Columbia University, the Welfare State, and Rikers Island Jail

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Introduction

New York City is known internationally as one of the greatest cities in the world. Each day, millions of people rush into and throughout the city to tackle major problems. Downtown, world-renowned businesses make billion-dollar deals. On the East Side, the United Nations meets to mitigate world crises. Over on Broadway, crowds pack into theaters to watch top-class actors, dancers, musicians, and entertainers. And uptown, just South of Harlem, sits the city's largest university, one that owns the most private land in Manhattan, one that has produced United States Presidents, economists, doctors, authors, and thinkers, and one that holds prestige beyond its connection to the city: Columbia University.

But just beyond Columbia, right off the M60 bus route and peaking between Manhattan and Queens sits a less-pristine reality. From a distance, this small island appears innocuous. Flat, plain buildings lined with wire fences. One or two cars idling on its few roads. The occasional worker walking by. From this perspective, the island might host a research facility or perhaps municipal offices. But to New Yorkers and much of America, hearing the name of this island immediately brings its purpose and reality to head. This is Rikers Island.

Rikers Island hosts Rikers Island Jail, a massive institution rightfully labeled as one of the most dangerous and cruel incarceration complexes in the United States. Rikers Island Jail is a pinnacle of New York City's barbarism and carcerality, and it was created with such intent. In the late 1800s, Rikers Island was bought by the City of New York to build a hospital. However, in the early 1900s, one man changed Rikers Island's fate by allowing not just the building of the jail, but the use of post-emancipation slave labor to build it. This man was former Columbia University President and turn-of-the-century New York Mayor, Seth Low. The idea of Rikers Island Jail was not Seth Low's creation, but the cruelty of the product was. Seth Low helped

create a dichotomous image of New York City, where the richest and most elite boarded at his university, and the poorest and most in need boarded at what would become the second largest jail in the United States with arguably one of the most notorious reputations: Rikers Island Jail.

This paper analyzes the unique impact Seth Low made on New York City both through his work at Columbia and on Rikers Island. First, I lay the background of Low's rise to power through his work in Brooklyn and at Columbia University, focusing particularly on how Low's policies effectively hid the city's poorer class and highlighted its wealthy class. Then, I discuss how Low's transition from President of Columbia to Mayor of the newly formed greater New York City gave him the power and opportunity to restrict the entire city's poorer and 'less desirable' class by building a jail outside of the traditional cityscape. Finally, I examine how, under Low's authority, Rikers Island Jail was built by slave labor, thus irrevocably shaping New York City as a carceral state. I rely heavily upon newspaper archives, such as the New York Tribune and The New York Times, as well as on videos and photographs of Rikers Island and former students' research papers on New York policing and incarceration to chronicle how Columbia University implicated itself in the history of New York's carceral state. I conclude the paper by calling on Columbia University to recognize its involvement in the creation of and its power to change the human rights atrocities occurring inside of the Rikers Island Jail.

Seth Low and Welfare

Throughout his political career, Seth Low presented himself as a progressivist and a reformist to greater New York City. While Low did hold reformist views on municipal policies, his public works reform policies were often fraught with thinly veiled elitism and paternalism which, in practice, suppressed the voices and autonomy of lower-class New Yorkers.

As a graduate of Columbia College himself, Low spent the first twenty years of his career building his political identity within the city. Upon graduation in 1870, Low joined his family's opium trading business, where he built connections with many large merchants and politicians in the region.[1] While Low helped fight municipal corruption and patronage in government, he also began promoting questionable welfare policies. Low approved of his grandfather, Seth Low Senior's, progressivist ideology that called for the "discountenance of indiscriminate almsgiving" to the city's lower classes.[2] Rather than encouraging the poor to "[shop] for handouts," Seth Low Senior believed the needy should receive aid from a more centralized agency, such as the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP), run by solely the city's elite merchant and political class, including Seth Low Senior, who ran the Brooklyn branch throughout the 1840s. The AICP's idea of distributing aid, however, was tainted by the organization's belief that poverty was caused "not by the failures of the economic system... but by the deficiencies of the poor themselves."[3] The AICP regularly visited the poor to decide "who was truly needy and who was idle or depraved" and distributed aid accordingly. For persons considered to have a chronic illness, a disability, or be generally "depraved," the AICP would forcibly institutionalize them into the City's wards and prisons. In these institutions, conditions were purposefully kept worse than the outside world so as to not "[create] temptations to fraud" and to send a "warning" to those participating in depravity in the community.[4]

