculine and rewarding them with privileges such as outdoor time for physical exercise [13], [14]. The prevalence of exaggerated masculinity is so severe that activities that channel hypermasculinity into positive results are necessary to minimize aggression, dangerous altercations, and violence [10], [12].

New and Hybrid Masculinities?

Though hegemonic and hypermasculinity are by far the most utilized performances of masculinity in prisons, they are not the only type of masculinity present within the carceral system. As has been evident since the beginning of masculinity studies, new terms must be created when there are forms of masculinity that no longer fall under one label. One example of a new term is the concept of hybrid masculinities, which refers to types of masculinity that incorporate facets of subordinated masculinities and facets of femininities [15]. Adding a new construction of masculinity to the literature allows for research that does not cast the net of exaggerated masculinity onto all incarcerated individuals. Men in prison are not homogenous in their performances of masculinity, and it would be inappropriate to study masculinity in prison through the lens that it is all dangerous, unemotional, and unidimensional.

It is important to note that a massive limitation in the concept of hybrid masculinity is that it has mainly been studied and defined in relation to white, heterosexual men [16]. Due to this focus on men who are able to embrace masculinities that go against the norm without repercussions, it is not clear how men who do not have the same privileges employ hybrid masculinity. To expand the concept of hybrid masculinity to marginalized men, and in this case marginalized incarcerated men, Jamani Umamaheswar conducted a study with interviews that were meant to get at how men in prison view their masculinity and emotions. She finds that though these men feel that they must hide their traits and performances associated

with femininity to fit in with other incarcerated men, they believed that you must have emotional relationships to truly be "a man"—a view which would not typically fit into the definition of hegemonic or hypermasculine performances [13].

There are complex ways in which incarcerated men express their masculinity, and the performances that are not hypermasculine can equally inform the strategies that men use to adapt to and survive within the prison environment. Emotions cannot be suppressed all the time, as that would lead to constant violence and aggression, and does not allow for the forming of any relationships necessary to get through life in an environment that strips people of everything they had before entering the system [15]. Incarcerated men do not strictly conform to hegemonic masculinity but instead create variations to satisfy the need to be loving/loved and caring/cared for at least some of the time.

Method

This paper examines the role of counter-hegemonic masculinity in the everyday lives of men incarcerated in United States prisons, using writings produced within these institutions. While traditional sociological methods such as interviews, ethnographies, surveys, and case studies have been widely utilized in prison research, analyzing stories and opinions directly from incarcerated individuals offers a less common approach. To explore the narratives authored by incarcerated men, this study employs content analysis of 30 stories written by 27 men. Content analysis is a research method used to identify and evaluate the occurrence of words, themes, and/or concepts within qualitative data [17]. Unlike interviews, where the presence of an interviewer and selective interpretation of responses can influence outcomes, content analysis of these writings provides unmediated insights into the author's perspectives.

The Prison Journalism Project (PJP) was established in April of 2020 to provide journalism education to incarcerated people in an effort to make their experiences and opinions available to the outside world [18]. Their hope is that, through journalism, the writers for PJP can learn transferable skills, create meaningful change, and challenge "who speaks with authority about life in prison" [19]. Learning how to write effectively is extremely useful for incarcerated individuals as the majority do not have high school diplomas, and seventy percent read and write below a fourth-grade level, which only increases the difficulty of reentering society [20]. PJP hopes to increase transparency about the U.S. prison industry through those who know it best so that they have an opportunity to break stereotypes, shift the traditional narrative, and contribute directly to dialogue about criminal justice reform.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this paper is the number of stories analyzed. While 30 stories can provide valuable insights into life while incarcerated, they are not representative of the diverse experiences of incarcerated men. Vast differences in state versus federal prisons, variations across and within states, and distinctions among security levels make it challenging to generalize findings. Factors such as age, gender identity, sexuality, race, and religion can significantly affect the experiences of incarceration and influence how masculinity is expressed. Additionally, as a woman who has never been incarcerated, no amount of research would be enough to understand what it is like living in prison and how dynamics of masculinity and femininity truly play out.

