



Episode 7: Unwritten  
First aired September 13, 2017

[00:00:00.01] Scraping noise

Nigel [00:00:07.02]: Those things ever pop?

Earlonne [00:00:08.22]: No. [laughs] You're now tuned in to San Quentin's 'Ear Hustle' from PRX's Radiotopia.

Listener Warning [00:00:15.29]: The following podcast contains language that may not be appropriate for all listeners.

Female [00:00:21.18]: Thanks to MailChimp for supporting 'Ear Hustle'. [upbeat music] MailChimp is the world's largest marketing automation platform. 15 million customers from small e-commerce shops to big online retailers use MailChimp to reach customers and grow their business. MailChimp gives you the marketing tools to be yourself on a bigger stage. Get started free at [MailChimp.com](https://mailchimp.com). MailChimp, build your brand, sell more stuff. [rising electronic music] 'Ear Hustle' is brought to you by Squarespace. Want to make a brand new website for your business? With Squarespace, you get access to beautiful templates created by world-class designers and the ability to customize look and feel with just a few clicks. We should know. We built the 'Ear Hustle' site on Squarespace and we

love it. Check Squarespace out at [Squarespace.com](https://www.squarespace.com). Register a domain name and start your free website or online store trial today. When you're ready to launch, make sure to use the offer code earhustle to save 10%. That's [Squarespace.com](https://www.squarespace.com) with offer code earhustle to save 10%.

Earlonne [00:01:31.21]: [into beat] I'm Earlonne Woods. I'm incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison in California.

Nigel [00:01:38.11]: I'm Nigel Poor, a visual artist who volunteers at San Quentin.

Earlonne [00:01:42.02]: And together, we're gonna take you inside. In prison, there's a lot of rules and I mean a lot of rules.

Nigel [00:01:52.11]: Yeah. There's rules for you guys inside, but there's also rules for people like me who come in to spend time here. There's a big one around food. I can't share any food with you that I bring in and I can't eat your food.

Earlonne [00:02:05.07]: Indeed.

Nigel [00:02:06.00]: And there's other ones too. Like, there's only certain colors I can wear. There's only certain parts of the prison I can go to. In some ways, they're not unlike some of the rules that affect you guys.  
[tinkling, snapping bass beat]

Earlonne [00:02:15.06]: Yeah, because there's only certain colors we can wear.

Nigel [00:02:17.07]: That's right. You guys always have to wear blue.

Earlonne [00:02:18.22]: Right.

Nigel [00:02:18.27]: And that's one of the reasons I can't, because I can't blend in.

Earlone [00:02:21.20]: Right. No. You can't wear green. You can't wear brown because those are employee colors. So, yeah, you do have that. And, I mean, it's a, it's a lot of stuff. I mean, it's, I can only go to certain parts of the prison. I have to be in my cell at a certain time to be counted. Um, I go to chow every day at a certain time.

Nigel [00:02:38.28]: You know what? There is something I can do that you can't do. I can-

Earlone [00:02:41.09]: Yeah, you can leave.

Nigel [00:02:42.09]: That is true, but I can flush the, I can flush the toilet as many times as I want to.

Earlone [00:02:45.25]: [laughs] Yeah. We only got 2 flushes within a 5 minute period, so you have to, I mean have to time it out.

Nigel [00:02:51.25]: Yeah. Let's not go too deep into that one. [laughs]

Earlone [00:02:53.17]: Ok, ok, ok. So, and, it's a lot of stuff. Um, we can only have 6 cubic feet of property.

Nigel [00:02:58.27]: Which reminds me, how big are the cells, actually? I think we made a mistake.

Earlone [00:03:02.20]: We made a mistake. I know I said 4 by 9. It's actually 4.5 by 10.8 feet.

Nigel [00:03:11.09]: I guess it was important that we were accurate about that.

Earlonne [00:03:13.06]: Yeah. That, that, that's cool. I mean, it's just an inch bigger. [laughs] But here's the thing, Nigel. Uh, there are other important rules.

Nigel [00:03:23.04]: I know. You always tell me about this.

Earlonne [00:03:25.00]: These are the unwritten rules amongst the prisoner population that we enforce them ourselves.

Nigel [00:03:31.27]: Right, and a lot of those unwritten rules actually have to do with race.