As a young Republican politician, Seth Low held similar beliefs on welfare as his grandfather. In 1876, Low led a Brooklyn-wide effort to abolish all "outdoor relief" to the city's poor and needy population, citing handouts of food, tea, and coal to civilians as a "waste of

[1] L E Fredman, "Seth Low: Theorist of Municipal Reform," Journal of American Studies 6, no. 1, 1972, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27552970. P. 21.
[2] Edwin G Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York to 1898* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). P. 620.
[3] *Ibid.*
[4] Edwin G Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham* (1998). P. 621.

public funds."[5] After a year-long experimental phase in which rations were cut, the welfare program was officially shut down in 1878. Low celebrated this decision, labeling it as "welfare reform" which saved money and curtailed municipal corruption without increasing the suffering of the poor. In reality, the cessation of resources forced many impoverished Brooklynites to seek food and shelter in hospitals, police stations, and asylums, both driving up the city's welfare expenditures and increasing the policing of impoverished people's lives.[6] Because these effects were felt in the city's institutions and not on its streets, however, Low's policies were seen as effective, and his political career began to grow.

While Seth Low held these ideas on welfare throughout his career, he rarely stated them publicly. From 1881-1885, Seth Low served two terms as Mayor of Brooklyn, where he yielded most of his stump time to rallying constituents on more popular issues, such as anti-tammany agendas and municipal reform. These policies allowed Low to gain support from many Brooklynites, but they did not garner the widespread legitimacy Low hoped for. So, in 1890, Low sought power beyond Brooklyn's borders by accepting a role as the 11th president of Columbia College.[7] In this position, Low believed, he would have more power to accomplish widespread political goals, including the reform of the welfare state beyond Brooklyn. In a letter to fellow politician, James Bryce, Low expressed this sentiment: "This office gives to me, I think, the best platform in New York from which to discuss the social and political questions which always have interested me."[8]

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[5] Edwin G Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham* (1998). P. 1029.
[6] *Ibid.*
[7] Columbia University, "Seth Low," Columbia University Libraries, accessed December 18, 2023, https://library.columbia.edu/libraries/cuarchives/presidents/low_seth.html.
[8] Nicholas Murray Butler, Across the Busy Years : Recollections and Reflections, 2 vols. (New York & London, 1939-40), vol. 1, pp. 156, 375-6; Low to Bryce, 1 December 1889, James Bryce American Correspondence (Micromethods Ltd.); Columbia University, Annual Reports, 1890 ft.; Low, Low, 56?64; David A. Shannon, ed., Beatrice Webb's American Diary, 1898 (Madison, 1963), pp. 8-11.

Seth Low At Columbia

Through his tenure as President of Columbia, Seth Low built up the institution's prestige and power in New York City, successfully framing the institution as a pillar of New York City's elite class while simultaneously calling on the city to cease support to its poorer class. In his inaugural speech to the College, Low emphasized the importance of Columbia as an institution and a pillar of the city's elite. He argued that some of the "greatest social problems" existed in cities and that university-educated men had the "will and standards to carry out the tasks of improvement."[9] In this address, Low both explicitly set out his ideological goal– to educate men who have the 'will and standards' to civically engage with the city– and his practical steps to get there– to integrate Columbia College more fully into New York City.