Findings

The carceral system thrives when incarcerated men self-police. This self-policing relies on and is reinforced by hypermasculine performances, whether of emotional suppression, physical dominance, an individualist perspective, or an 'us versus them' mindset. When incarcerated men embody counter-hegemonic masculinity—expressing vulnerability, kindness and generosity, and community—they undermine and disrupt the self-policing that the system relies on for punishment, order, and control.

This section of the paper discusses how expressions of emotion, caring and kindness, crossing racial divides, and time spent with animals serve as forms of resistance. The analysis begins with three stories that feature examples of staff reinforcing a negative, hypermasculine atmosphere. The second section features five stories, there are eight in the third, six in the fourth, and eight in the fifth.

Staff Reinforcement

"*Why was I sent to prison again? Punishment? Justice? Rehabilitation? Or is it indoctrination into the same criminal belief system that got me here, reinforced over and over?*
But the prison keeps telling you that they are promoting positive change in my behavior" [21]. – David Jones

Placing people in positions of authority can promote aggression, objectification, and dehumanizing behavior [22]. Prison staff not only fail to deviate from this tendency, but are likely to exhibit these harmful behaviors to an even greater extent. In their jobs, they have power over individuals who are among the most excluded in society. The pervasive stigma around incarcerated men often amplifies the dehumanization they face, with the harsh exercise of power over them an accepted part of the system.

A tactic for control that was mentioned in quite a few stories are strip searches and cell searches. A common thread in these stories is humiliation. When correctional officers (COs) go cell by cell to search for contraband, at least at the institution that Frederick Dew is living in, they begin with strip searches. Afterwards, when you are left in just your t-shirt and boxers "the walk of shame ensues and the degradation commences" [23] as COs destroy the individual's cell under the pretext that there is something hidden. The men have to stand in a central location for up to three hours with no regard for taking medication or going to the restroom [23], [24]. Even if there is no contraband found, the COs leave the cells in complete disarray with belongings treated like "garbage," "your food opened, and containers taken away along with anything else the officers felt you should not have. It doesn't matter if it is an item you purchased from the facility's commissary or received in an approved package" [24]. Frederick says that this process and the feelings of violation that come from it can "lead to an environment of hostility and violence" [24]. It does not have to go this way. If prison staff and administration wanted to change the operation, or simply do it without cruelty, they could.

David Jones describes that the COs help create "the most toxic environment created by man" [21] which can, of course, do nothing to help rehabilitation. Directly contributing to the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity, the COs, in trying to demean the incarcerated men by poking at their masculinity, refer to them as the f-slur and "little princesses" [21]. Not only do they make homophobic and sexist remarks, but racist ones too. David describes

that the COs only feel comfortable speaking to the incarcerated men this way because the people above them are doing it too. He states that "this sentiment is so pervasive in the corrections officers' unspoken creed that any other sentiment would seem foreign" [21].

Puncturing the Emotional Veneer of Masculinity

"*..to hear someone cry out loud in prison is as rare as an eclipse or a leap year*" [25]. – Marcus "Wali" Henderson

As previous literature has demonstrated, the environment of men's prisons fosters hypermasculinity [10], [11], [12]. It does so because it was "built on injustice and violence, but not humanity" [25]. The writers of the stories used in this paper affirm this, as mentions of hostility, fear, anger, danger, and toxicity are overflowing in almost every story no matter the subject. Even so, emotion breaks through.

Crying is not a common occurrence in men's prisons. In agreement with the literature, the PJP authors say that crying is seen as a sign of weakness and can put an individual in danger. Though people do eventually cry, they do so in private to escape judgment. This does not mean that crying is never accepted though. When an individual finds out that someone's loved one has passed away, they are typically given space by the other men, with cellmates often leaving the cell for hours [25]. This space allows for an opportunity to cry without it being openly acknowledged, even though everyone is aware that it happened. So when someone cries publicly, responses are varied. There is shock, there is caring, and there is annoyance. After a young man publicly had a breakdown, Wali describes asking people who witnessed it how they felt about the occurrence. The common response was that the man was "soft," but Wali felt differently, expressing hope that the next "generation will continue to challenge the status quo, bringing a little humanity into the museum of false beliefs" [25].