Earlonne [00:03:35.07]: Yep, and that's what we're talking about on this episode is the unwritten rules of race in prison.

Nigel [00:03:40.25]: And we're gonna actually introduce that topic by talking about an unusual guy in here who has a very specific skill set.

Drew [00:03:50.14]: I don't really case out someone's bed area beforehand really. I just grab my basic supplies like tape, uh, markers. Black, red, blue, purple, and I have some-

Earlonne [00:04:04.14]: That's Drew Sabatino a.k.a Drewdown. He's a prison party planner. He's the go-to guy for organizing any type of celebration at San Quentin. Mostly, birthday parties.

Drew [00:04:16.07]: Put a little bit of color to it and maybe do some toilet papering as well as like, uh, streamers. Uh, they will work.

I have 168 birthdays in my calendar and every single one of those people get cards for the birthday.

Like balloons, you're going to put a little banner up and, uh, say happy birthday.

I like the way people feel when I celebrate them.

Um, I'll usually do like a smiley face [drawing] or something like that, uh, right after happy, uh, because birthdays-

And most of the time, you know, we'll have the card there along with some sweets or something. [sweeping beat] Everyone likes sugar in here. You know, it's cakes, cookies-

Earlone [00:04:58.02]: Drew has been in prison for about 5 years for assault with a deadly weapon. He told us that he got his party planning skills from his moms who love celebrating every family occasion from Christmas to birthdays, you name it.

Nigel [00:05:09.18]: Um, and by the way, Drew's white, and this is important because whites are actually a minority at San Quentin. I'm guessing about 20%.

Earlone [00:05:18.01]: That sounds about right, but what makes Drew unusual at San Quentin is not just his party planning abilities. What makes him different is that he knows how to plan different type of parties for different races.

Nigel [00:05:30.05]: And the different races seem to like different kinds of, [laughs] I don't even know what to say.

Earlone [00:05:35.12]: No. Let, let Drew say it.

Nigel [00:05:36.23]: Ok.

Drew [00:05:37.16]: Sex play is more of, it's just, it's just messin' around with, whether if it's jokes about homosexuality or anywhere around that, and it mainly is with whites that do this.

Arthur [00:05:54.05]: Definitely with white people. [laughs]

Nigel [00:05:56.08]: And that's Arthur Snowden but everyone calls him AR.

Earlonne [00:05:59.24]: He's black. He don't go for that kind of stuff.

Drew [00:06:03.05]: I mean, some guys take it a lot farther than I ever would. I'll do the jokes and stuff like that, but I won't do no grabbing or-

Arthur [00:06:12.11]: It's out of pocket, in the showers, slapping asses.

Drew [00:06:14.28]: Yeah.

Arthur [00:06:15.16]: And like, [laughs] yeah, it's crazy.

Drew [00:06:17.19]: Yeah, there's a lot.

Arthur [00:06:19.00]: But tell me what you do to some people bunks, Drew. [laughs]

Drew [00:06:20.23]: Well, oh, well, yeah. So, I know AR doesn't sex play and-

Arthur [00:06:26.01]: Not at all.

Drew [00:06:26.10]: So, for his birthday, I didn't put the penis towels, the condoms, you know. [electronic beat]

Nigel [00:06:33.28]: So, I'm guessing you're not into towels folded so they

look like kind of-

Earlonne [00:06:38.04]: Hell no. I'm with AR on this one. Even though they disagree on that point, Drew and AR are close. In prison, we call them row dogs, like they're together all the time.

Arthur [00:06:48.20]: I wish you could see 'em. [Drew laughs] They're like this big, huge white penis that's rolled up out of a towel. Like, that's crazy, man. I don't even know how he thought of this.

Drew [00:06:55.11]: Yeah, yeah. Somebody taught me how to fold it. I don't know.

Arthur [00:06:58.14]: They taught you how to fold a penis towel? [laughs]

Drew [00:06:59.18]: Yeah, well, he was teaching me how to fold other things.

Nigel [00:07:04.04]: I hate to imagine what those other things are.

Earlonne [00:07:05.20]: Nig, where's your mind at? He's talking about folding chickens and roosters and stuff like that.