To accomplish this goal, Seth Low procured two major changes to Columbia: Its name and its location. First, he consolidated the separate undergraduate and graduate schools into one university, allowing each to be represented by a dean or president, while all existing under one joint institution. Through this consolidation, Low secured Trustee votes to officially change the institution's name from 'Columbia College' to 'Columbia University in the City of New York."[10] This ensured the public would view the school not only as a conglomerate of the most esteemed professions and intellectual prowesses but also as a pinnacle of the city's intellect and progress.

While voting to change the name of Columbia's institution did yield some increased engagement across the city, Low's decision to move Columbia to its current Morningside Heights location ensured its success. In 1897, Low secured land on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, buying it from the Bloomingdale insane asylum who had kept the land mostly

[9] L E Fredman, "Seth Low: Theorist of Municipal Reform," Journal of American Studies 6, no. 1, 1972, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27552970. P. 21.
[10] Columbia University, "Seth Low," Columbia University Libraries, accessed December 18, 2023, https://library.columbia.edu/libraries/cuarchives/presidents/low_seth.html.

vacant.[11] This space allowed Columbia to expand its campus and build original, standardized, and iconic buildings that would give students updated and innovative places to live and study, as well as lock the university's significance into the city's structural history. To begin this massive construction, Low donated one million dollars to build the first structure on the new Columbia campus: the Low Memorial Library.[12]

As Seth Low ensured Columbia University's structural and cultural significance in New York City, he also used his position of power to suppress the voices and autonomy of lower-class civilians. In 1897, amid his procuring of new land and a new name for Columbia, the city itself was undergoing its own structural transformation. During this time, the title "New York City," once representing only Manhattan, was expanded to include all five boroughs. As such, Low was appointed by the governor of New York as one of fifteen commissioners to write a charter for the newly expanded New York City.[13] For Low, this position served two important purposes: Firstly, the Brooklyn welfare reform law he had lobbied for in the 1870s had become null and void through the borough's consolidation into New York City. To ensure the sentiments of his Brooklyn policy would remain in place, Low needed to draft a new law. Second, by contributing to the charter of the newly expanded New York City, Low had the opportunity to once again assert his political dominance and agenda on a wider scale, promoting his work bolstering Columbia's elitism as well as his efforts to suppress lower-class power. So, when given the opportunity to write the new charter, Low unabashedly wrote a provision that "explicitly banned all outdoor relief" to all New York City residents, forcing the cessation of three boroughs' existing charity laws and forcing even more impoverished New Yorkers to turn to crime and

[11]"Archival Collections," The New York Bloomingdale Insane Asylum records, 1880-1910 | Rare Book & Manuscript Library | Columbia University Libraries Finding Aids, accessed December 18, 2023, https://findingaids.library.columbia.edu/ead/nnc-rb/ldpd_14329111.
[12] Columbia University, "Seth Low," Columbia University Libraries, accessed December 18, 2023, https://library.columbia.edu/libraries/cuarchives/presidents/low_seth.html.
[13] Edwin G Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham* (1998). P. 1234.

institutions in order to eat and find shelter.[14] Just as his Brooklyn policies had done, Low's involvement both as President of Columbia and as commissioner of the New York City charter grew his political breadth and popularity, this time pushing him to the forefront of the expanded city's 1901 mayoral race.

Seth Low as Mayor of New York City.

In December 1901, Seth Low was elected as the second mayor of the newly expanded New York City. In this role, he expanded his efforts to suppress lower-class voices and autonomy by increasing the carcerality of New York City. As Mayor, Low appointed longtime friend and fellow welfare reformist, Thomas W. Hynes, to act as the Commissioner of the Department of Corrections in New York City.[15] As Corrections Commissioner, Hynes, under Low's administration, oversaw all jails and prisons in New York City and was tasked with implementing innovative incarceration structures for the city.[16] Upon his appointment, Low told the New York Tribune that he was "confident" Hynes would reconstruct the city's prison system through strategies that were "in many ways… unusual." Still, Low assured the Tribune, Hynes held a "sympathy" for incarcerated people and would be sure to use "the most modern method of dealing with prisoners."[17]

While Thomas W. Hynes' methods of innovating the carceral state were certainly "unusual," they were not surprising. As Low and Hynes had worked together on welfare