In such a harsh and uncomfortable environment, it is especially difficult to mourn. Dennis Jefferson Jr.'s friend, Gerald, passed away when Covid-19 was devastating prisons. Gerald was the first person to offer the writer a seat in chow hall (where incarcerated people eat their meals), which was significant because it is a "hostile" environment, where the tables are segregated by race, among other characteristics [26]. Though actions like these might seem rather small, if the seats are reserved, or a table does not want you to sit with them, you have nowhere to sit. Dennis, in reflecting on Gerald's passing, is acutely aware of how much his friend meant to him and how much he hid this for the fear of appearing "soft, squishy, [and] emotional" [26]. He describes his discomfort and challenge in hiding his emotions, and attributes these feelings to

> The male role belief system, which pushes traits like stoicism, toughness, silence, and strength, tells us to be unemotional in our manhood. But I've found these traits self-destructive, limiting and disingenuous. These labels come with scripts and expectations, but they should come second to what's in the heart. These qualities have helped me in certain situations, but most have outlived their usefulness [26].

Many incarcerated men share similar experiences. Suppressing emotions has become so normalized in this environment that, when something deeply emotional occurs, individuals often struggle to react or cope effectively. The "mask" that conceals these emotions offers no benefit to their well-being. This is why, when faced with intense emotions, the ability to accept and understand them, as Wali and Dennis did, carries profound significance and strength.

Incarcerated men do not just puncture emotional veneers through crying about upsetting and tragic events. Being in prison deprives people of being allowed to openly feel joy too. When California began implementing free tablets that allowed for video calls, Walter Hart watched a man, who had been incarcerated for 12 years, find out that he would be able to see his grandma for the first time while in prison. It should not come as a surprise that people become hard and cold when they are put in a place that is allegedly for reform and rehabilitation, and some cannot even see or hear from their close family and friends for years. They are stripped of all the people and things that brought joy, love, care, and warmth, so toughness and hypermasculinity is all that they have left. When the man's grandmother answered the call "he had put up a valiant effort holding back his emotion, but within minutes tears began cascading down his face" [27].

When feelings of sadness and joy are barely accepted, physical touch is unheard of. While Biktor B was talking with a friend named Cuba, Cuba cracked a joke that made Biktor "laugh so hard that [he] impulsively gave him a slight hug, just for a second or two" [28]. Though, outside of prison, this would appear to be a completely normal and usual interaction, Cuba went silent. One of the biggest takeaways from these stories is that, in prison, all interactions and practices have to be relearned. Biktor feared that he was in danger or that Cuba was having a stroke until he said, "Biktor, I've been locked up for over 23 years, and this is the first time someone has ever hugged me" [28]. Biktor has hugged Cuba every time he has seen him since.

Crossing the Barriers of Racial Divides

"*These clippers ain't Black or White. They're just clippers, and if you got a problem with it, find somebody else to cut your hair*" [29]. – Walter Hart

Separations by race are especially prevalent in prisons for a variety of reasons, one of the most prominent being that an individual receives protection and support from the group of people they racially identify with. In some institutions, incarcerated people refer to these groupings by race as "cars." An example of which is the PISA car, which PJP defines as Latinos who are not affiliated with a gang, though different prisons have differing specifications [30]. Some are happy with the chosen car system as it brings a sense of belonging, but most are forced to deal with it because separating by race is how groupings in prison have always been created. Though segregation in prisons is technically optional, it was not always this way. In 1968, before the Supreme Court in *Lee v. Washington* ruled that segregation in prisons violates the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, all incarcerated individuals were formally separated by race [31]. California prisons, along with many others, only officially stopped 37 years later when the Court's ruling in *Johnson v. California* stated that racial segregation policies in prison must be strictly scrutinized [32]. It is not surprising then, that racial divides are cemented in prison culture.