Nigel [00:07:10.18]: All right. If you say so. [laughs]

Earlonne [00:07:12.06]: Anyhow, Drew the party planner is on it when AR's birthday rolls around. [keyboard melody]

Arthur [00:07:17.20]: My most recent birthday was when February the 12th, when I just turned 32. Uh, I woke up that morning, right, feeling old [Drew laughs], because I done spend a lot of years, uh, in prison, right? My boy, Drewdown, right, had my bunk like all done up. And, when I was like, "Oh, my god." Like, I came back. I was shocked and-

Drew [00:07:36.09]: Um, I'll usually take Post-It notes also and I'll put Post-It notes everywhere.

Arthur [00:07:40.20]: He got like a lot of sayings that like got like say like, uh, like, I call a couple of my friends in here like Sugarfoots. [laughs] Sugarfoots and I never even received a birthday card as far as from like any of my family members. You know what I mean? So, for here it is, a guy that I just met in prison, right, who I became close with actually walked around and had everybody as far as who I communicate with and who I bond with actually sign a birthday card and actually give it to me and just to see like their response as far as like in the birthday card was like amazing. It was, it was definitely amazing, man.

Nigel [00:08:17.10]: Ok, like we said, Drew learned his party planning skills from his mom and she also taught him how to cook.

Earlone [00:08:22.08]: Yeah, but she didn't teach him how to cook in prison. [sweeping, jazzy beat] That requires a whole different set of skills. You know, you don't have no pots and pans. You've got what they call a hot pot and it don't get very hot. The water you boil in it is like mild, lukewarm. [laughs] There's no ovens, no microwaves. Everything you do has to be in that little hot pot.

Nigel [00:08:43.11]: And the other hard thing about cooking in prison is getting the ingredients.

Earlone [00:08:46.11]: Exactly, but you can get certain things out of the mail-order quarterly packages.

Nigel [00:08:50.19]: Like, is that where you get the meat that comes in a pouch?



Earlonne [00:08:53.03]: Right, right. You get that. You can get your seasonings and spices, cookies, zoom zooms, wham whams. You can get some of that stuff from the canteen here at San Quentin. Or, you can try another creative approach and try to get it out the kitchen.

Nigel [00:09:06.26]: And, of course, there's also the bartering system, but there's a lot of things you just can't get and really often you have to make do. Drew had that down to a science.

Arthur [00:09:17.00]: Yeah. My boy, Drew, is an extravagant cook, man. He makes something out of nothing all the time, right, and he's the one that usually does the cooking due to the fact of the politic situation, right.

Earlonne [00:09:30.14]: Politics. That's how guys refer to those unwritten rules about race that we're talking about.

Nigel [00:09:35.20]: And some of the rules have to do with food.

Drew [00:09:37.25]: So, if he gives me a package food or whatever-

Arthur [00:09:42.00]: Pouch food, whether if it's mackerel, salmon. Take it over there still sealed in the pack because this is a law where it's ok as long as I give it to this other race sealed because it's not opened so, therefore, it's not tainted. [laughs] Right?

Drew [00:09:56.15]: He can't help me, you know, the blacks, they can't help you cook it. It just doesn't work that way.

Nigel [00:10:03.26]: God. Ok, so let me get this straight. So, if one race give another race an open package of food, that other race won't eat it because it's tainted?

Earlonne [00:10:12.08]: That's the prison politics.

Nigel [00:10:13.26]: Ok. It's tainted because it's open.

Earlonne [00:10:15.12]: Right.

Nigel [00:10:15.19]: Ok, but say that AR gives Drew a sealed, unopen package of meat. Then, Drew can cook with it and other white guys will eat it?

Earlonne [00:10:24.20]: Yep.

Nigel [00:10:25.17]: Ok. Who makes up these rules? Where do they come from?

Earlonne [00:10:29.00]: I don't know. These are the rules that were in place before any of us got here. These are the rules that we live by, but I do know that over time, the rules have changed. It's time to bring in Lonnie Morris.

Nigel [00:10:42.12]: Lonnie Morris. So, he works down here in the media lab with us and, actually, people might recognize his voice because we are constantly asking him to please be quiet so we can record. [Lonnie in the background] His voice is so loud, you can hear him on the other side of the wall.

Earlonne [00:10:55.13]: It's deep.

Nigel [00:10:56.00]: It's deep.

Earlonne [00:10:56.04]: It's deep.

Lonnie [00:10:57.06]: Ok. I'm going to chow. I'll see you there.