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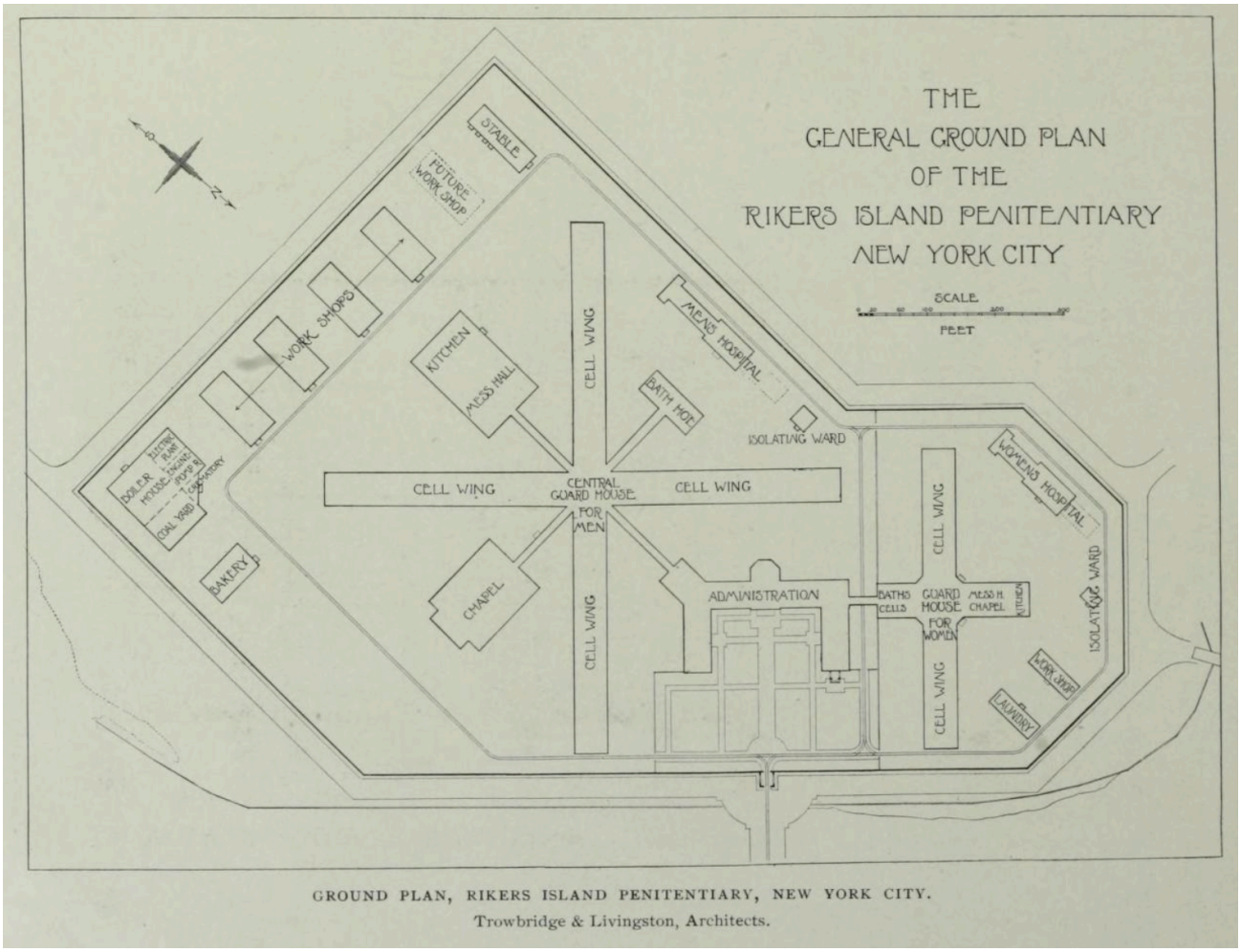
[14] Edwin G Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham* (1998). P. 1234.
[15] "Lepers on Rikers & 1st Blackwell Inmates to Rikers - Correction History," New York Correction History, accessed December 19, 2023, https://correctionhistory.org/html/chronicl/nycdoc/rikers/Lepers-on-Rikers-&-1st-Blackwell-Inmates-to-Rikers.pdf.
[16] "New York State Commission of Correction," Commission of Correction, accessed December 18, 2023, https://scoc.ny.gov/#:~:text=The%20Commission%20of%20Correction%20strives,implementation%20of%20new%20correctional%20technologies.
[17] New York Tribune, "Important Offices Filled. Heads of the Departments of Fire, Parks, Taxes, Correction and Docks Named.," *New York Tribune*, December 21, 1901.