In such an atmosphere, with a "take care of your own" mentality, what prevents racist violence? Though racism is

inescapable, "racist hate is spread evenly in California prisons in a way that may neutralize its violent charge," [33] so much so that in 26 years of incarceration, Kevin D. Sawyer has never witnessed someone being attacked because of racial animus. Kevin attributes this phenomenon to self-segregation, i.e., the cars. The key to the lack of racist violence is not fear or the toughness of the men one hates, but respect for each other. Joey LeBlanc is a self-described "former White supremacist" who learned to reject the behavior and beliefs he was taught that made him so hateful. Survival in prison is not dependent on who can be the most hypermasculine, but on learning to coexist. Kevin writes that even when an incarcerated man dons tattoos that are associated with the Nazi party, instead of fighting, you "read the tats, register the hate, know the man, give him space" [33].

When Walter Hart, the incarcerated barber for Black men, was tasked by a CO with helping an elderly White man, there was immediate confusion by him and those who witnessed the conversation. Gary, the 74 year old Walter was asked to assist, had just been beaten up because he smelled. He did not own soap, shower shoes, or deodorant, so could not shower. When receiving pushback from other men for agreeing to help, Walter responded that "these clippers ain't Black or White. They're just clippers, and if you got a problem with it, find somebody else to cut your hair" [29]. After giving Gary his own extra shower equipment so that he could get clean, Walter began cutting his hair. As he did, fellow incarcerated men began walking over and dropping off necessities for Gary on a table next to him. In the end, men of all different races, men who are believed to not help each other or care for each other, had gifted Gary clothing, soap, shoes, toiletries, food, and coffee, so much so that the table was overflowing. Items like these are not as easy to get inside of prison as they are outside. Men have to wait until their day to go to the commissary each week, every other week, or month, and then spend what little money they have (from family or friends on the outside or prison jobs that pay cents per hour) to purchase everyday necessities and anything else they can afford. The men who helped Gary, typically characterized as dangerous criminals that display only hypermasculine traits, gave up their goods for someone they had never met, someone who was not even "one of their own."

C.R. Addleman and Aaron M. Kinzer share similar sentiments. Aaron leads workout classes so that fellow incarcerated men can channel their energy into positive avenues and because bad health is prevalent in prisons stemming from the food and abhorrent healthcare. He finds that in the groups of men he works out with "topics of conversation range from amino acids to Freud, from water intake to war, from tendinitis to Tesla," while "brothers of all stripes, colors and creeds bond over bench presses" [34]. And when C.R. finds true friendship, he tells his friend that "no matter what the unwritten prison laws of the division of races says, all BS aside, you'll always be one of the few, if not the only, I consider my friend" [35]. These men resist the system through collectivity, respect, and trust in each other. They see humanity and complexity, instead of what prison staff and many outsiders see. To each other, even with pervasive levels of racism, they are more than inmates and more than criminals.

The Complexity of Caring and Kindness

"*Over time, these men have become my prison family. I almost hate to place the word "prison" in front of "family," because the relationships I have built are genuinely familial, regardless of environment or circumstance*" [36]. – Preston J.

In writing stories about caring and showing kindness towards each other, these authors present a narrative that resists the carceral system's justification for its punitive structures. When entering prison, an individual is stripped of everything they had and knew prior to entry. One of the biggest of these losses, according to Shon Pernice, is a sense of dignity. He says that

> When people are treated like a piece of trash every day for years, they internalize it. They begin to feel that they aren't worthy of love, support or time. If offenders are programmed to feel this way, then recidivism and other failures in rehabilitation and re-entry should come as no surprise [37].

This does not mean that no one is trying to combat feelings of worthlessness and the loss of respect and dignity, though it is certainly not the system doing so. Shon began a clothing donation program for newly released veterans, John L. Orr gave housewarming gifts to recently incarcerated men, Andrew Suh dropped everything to take care of an ailing 75-year-old man, and Lawrence May filled Christmas stockings for all the men in his building. These men are not the exception, combating hypermasculinity through kindness, they are just some of the ones that have written their stories.