Earlonne [00:10:59.01]: So, Lonnie was in San Quentin in the 80s when it

was a real violent place, when they had areas called blood alley. You knew not to even walk in that area because you might be a victim. He's seen the racial politics play out over the decades.

Lonnie [00:11:10.21]: When I first came to prison, the blacks were the minority by a long shot. You know, so, where we the majority now, we were like maybe 20 some percent of the population. You know and you could be in a cell area on the tier, a tier of 50, 60 people where there's only 5 or 6 blacks on the whole tier, and you got thrown up on one of them tiers and you had to really be rallying together to make sure that when they pop these doors, we come out, we wait on each other, we walk together. We got to try to protect each other. And you didn't have many black police, either, so that was another factor. Even today, the racial politics are still in place. Uh, the difference is that stabbings are not commonplace in prison these days. Whereas, back then, stabbings were what you did. [light beat]

Nigel [00:11:57.19]: How often are there stabbings nowadays at San Quentin?

Earlone [00:12:00.07]: [laughs] Oh. What is a stabbing at San Quentin?

Nigel [00:12:06.07]: Uh, something that pierces the skin?

Earlone [00:12:08.05]: I think the only people pierce the skin here are the doctors.

Nigel [00:12:10.28]: So, it's really a thing of the past?

Earlone [00:12:11.12]: There's none, really. There's no stabbings, really. Not at all.

Lemar [00:12:17.12]: Did you guys hear the story of what happened to Drew when he first came to prison?

Earlonne [00:12:22.03]: That's Lemar. He stops down in the media lab all the time. He lives in the same dorm as AR and Drew and he told us a story about Drew getting himself into a tight spot over race. [disquieting tone, light beat]

Lemar [00:12:32.25]: I guess he was on his way to the shower and the white dudes noticed that he had Eazy-E tattooed on his leg.

Earlonne [00:12:39.09]: He's talking about Eazy-E from N.W.A., also known as "The Godfather of Gangsta rap".

Lemar [00:12:44.13]: It was going to be an issue if he didn't cover it up. They gave him an ultimatum, either he remove the tattoo or he had to go.

Earlonne [00:12:55.14]: Had to go, which means you can't stay on the yard with everybody else. You have to leave or other prisoners will force you to leave. Or, you can tap out, which is you can turn yourself into the authorities and tell them that your life is in danger.

Nigel [00:13:07.16]: Drew didn't go to the authorities.

Earlonne [00:13:09.08]: Nah.

Nigel [00:13:09.26]: Uh, he took care of it himself.

Drew [00:13:12.13]: They, they were talking about, you know, doing something to me just because I have some rapper on me tattooed, some black guy, that I was looked down upon or I had to get it covered up because it's a black guy and I can't have that in prison, you know.

Earlonne [00:13:35.09]: Just to be clear, it was the white dudes who didn't want him to have that tattoo. The black dudes, they were cool with it, but for

his own safety, Drew covered up Eazy-E with another tattoo.

Nigel [00:13:45.13]: For Lonnie, this was actually a sign that things had gotten better in the last 30 years.

Lonnie [00:13:49.28]: Uh, the difference is that they made him cover it up, cover the tattoo up on his leg, and back then they might have cut the tattoo out of his leg and left him there to die, bleed to death, because they wanted to send a message that you got an n's tattoo on your leg, nah, that ain't happening.

Earlone [00:14:07.17]: Here's Lemar again, from the same housing unit as Drew.

Lemar [00:14:10.23]: He felt bad because, you got to understand that, coming from the area he came from, listening to rap music at the age that he was and from that era, he was attached to blacks, and then, coming to prison, you have to detach yourself. You can't be who you are. [melancoly beat]

Earlone [00:14:31.18]: Racial divisions in prison aren't just black and white.

Philip [00:14:34.22]: Yeah, so, my name is Philip Melendez. I am Filipino and Mexican.

Earlone [00:14:39.11]: There are a lot of groups: the Hispanics, the Pacific Islanders who group the Asians, Native Americans. But, for guys of mixed race like Philip Melendez, it's hard to be who they really are.

Philip [00:14:51.05]: I grew up in a very, well, I guess, predominately black neighborhood, right, and when I came to prison, I couldn't hang out with blacks. I actually had to choose which race or which side that I wanted to

hang out with, Filipinos or Mexican. So, that was a test in and of itself, right, because I couldn't be who I wanted to be. I couldn't hang with just anybody. I had to actually pick a side.