restrictions in Brooklyn throughout the 1870s and 1880s, their newfound power gave them the ability to expand their welfare reform to not just lower-class civilians, but also to incarcerated people. Immediately after his appointment, Hynes, under the leadership of Low, began plotting for the construction of the newly consolidated city's first and most massive jail the region had ever seen. Through this process, the jail would effectively sequester the city's undesirable population to an island offshore of Manhattan– the city's wealthiest borough– while simultaneously maintaining the two men's welfare reform goals. This project was the construction of Rikers Island Jail.

The Making of Rikers Island Jail

Rikers Island was bought by the City of New York in 1884, just before the consolidation of the boroughs. Originally just around 70-80 acres, the island was purchased with the original intention of hosting a hospital, according to the New York Times.[18] Under Low's and Hynes' rule twenty years later, though, the idea of building a mere hospital on the land was eradicated. Instead, Hynes planned to build up the island to support a massive incarceration complex for the city's undesirable populations. In a 1910 edition of the popular architectural magazine, The Brickbuilder (now named the Architectural Forum), published the ground plans of the mostly finished complex, touting massive, state-of-the-art cell wings and workhouses.[19] Less than a decade after the project began, Riker Island Jail had been significantly constructed.

[18] The New York Times, "The Purchase of Riker's Island.," *The New York Times*, July 3, 1884, https://www.nytimes.com/1884/07/03/archives/the-purchase-of-rikers-island.html.
[19] The Brickbuilder, "The Planning of a Prison or Penitentiary," *The Brickbuilder*, 1910, https://archive.org/details/brickbuild19unse/page/n152/mode/1up.



GROUND PLAN, RIKERS ISLAND PENITENTIARY, NEW YORK CITY.
Trowbridge & Livingston, Architects.

To accomplish such a lofty construction project in so little time, Thomas Hynes relied on his, "unusual" strategies. Namely, Hynes forced people already incarcerated in other institutions into unpaid, post-emancipatory slave labor. To begin the process of forcing prisoner labor, Hynes charged Blackwell Island's warden, Frank W. Fox, with sending prisoners as day laborers to Rikers to help expand the island with landfills and begin constructing buildings. In the 1902 Official City Record, Fox reported that he had sent approximately 181 incarcerated men to work on Rikers Island each day, totaling 46,829 unpaid and coerced men over the span of just one year.[20] This unpaid work was used both as a way for Blackwell Island to relieve itself of its

[20] New York City, "The City Record" (New York City, February 4, 1903). P. 1000.

extreme overcrowding during the day, as well as to punish prisoners they deemed especially deplorable. An April 1903 New York Tribune article describes the work on Rikers Island as an "almost sure cure for wifebeaters," as the work was "the hardest work" any prisoner could endure.[21] For the majority of unskilled Blackwell prisoners sent to work on the construction of Rikers, they would leave their ward at 7:30 AM, arrive on Rikers shortly after, and then "hammer rocks for ten hours a day."[22] This work was grueling, unusually punitive, and, of course, completely unpaid. During 1902 alone, approximately 378,881 cubic yards of landfill had been added to the island's perimeter.[23]