When Shon's veteran friend was preparing for release, he tried to find a halfway house for veterans that had been incarcerated to ease his reentry into society [37]. He felt unequipped to return to society, and the prison system did not provide the resources or support needed to aid the transition. After being repeatedly declined due to his prescription for antidepressants, he finally found one that accepted him. When he called Shon after his release, he spoke of feeling embarrassed to walk into the reentry center as the prison had given him mismatched clothes that were too big for him. In resisting this lack of care, Shon felt that his friend's poor experience had given him a "mission and a purpose" and with that, found organizations outside of the prison that could help him gather clothing and other essentials to gift, in a "Bag of Hope," to recently released veterans.

John learned how "what goes around, comes around" could be "applied to the spirit of giving" [38] when two men he had once helped returned the favor years later and at different prisons. One had received kits of snacks, coffee, and essentials from John until he was able to afford them himself, and the other was supported while struggling to adapt to his new life in prison. Preston J. writes about how his prison family, made up of men who "gave me a job when I was lost, corrected me when I was mistaken, cooked for me when I was hungry, expressed pride in my growth when earned" [36] helped him develop since entering prison at 18. These men give him "hope for a better future," when the institution does not. And when Andrew noticed an elderly Korean man who did not speak any English enter the prison, he spoke to him in Hangul, smuggled him some clothing and snacks, pulled strings to get him moved into the cell Andrew was in so that he could take care of him and be his interpreter, cooked for him, cleaned for him, and loved him. When the "petite 75-year-old Korean man was thrown into the American criminal justice system to fend for himself," [39] with declining health and no way to get proper medical assistance, Andrew acted as

his nurse until the man was released. After all of that, Andrew said the man had helped him most, healing his traumatic past, and being the father that he needed in prison.

The Holidays

The consensus is that the holiday season is pretty depressing when you are incarcerated. All the comforts of the holidays do not naturally exist in prison, but that does not mean that people do not try to reproduce at least some of them on the inside. In Reginald Stephen's prison, two men made a Thanksgiving meal consisting of turkey, yams, collard greens with pepperoni, macaroni and cheese, and fresh broccoli. While eating, the men experienced, "for a little while, a sense of brotherhood, goodwill and community" [40]. During Christmastime in the prison Walter Hart is incarcerated in, a man strung up homemade Christmas lights, made a cardboard tree decorated with bulbs made from Doritos bag foil and fake presents to go under it, and created a fake fireplace with aluminum foil and an amber light. Another bought ramen and coffee for everyone, contributing to "a genuine feeling of brotherhood that sometimes gets lost in the shuffle of daily prison life" [41].

On his 13th Christmas in prison, Brian Hindson watched a man secretly leave a Little Debbie snack on every person's locker, each with a bow made of green and red string and a note that said, "Merry Christmas" [42]. On the same day, he watched one of the cars gather items from the commissary and give them to a man from a different car because he "had no money coming in and could use some goodwill" [42]. In changing the narrative on what men's prisons are like, Brian writes that these people give him hope because "humanity, kindness, well-wishing and the like all exist here" [42]. Similarly in an act of generosity, Lawrence and his friend filled stockings (state-issued socks) with shower shoes, "a soda, a bag of nuts, a Rice Krispy Treat, a pastry, hard candy and a variety of dark and milk chocolates" [43]. Lawrence found that this "simple act of love had a deep effect on these restless and homesick men," [43] and that his and his friend's "acts of kindness and compassion may have helped others, but they also changed our lives forever" [43].

Brotherhood and generosity do not come naturally to life in prison. The harsh environment created for punishment, which thrives on anger and fear through self-policing, should not also have men who make decorations, food for each other, and give out gifts. But it does. With community, the prison cannot easily control incarcerated men, and without it, the prison cannot easily rehabilitate them.