Nigel [00:15:16.27]: So, Earlonne, guys have to pick a side. They have to pick a race when they get to prison. They have to declare themselves as white or black, Native American, Asian, or other. Is it actually written down or is this one of those unwritten laws?

Earlonne [00:15:31.21]: No, it's actually written down. Like, if you type in Earlonne Woods in the prison computer, it's going to come up as black.

Nigel [00:15:37.07]: And my understanding is once you pick a side, you're not changing and that choice will follow you to whatever prison you go to.

Earlonne [00:15:44.20]: Yeah. I've seen guys make the wrong choice and regret it later based on the shit that they had to go through. You know, some dudes have to prove themselves. They have to show that they're down for their race and prove their allegiance. For Philip Melendez, he end up running with the Asians and Pacific Islanders because of his Filipino heritage.

Philip [00:16:01.05]: But that meant actually stifling any kind of Latino heritage that I had, because if I showed any kind of Latin, rolled an 'r' or something, you know, with Latin flavor, then they'd be like, "Oh, who is this dude? Is he with us or is he not with us?" Then, from there, I could be assaulted or I could be asked to participate in violence just to prove myself, so it's been a trick having to stifle stuff since I've been in prison.

Wayne [00:16:30.26]: My name's Wayne Boatwright. I've been in prison since 2012.

Nigel [00:16:35.02]: Prison politics are complicated even for guys who

aren't mixed race who are totally clear about which group they're in.

Earlonne [00:16:42.10]: Wayne Boatwright was in his 50s when he got to San Quentin. One of the first things he learned about was the racial geography of the prison yard.

Wayne [00:16:49.19]: The yards are divided into sections of control by each of the races. But I, unfortunately, am somewhat oblivious to some of these standards. So, one time, for example, I was walking, um, across the prison yard and just wandered into the Latin area, and a young man came up to me. He said, "Excuse me, sir. You know, you're white. You're not allowed to be in here." And I just said, "Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to," and walked out.

Nigel [00:17:21.10]: Earlonne, for people with no experience of prison, this racial landscape is, it's weird. It's confusing.

Earlonne [00:17:27.28]: It's the same racial landscape that's on the outside though.

Nigel [00:17:31.12]: I, I understand what you're saying, but it's not so clearly delineated outside and it's not such a tight space. I mean, the yard here at San Quentin is not that big and to have it divided up into these various turfs, it's really striking.

Earlonne [00:17:45.27]: It's the same thing. It's just on a smaller scale. But anyways, for almost all the guys we talked to, these racial divisions have kind of a logic to it.

Wayne [00:17:54.22]: It's interesting. These things are actually more for our own safety, not as a barrier to keep people out, but to make sure that everybody within that area is safe. [water running]

Philip [00:18:10.10]: The shower situation.

Earlonne [00:18:12.16]: The showers are divided up by race too. This is Philip again, who runs with the Asians and Pacific Islanders.

Philip [00:18:18.23]: I mean, it's a communal shower. There's 2 sides to it, though, and on one side you have a white side and Hispanics and some Asians shower there, and the other side is mostly just the black side.

Nigel [00:18:29.25]: Here's Drew again. [water draining and running]

Drew [00:18:31.23]: When you're in the shower, you're vulnerable. Uh, you're in like flip-flop sandals, and if something goes down in there, then you're pretty much, you're kind of screwed, you know.

Nigel [00:18:44.03]: Even though Drew's closest friend in prison is black, for his own safety, he knows he has to shower with the other white guys.

Drew [00:18:50.24]: Even in some places, you have to, you cannot shower alone. Like, you have to go with 2 or 3 people to shower and you have to leave with those people and you can't go in without those people.

Officer [00:19:03.10]: Showers off. Showers off.

Drew [00:19:06.17]: You're one with your race, you know, if something happens between 2 races, everybody's supposed to go, you know, whether it's fighting or whatever. [water draining]

Earlonne [00:19:16.06]: He's saying, if something go down racially, most of the inmates would side with their own race and then all hell would break loose. You could have a race riot. So, the logic is, if you follow the rules, there won't be any problems.



Nigel [00:19:28.02]: So, what do you think? Um, does it actually work?