By mid-1903, prisoners had constructed ten buildings on the island, including dormitories, a mess hall, a bathhouse, and a "cooler for troublesome prisoners," which is suspected to be an isolation ward.[24] While this had seemingly yielded positive results for the city, in the eyes of Thomas Hynes, it was not enough. On June 22nd, 1903, to increase the island's production, Hynes sent 150 prisoners from Blackwell Island to live permanently on Rikers Island.[25] There, Hynes told the New York Times, prisoners would be expected to work an additional "several hours" more a day than the typical ten-hour shifts they had while living on Blackwell. Through this increased labor, Hynes believed, "a greater amount of work will be accomplished, and that before the end of the present year the larger part of the work of filling in

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[21] New York Tribune, "Almost Sure Cure for Wife Beaters Can Be Seen Daily Doing Its Good Work on Riker's Island," *New York Tribune*, April 12, 1903.
[22] *Ibid.*
[23] New York Tribune, "Making a Big Island for New York out of a Small One.," *New York Tribune*, May 5, 1907. It's important to note that this figure represents the total cubic yards of landfill material added to the island, not the actual acreage of usable land added. It's unclear how deep the landfill material was set while adding to the island, so real figures of usable land added in 1902 is unfounded.
[24] The New York Times, "Passing of Blackwell's: Prison Colony to Be Established on Riker's Island To-Morrow.," *The New York Times*, June 21, 1903, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1903/06/21/118493388.html?pageNumber=8https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1903/06/21/118493388.html?pageNumber=8.
[25] *Ibid.*

will have been accomplished."[26] Through permanently settling prisoners on Rikers Island, Hynes created a sequestered space where inmates could be exploited for their labor away from the judgment of greater New York City. It's important to note that, while Hynes did exploit inmates in secluded spaces, this exploitation was not a secret. Newspapers such as the New York Tribune and the New York Times applauded the policy as a way to set criminals straight and punish them for the benefit of the city. While Hynes, under the Low administration, pulled the trigger on these cruel and unusual policies, the general public did not object.

While Rikers Island Jail had made much progress over the year-and-a-half since Low and Hynes had taken office, the habitability of the island itself had not. Just two months after prisoners were sent to live on the island full-time, residents of Queens began protesting the island's construction process, claiming that the production was hazardous to civilians. As the island relied on garbage ash to fill in the land, the construction process on the island created swaths of polluted, foul-smelling air that filled both the entirety of Rikers Island and wafted down into Queens. The pollution created such outcry that the New York Board of Health was called to Rikers Island to address the problem. In their investigation, the Board of Health found "only six barrels of disinfectant" on the island, an amount the New York Times recalled was "as much use as it would be for a man to try to dry up the East River with a spoon."[27] In a public address, Health officials told citizens that there was "no place other than Rikers Island to dump [the landfill]," and that " to stop dumping now would be of no benefit as material already on the

[26] The New York Times, "Passing of Blackwell's: Prison Colony to Be Established on Riker's Island To-Morrow.," *The New York Times*, June 21, 1903, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1903/06/21/118493388.html?pageNumber=8https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1903/06/21/118493388.html?pageNumber=8.

[27] The New York Times, "Fight on Rikers Island: Astoria Residents to Appeal to State Board of Health.," *The New York Times*, August 12, 1903, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1903/08/12/102017343.html?pageNumber=2.

island would smell just as badly."[28] They reassured citizens of Queens, however, that they would patrol the beaches of Queens to gather and dispose of any stray garbage and employ the use of more disinfectants and deodorizers to the neighborhoods affected. Unsurprisingly, the article mentions nothing about providing such resources or care to the incarcerated people living on the island itself.

The landfill issues on Rikers Island display one of many health concerns that incarcerated people faced to no avail by the city government. While the people of Queens were given recognition and solutions to their concerns, the people on Rikers were expected to endure the cruel and, in many cases, unsafe conditions on the island. While no research has been done to determine the long-term effects of working on Rikers Island during its landfilling process, the New York State Department of Health currently links exposure to landfill gas with increased "eye, throat, and lung irritation, nausea, headache, nasal blockage, sleeping difficulties, weight loss, chest pain, and aggravation of asthma,"[29] and several studies have found potential links between exposure and rates of cancer.[30] These potential symptoms from the landfill only compile onto the health risks incarcerated men surely faced from the demands of their labor while on the island. While no research has fully exposed the health realities for prisoners living on Rikers Island during this time, circumstantial evidence suggests the type of cruelty and barbarism they endured.