Creatures that Comfort

"*Perhaps prison would have persisted this way forever. Perhaps our granite hearts and iron wills would have never crumbled. Perhaps the prison mentality, that we be cold and heartless, would have endured. Perhaps. But then there were kittens*" [1]. – Cameron Terhune

Paws For Life K9 Rescue, New Leash on Life, Everglades Dog Program, and Paws with a Cause have all partnered with prisons to have incarcerated men train dogs for various purposes, including providing assistance for people with physical disabilities and being service dogs for people with PTSD. Those participating in dog programs contrast the stigma that incarcerated men do not show care and love. Richard Fontes, along with others who write about similar programs, sees parallels between the dogs and incarcerated men. The dogs thrive in their training and rehabilitation when they receive positive reinforcement, affection, and patience, and when they feel "safe and loved" [44], [45], [46], [47]. This is exemplified when one man, "inspired by empathy for his dog's scars, shared how he, too, was abused. Tears streamed down his face. He accepted a hug from a man whose hand he might not have even shaken before" [44].

Another commonality in these stories is that the dogs give the men purpose when they otherwise feel worthless. Training dogs changed Timothy's "formerly arid life," [45] as he no longer feels that he must wait until his release from prison to have a purpose. His dog, Waylon, gave him a second chance at a happy life. The love Waylon showed him encouraged him to "try to change not only the prison culture, but society" [45]. Before being partnered with a dog, Bradford King was "going through the motions and wanting to die" [46]. He found purpose in challenging himself and others to show affection, and when asked by another incarcerated man why he kisses his dog, he responds, "because I want him to know that I love him... The greatest strength is gentleness" [46]. Eric Finley did not feel human until a puppy came up to him, her "eyes shining with life, unlike so many human eyes here in prison," which he describes as "the most thrilling interaction I had experienced in years" [48]. Lawrence looked forward to getting up in the morning just to train his dog, Casper [47]. J.H. writes that the dogs help the incarcerated men let down their walls and feel vulnerable, with one man teaching his dog the command "hugs and kisses" [49].

And Kittens

Though less common because there are no programs related to them, kittens still find a way to make it into incarcerated men's lives. When the incarcerated men at Jesse Milo's prison felt worthless, a "shower of meows seems to validate our existence, letting us know we are fulfilling some purpose in this world where many of us are forgotten and sent to die" [50]. For these men, purpose came in the form of sneaking food from the chow hall and the commissary, risking punishment during pat-downs after meals just to feed cats that had made the corner of the prison yard their home. The cats make the incarcerated men feel alive again, with Cameron writing that they are "gracious enough to spend their time with us so that we might learn, and so that we can enjoy a few quiet moments of warmth, softness, non judgment, and freedom" [1].

A feeling of worthlessness and dehumanization permeates the carceral system. The dogs and cats "reject everything it means to be in prison," making "hard cases doing hard time melt like butter" [1]. These men should not need animals to feel that they have a reason to live, but they do. The animals contribute to resistance, allowing the men to show love and affection, to be "soft and cuddly" [1], to feel joy.

Lessons Learned from Incarcerated Men

The subliminal employment of counter-hegemonic masculinity by incarcerated men resists the carceral system by challenging the dehumanizing norms perpetuated by the prison environment. The men in this paper reclaim their stripped humanity, demonstrating that power comes less from masculinity and more from embracing emotion, fostering community, supporting each other, and expressing affection. Being hypermasculine confirms and reinforces what the public already believes about incarcerated men. If there is no outward evidence of love and kindness, society will continue to view incarcerated men as undeserving of these qualities. Through

these stories for PJP, incarcerated men can literally rewrite the narrative, challenging harmful preconceptions.

At the time of writing this paper, there is a noticeable gap in scholarly work addressing counter-hegemonic masculinity in prison. While studies on hegemonic and hypermasculinity in prisons are valuable, the lack of recognition for other forms of masculinity perpetuates harmful stereotypes and stigma. The flaws in the United States carceral system are evident, and the academic literature and discourse surrounding it should strive for more complexity and nuance.

There are numerous opportunities for future research, particularly in incorporating and amplifying more voices and perspectives from individuals within the system. Further exploration of the intersectionality between race, age, sexual orientation, religion, and gender and prison masculinities is necessary. Additionally, understanding and developing programs that promote and encourage counter-hegemonic masculinity can potentially improve the lives of incarcerated men and contribute to their rehabilitation. By fostering emotional expression, community building, and empathy, these programs can challenge harmful gender norms and toxicity, and support reintegration into society.