Earlonne [00:19:30.18]: I guess. I mean, we haven't had a big race riot here at San Quentin in many years, at least as long as I've been here, so a lot of prisoners think it's important for new prisoners to learn these rules before they create serious problems for themselves or for the people around them. [rhythmic beat] This is especially true in other prisons. In maximum security prisons, where they politic hard, you can get killed for the smallest infractions if you violate the political structures.

Charlie [00:19:54.23] Yeah, so I started out at a Level 4 prison a month after my 18th birthday, and my first incident with race there, um, was a really highly charged one.

Nigel [00:20:05.07]: Charlie's a white guy who's been incarcerated since he was 16. He's 21 years into a 26 to life sentence for first-degree murder. We got him in the studio to talk about a thing called fish row.

Charlie [00:20:17.17]: When you go to a new prison, they put you on lockdown for 10 days, and you're evaluated by the staff, and you can't come out of the cell for that first 10 days, and so, I had no contact with other inmates besides my, my roommate at the time, who was white, and he kind of started to explain to me a little bit about the prison politics that go on with race, right. So, not, not to hang out with people of other races. Don't walk through their areas, right. I didn't know what that meant yet because I hadn't been to yard, so he kind of broke it down to me a little bit but not really fully in depth.

Earlonne [00:20:51.07]: The first day that Charlie was off fish row in that maximum security prison, he went to the chow hall.

Charlie [00:20:56.15]: And I was sitting at the table with 1 other white guy and 2 African American men, and after I finished my meal, 1 of the guys

that was sitting next to me that happened to be African American asked me if I wanted the roll off his tray.

Nigel [00:21:09.04]: Ok, well, that sounds like a nice enough gesture. He's giving Charlie some of his food.

Earlone [00:21:13.26]: Well, Nig, as you know, nothing in prison is ever what it seems. After the break, we'll hear what happened with Charlie and that dinner roll. [pleasant music]

Female [00:21:24.08]: Thanks for supporting 'Ear Hustle' by listening. If you or your company would like to take this a step further and sponsor the show, just drop a line to [sponser.radiotopia.fm](mailto:sponser.radiotopia.fm) and thanks.

Nigel [00:21:41.12]: [two tone beat] Ok, here's what was happening. Charlie was at dinner on his first day in the chow hall of a maximum security prison and an African American guy at his table offered him one of his dinner rolls.

Charlie [00:21:52.26]: And, so, I took the roll off of his tray and I ate the roll, and we went back to the unit, and the white guy who happened to be sitting at the table came to me and he said, "Hey, youngster, um, I'm glad nobody else seen that, and I'm not going to say anything, but if you ever take something off of another race's tray again, we will kill you."

Nigel [00:22:16.26]: So, what do you think? Was that white guy doing Charlie a favor by telling him not to eat the food given to him by another race or was he threatening him?

Earlone [00:22:25.16]: I wouldn't say it was a threat. I'd say he was lacing him on what not to do in the future if he didn't want to violate the policies of the white structure.

Charlie [00:22:34.09]: The guy offered me his roll, um, I learned later, to set

me up. So, he knew that I was, uh, uh, a fish, what we call a fish, a new person in prison, and he knew that I was really green. Um, they had been at the prison for a while and so he knew that the reaction he would get and so he really just kind of set me up for no reason.

Nigel [00:22:54.01]: Just like a sport?

Charlie [00:22:55.26]: Just like a sport, maybe. Just out of boredom, because there you're locked down all the time, and so, um, that could have been it.

Nigel [00:23:04.29]: So, what happens when somebody comes here and they come with the mindset from a higher level prison?

Charlie [00:23:09.27]: [laughs] Yeah, so it, it takes a while. It takes a while to adapt and to let go of that, right. What it really is, what you're really letting go of is not necessarily what's inside of you. Well, let me rephrase that. What you're letting go of is the fear. For me, what I was letting go of was the fear of being harmed if I talked to another race, so that fear stays present even after the rules are gone.

Nigel [00:23:36.10]: So, when we talk about race at San Quentin, we talk a lot about how it's a little bit different here.

Charlie [00:23:42.27]: Sure, yeah.

Nigel [00:23:43.20]: Is it, really?