By the end of his term in December 1903, Mayor Seth Low had successfully eradicated the visibility and autonomy of New York's impoverished class by ceasing welfare benefits and

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[28] The New York Times, "Fight on Rikers Island: Astoria Residents to Appeal to State Board of Health.," *The New York Times*, August 12, 1903, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1903/08/12/102017343.html?pageNumber=2.

[29] New York State Department of Health, "Important Things to Know About Landfill Gas," Department of Health, accessed December 18, 2023, https://www.health.ny.gov/environmental/outdoors/air/landfill_gas.htm.

[30] "Landfill Gas Primer - An Overview for Environmental Health Professionals," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed December 18, 2023, https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/HAC/landfill/html/appc.html, Appendix C: Health Studies Related to Landfill Gas Exposure.

beginning production of Rikers Island Jail. As the welfare state declined, lower-class individuals sought sanctuary in the city's institutions, either by admitting themselves or their children to wards, or by committing crimes in order to secure food and shelter. This irrevocably increased the carcerality of impoverished peoples' lives in New York City, making the carceral system an unwavering pillar of their existence and the executioner of their autonomy.

Seth Low's terms as President of Columbia University and Mayor of New York City cannot be held as separate endeavors, nor can Columbia University exonerate itself from Seth Low's impacts on the impoverished and incarcerated people of New York City. Columbia University's prestige and power within New York City was cemented into history by Seth Low through his renaming, consolidating, and relocating of the university. Its structural and cultural significance in New York City as an elite institution remains irrevocably intertwined with the anti-poor and carceral policies Low championed on Rikers. A city structure which deifies elitism and prestige cannot exist without the active suppression of those who defect from the ideal. With an institution like Columbia University, an institution like Rikers Island Jail will always exist. As such, Columbia must learn how to reckon with its existence as the creator and perpetrator of one of the country's largest carceral bodies.

Conclusion and Recommendations.

New York City is known internationally as one of the greatest cities in the world, but just below the surface sits a cruel reality that thousands of New Yorkers face each day. Rikers Island Jail currently hosts about 6,000 people, most of whom await trial under the presumption of innocence, many who are brutalized by the jail's horrifying discipline and rehabilitation policies, and all who sit atop land literally formed by modern-day slave labor. Each week, Columbia

University sends researchers and volunteers to Rikers Island Jail to observe and interact with inmates for the intellectual benefit of the university. While many of these programs operate under the veil of philanthropy, Columbia University cannot relinquish itself from the reality of its position in creating this institution merely by sending its members there to help individuals, especially when using such experiences for institutional gain, whether it be a research paper for its faculty or a line on a resume for its students.

To effectively engage in unraveling Columbia's connections to modern slavery and carcerality, Columbia University must acknowledge its role in creating and maintaining Rikers Island Jail and work to uncover more histories and narratives from incarcerated people forced under the Low administration to work on Rikers Island. Beyond that, the university must reflect on its current policing practices of the greater Harlem area, of Morningside Heights, and of its own campus to ensure its own students, particularly those with ancestral ties to slavery and who are disproportionately affected by the carceral state, feel safe on and around campus. To this end, Columbia University must uphold and codify the research and study of Black and Brown voices by departmentalizing the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race and hiring diverse, knowledgeable, and local community members to lead discussions and courses that look critically at the university's role in incarceration and other systemic forms of oppression. Finally, Columbia must engage with the community through more grassroots and reparative structures to break down the very ivory tower that has created institutions like Rikers Island Jail. Only upon the breakdown of Columbia University's ivory tower can the rest of the city's population be free.

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