The carceral system cannot be changed without listening to those inside it.

Appendix A: The Men

This section gives all of the names and locations of incarceration for the writers mentioned in this paper. Some of the men have short bios on their profiles which are included. It is important to continuously acknowledge that these authors deserve respect and recognition, particularly given the negative stigma associated with incarceration.

In order of appearance:

David Jones in Texas– "David Jones is a writer and the author of *Living in Reality: Everything I Needed to Know I Learned in Prison*."

Frederick Dew in California

Kenneth M. Key in Illinois

Marcus "Wali" Henderson in California– "Marcus 'Wali' Henderson is the former editor-in-chief of San Quentin News, an award-winning newspaper published out of San Quentin State Prison in California, where he is incarcerated. He became a reporter the day he arrived at San Quentin."

Dennis Jefferson Jr. in California– "Dennis Jefferson Jr. doesn't think of himself as a writer, but one who respects the power of words. He participates in charity drives, volunteer work and self-help groups, and he holds an associate degree in general studies."

Lanard H. in Wisconsin

Walter Hart in California

Biktor B. in California– He writes under a pen name.

Kevin D. Sawyer in California– "Kevin D. Sawyer is a contributing editor for PJP; a member of the Society of Professional Journalists; and a former associate editor and member of the San Quentin News team that won SPJ's 2014 James Madison Freedom of Information Award. His work has appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle, Oakland Post, California Prison Focus and others. He was a 2019 PEN American Honorable Mention in nonfiction and a 2016 recipient of The James Aronson Award for community journalism. Prior to incarceration, Sawyer worked in the telecommunications industry for 14 years."

Joey LeBlanc in California

C.R. Addleman in California

Aaron M. Kinzer in Pennsylvania– "Aaron M. Kinzer is a writer, poet and spoken word performance artist. His work has been published in the Columbia Journal and In the Belly, the upcoming re-sentencing journal by Tufts University. He has written for DreamCorps Justice for their 2022 National Day of Empathy."

Shon Pernice was in Missouri– "Shon Pernice is a contributing writer for PJP. He is a veteran and a Kansas City native who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom as a combat medic and came home with traumatic brain injury and PTSD. He has been published in Veterans Voices, The Beat Within and Military Magazine. He is a contributing author to the book, *Helping Ourselves By Helping Others: An Incarcerated Men's Survival Guide*."

John L. Orr in California

Preston J. in Pennsylvania

Andrew Suh in Illinois

Lawrence May in California– "Lawrence May is a writer incarcerated in California. He has traveled to nearly 40 countries outside the U.S. and has written more than 50 stories, as well as his autobiography."

Reginald Stephen in New York

Brian Hindson in Texas– "Brian Hindson is an artist whose favorite styles of work are impressionism and pop art. His work is published on the Justice Arts Coalition."

Cameron Terhune in California

Richard Fontes in California– "Richard Fontes is a writer who once served in the U.S. Army. For several years now, he has been involved with Paws For Life K9 Rescue"

Timothy Johnson in North Carolina– "Timothy Johnson is the assistant editor for The Nash News, a newspaper published out of Nash Correctional Institution in North Carolina, where he is incarcerated. He holds a bachelor's degree in pastoral ministry with a minor in counseling from Southeast Baptist Theological Seminary. He also works as a graduate assistant and is the editor of the journal Ambassadors in Exile for The College at Southeastern's North Carolina Field Minister Program (NCFMP), which provides theological training to long-term incarcerated people."

Bradford King in Michigan

Eric Finley in Florida

J.H. in Florida– "J.H. is a writer incarcerated in Florida. His high school literature teacher published his first poem in a journal for Seminole County. Nearly 30 years later, Ms. Susanna, an instructor for Exchange for Change's creative writing course, encouraged him to pick up writing again. Now in his 50s, he finds the possibility of realizing his dream to be a writer uplifting. He has asked that his full name be withheld."

Jessie Milo in California– "Jessie Milo is a writer, artist and poet incarcerated in California. He is a volunteer for InitiateJustice.org and an advocate for mental health."

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