Charlie [00:23:43.28]: Yeah. It's a, it's a completely different thing at San Quentin. Race is a completely different... It's still there, right. It's always still present to some degree, but those racial lines that are drawn in the sand at the higher security levels, they're blurry here. [droning, uptempo music]

Nigel [00:24:02.03]: All right. So, Earlonne, let's talk about 1 particular space where race has become a little blurry here at San Quentin, as Charlie put it. We mentioned the main racial groups, but there's another group where racial boundaries have softened just a bit.

Earlonne [00:24:16.00]: Yep. The L7s. The nerds.

Nigel [00:24:18.24]: What do you mean L7s? [both laugh]

Earlonne [00:24:20.15]: You know, put up an 'L'. Put up a 7. Put them together, what you got?

Nigel [00:24:23.04]: A square. [laughs]

Earlonne [00:24:24.03]: A square.

Nigel [00:24:25.00]: Woah. Ok.

Earlonne [00:24:26.09]: This is California. Even in prison, they're L7s and nerds.

Mesro [00:24:30.11]: I got a creature card here. Uh, his name is Dusk Dale Worm. Uh, he's a creature and he has trample.

Earlonne [00:24:37.03]: That's Mesro. He's been in San Quentin for about 6 years, and as you know, Nigel, he's into fantasy games.

Nigel [00:24:43.22]: What do you have in your hand?

Mesro [00:24:44.27]: Oh, this? This is a deck of Magic cards, for Magic: The Gathering. Uh, this is, uh, this is a green deck. It's comprised of like forest and I got a bunch of like terrible worms in here that do all kinds of bad things. It's called Worm Weaver Coil. What it does is, you have to

enchant a green creature and it gives a creature a 6-6, which makes... We gamers, we tend to be the nerds and the outcasts, and a lot of us are into superheroes and science-fiction, and we read books, and spend time in the library, and I've been a nerd my whole life. [people talking in background]

Nigel [00:25:19.17]: When you got to prison, how did you find your people?

Mesro [00:25:22.00] I was walking the track and I seen some guys, and they were just kind of hanging out, and they had this D&D board sitting out, and I was like, "Oh, man! Is this Dungeons & Dragons?" They were like, "Yeah." And, I was like, "Oh, yeah. I get down with this. Uh, what's up? My name is Mesro. How can I get in? What's going on?" We hang out in an area which is what the hardcore guys call it a neutral area, right. It's not an area where it's separated like, "Oh, this is only where the blacks hang out." Or, "This is only where the whites hang out." We don't have that over there. Everybody's welcome to come over there, and if they want to come and hang out with the gamers, by all means, come and see us.

Nigel [00:25:58.27]: When I walk down into the yard, when I see your area, who's going to be there?

Mesro [00:26:02.24]: You might see, you know, maybe 3, 4 black guys, 2 Asians, a couple of Middle Easterns, couple of white guys. We're all over there having fun, hammin' it up. Somebody might be being the Dungeon Master like I usually am, and I'm very active about it, right. I like to make voices and do all kinds of play acting and stuff. You know, we're getting our game on. We're enjoying ourselves. We're not in here, you know, mad dogging with a thousand yard stare plottin' on somebody else or anything. We're just having a good ol' time. We're staying out of the way.

Nigel [00:26:36.06]: And you never had a problem?

Mesro [00:26:37.27]: No.

Nigel [00:26:38.13]: Because I, I've heard really awful stories about guys who crossed the racial line here and then shit happens.

Mesro [00:26:45.10]: Well, I've had people ask me questions. Like, I remember once I was walking past the area that they call the Black Sea. That's that spot that's right by the basketball court.

Nigel [00:26:53.00]: It's called the Black Sea?

Mesro [00:26:53.26]: The Black Sea. Yeah, that's what they call it, because that's where all the brothers are at, right, and so, when I was walking by, a guy pulled me over. He was like, "Man, let me talk to you, youngster. What's up? Why you always hanging out over there by the rec shack over there?" I said, "Well, 'cause that's a neutral area. That's an area where everybody can be. I don't like being places where people are restricted." And he was like, "Well, I think you need to come and hang out with us." And I was like, "Why don't you come and hang out with us and figure out what it's like to be a little bit more free, right? Even though we're in prison and it sucks, but you know, we have a little bit more freedom hanging out with people that we want to hang out with rather than the people that we're forced to hang out with. And he was like, "Oh, man," and he got a little bit upset about it, and I was like, "Well, I don't know what to tell you. Uh, it sounds to me like you have some kind of personal weird issue with race or whatever it is, but you need to like get over that."

Nigel [00:27:47.18]: Well, it sounds like Mesro and the nerds-

Earlone [00:27:50.06]: The L7s, Nigel.

Nigel [00:27:51.11]: [laughs] Ok. The L7s have managed to find a way to kind of go around some of the unwritten rules around race.

Earlonne [00:27:58.07]: Well, I, I mean, you have other places in prison that's, that's pretty integrated.

Nigel [00:28:03.04]: Like what?

Earlonne [00:28:03.18]: Well, like say, for instance, a person's work. Whether they work in the kitchen, whether they work, you know. You have to have a rapport when you're working around your coworkers, you know, so it's integrated there.

Nigel [00:28:13.22]: Yeah. That makes sense, but I guess it's still really complicated.

Earlonne [00:28:16.26]: It's complicated, yeah.

Nigel [00:28:17.28]: And for a lot of guys, the unwritten rules still apply. I mean, even Drew and AR, Drew still has to shower with just the white guys and he can't take unopened packages of food from AR to cook with.

Earlonne [00:28:30.28]: That's just the politics of prison. [rolling beat] The bullshit.

Nigel [00:28:34.09]: But, despite that, they really have managed to forge a close bond.

Arthur [00:28:38.09]: I'm not racist, right, but Drew is actually my first white friend in prison and my only white friend.

Nigel [00:28:43.24]: And Drew and AR really celebrate each other. Even Drew the party planner got surprised on his birthday by AR.

Arthur [00:28:51.05]: Waited until he went outside and then we called my second favorite white guy, which is Aaron. [laughs] We called him over,

right, and we was like, "Ok, we need you to get all the inappropriate stuff, like as far as like the condoms, as far as like the muscle mag magazines and like anything that has to do with as far as like the, the sex play things, which I'm not into but [laughs] I know Drew didn't mind. I mean, he makes penis towels. [laughs]

Drew [00:29:18.23]: I mean, there was even Christmas lights hanging in my area and I didn't even notice them until after I like calmed down. How the hell did you guys get Christmas lights in here [Arthur laughs] and put 'em on my bed? Like, this is crazy, you know?

Earlone [00:29:39.27]: Thanks to AR and Drew for sharing their stories. Since we recorded this story earlier this year, Drew has been released from prison.

Nigel [00:29:46.26]: We had a lot of people show up in this episode. Lemar, Philip Melendez, Lonnie Morris, Wayne Boatwright, Mesro El-Coles, and Charlie, and it's a big deal to talk about race inside prison, so we really thank them, and our special sound designer this episode-

Earlone [00:30:02.25]: Is yours truly, Earlone Woods.

Nigel [00:30:05.14]: The E! [laughs] But, we did have tracks contributed to this from Antwan Williams.

Earlone [00:30:11.13]: Pat Mesiti-Miller is our off-site production adviser. Our story editor is Curtis Fox and our executive producer for Radiotopia is Julie Shapiro.

Nigel [00:30:21.01]: And we also want to thank Warden Ron Davis and every story has to be approved by this guy here.

Sam Robinson [00:30:27.29] I am Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the public



information officer at San Quentin State Prison and I approve this story.  
[outro music]

Earlonne [00:30:35.20]: Next time on 'Ear Hustle', the law that created a subcategory of incarcerated people known as strikers.

Male [00:30:41.26]: So, the crime I committed is I walked into a liquor store, I snatched 2 \$20 bills out of the cash register, no weapon. I've never shot a gun. I never molested no kids, never raped nobody, never put my hands on nobody. I mean, surely, they're going to see the error of their way of giving me 50 years to life.

Earlonne [00:31:02.22]: 'Ear Hustle' is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collection of the best podcasts around. Radiotopia is made possible with support from the Knight Foundation. Here more at [Radiotopia.fm](https://radiotopia.fm).

Nigel [00:31:15.14]: For more information about 'Ear Hustle', please visit our website, [earhustlesq.com](https://earhustlesq.com). I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlonne [00:31:22.24]: And I'm Earlonne Woods. Thanks for listening.

Radiotopia outro [00:31:31.19]: Radiotopia from PRX.

Female [00:31:39.06]: Thanks for listening and thanks to Adzerk for providing their ad serving platform to Radiotopia.