

Postscript: “Walls Turned Sideways Are Bridges”

Abolition Dreams and the Prison’s Aftermath

By the time mass incarceration is said to have begun in the 1970s, Leavenworth had already created a massive carceral complex and transformed the meaning of democracy. It was supposed to be the beginning of the carceral state, but because the state had always been carceral the 1970s was the latest manifestation of an already developed and institutionally grounded law-and-order politics. During the federal prison system’s “rebellion years,” people living on the edges of democracy and behind prison walls had convinced the nation that Leavenworth’s architecture was a regime of state violence that should be brought to an end. By the time of mass incarceration, Leavenworth had already died and been brought back to life. Carlson promised that the city of Leavenworth would be considered for a smaller replacement prison.¹

Leavenworth’s reemergence as the flagship institution of the federal prison system relied on a remodeling of its internal architecture. The Bureau of Prisons claimed it was closing Leavenworth because of its antiquated structure rather than because of the regime of racial and legal violence that was exposed by the efforts of antiprison organizers, so in 1975 authorities simply imagined a different sort of Leavenworth. When the institution was forced to change, it abandoned the old dungeons of Building 63, which was torn down and replaced by a remodeled Cellhouse C with “silent cells, a mini-Marion on site—bars rather than the double doors and pie-shaped cells. . . . The physical environment has been brightened by painting the interior of the cellblocks green, blue or yellow to replace the usual gray.”² In the aesthetic of this new architecture, the idea of Leavenworth was recalled to life by a state with new priorities in the project of mass incarceration. When the Bureau of Prisons announced the end of Leavenworth’s life, it was without a way forward beyond the prison, so embedded in this concession was the resurrection of the carceral state.

The project of federal punishment took on new political and cultural functions, increasing in capacity and insularity, becoming a site for the legal enclosure of federal prisons from public regulation and a site for the mass incarceration of immigrants. In new forms of legal incorporation, immigrant detainees were assigned the “hopelessly outdated” cell houses that radiated from the back of the prison’s dome.³ By the early 1980s, the mass incarceration of immigrants in federal prisons brought 719 Cuban prisoners to Leavenworth from Atlanta, which the Cubans had tried to burn down. There were three thousand Cubans in federal custody, and while some had actually violated criminal laws, most were seeking political asylum and remained in federal custody only because Fidel Castro refused to take them back. When Castro agreed to renegotiate the terms of mass deportation and the resulting “riots” ended in mass transfers to Leavenworth, the prisoners were denied family visits, recreational facilities, educational classes, jobs, religious services, and exercise.⁴ They were double celled and given one shower per week. In this newly established immigration jail inside the nation’s flagship institution, the “four-point restraint,” or practice of chaining detainees to their beds, was a routine part of “institutional security.”⁵

Leavenworth’s resurrection consolidated its power in political and economic terms. As part of a whole way of life, the sustained public commitments to federal power that had overturned an earlier set of traditions could not simply be abandoned. In a region that once went to war over the impositions of federal law and order, state power relied on the incorporation of the people into the prison’s rituals. The prison was mapped into the town’s existing gridlines, and it deputized citizens of a carceral democracy to do its work. In addition to the cultural aspects of the relationship, the closure of the nation’s first prison would mean a loss to the local community of nine hundred jobs, 6.5 percent of the workforce, and \$5.9 million in revenue.⁶ Losing Leavenworth would also have diminished the city’s political power in the state, since Kansas districting laws count prisoners as residents in order to bolster the region’s power in elections.⁷

As Leavenworth found new institutional priorities as a joint political, economic, and cultural project, it was adapted to meet new racial designs in a very old racial script. In the 1980s and 1990s, the federal prison system experienced what administrators described as “race wars.” As part of that regime of violence, Thomas Silverstein, a member of the Aryan Brotherhood, killed a member of the DC Blacks prison gang named Raymond “Cadillac” Smith at the federal prison in Marion, Illinois. When he killed a guard named Merle Clutts in 1983, he was sent to Atlanta and then to Leavenworth in 1987, where he was given a “no human contact order” in a “special isolation cell” made of steel in the prison basement.⁸ Lights remained on and officers stood guard around the clock. The cell was originally constructed to house organized crime bosses on “protective” status, and it was “buried underneath the rotunda in a section of the basement [not] used for years. It was so isolated that you could not hear any of the familiar sounds of prison

life—no human voices, toilets flushing, doors clanging shut, televisions blaring. Nothing.”⁹ The adaptation of old architectures meant that the public demolition of Building 63 took place alongside the private reliance on new methods of state deprivation.

Despite the public announcement of its closure in 1974, Leavenworth remains open today as an icon open to prisoners but closed to the public. Signs across the street from the institution state firmly in red letters that no photos of the institution should be taken. The last researcher allowed inside was the journalist Pete Earley, who wrote *The Hot House* with unfettered access between 1987 and 1989. Calls for Leavenworth’s closure have abated, and it seems an institution without end. If its limestone could somehow be disassembled and forged into something new, what shape would it take? What happens when prison walls are taken down? What remains? What does it mean to imagine the end of the prison as the beginning of democracy rather than to tinker in the realm of reform?

There was a time when even James Bennett, head of the Bureau of Prisons for most of the twentieth century, imagined a time beyond the prison.¹⁰ In explaining his vision of the prison’s end, he suggested that state terror could somehow be removed from the building—that prisons could be redesigned into residential rather than custodial kinds of buildings. When Leavenworth’s walls almost came down, one of the most important lessons from that moment was that state terror cannot be removed from the prison. Leavenworth was an idea about many things, but it was an idea about the end of gothic violence that served only to ratify a structure of civil death and to normalize the terms of carceral democracy. It created the very terms of the violence it claimed to remedy. In the moment when it was almost abolished, Leavenworth fortified itself, drawing on the secrets of its architecture and the enormity of its shadow across the prairie to reassert its sense of permanence.

To understand the prison’s revivification as a democratic institution, we return analytically to the border. At this most gothic place, the border prisons of the nineteenth century were crumbling architectures by the 1970s. They had stood for over a century as emblems of a carceral state at the border between slavery and freedom. Their closures re-marked space in different ways. The Virginia State Penitentiary, where slaves were admitted to a prison system designed for free subjects, was reduced to a barren green lawn on the side of the highway until it was paved for a company parking lot. The prison was demolished in 1999, when state prisoners brought the bricks down one by one. No traces remain of John Henry or the “white house.” The original Maryland Penitentiary, established in 1811, remains open today as the oldest operating prison in the world. Maryland’s second prison, built in 1879, was condemned in 2007 with a national reputation as the “killing fields.” When the governor shuttered the prison because of its “antiquated design,” hundreds came to tour the institution before its demolition.¹¹ Prisoners took apart the prison house door and salvaged the parts for the state.

While some of the original institutions of the gothic generation have been taken down brick by brick, others have become sites of memorialization or have developed into prison museums for dark tourism. Eastern State is now the site of art exhibits, daily tours, and even a haunted house. The Missouri State Penitentiary is now a tourist site with an online store where one can order a real piece of brick from the institution. Missouri and West Virginia are also part of ghost-hunting expeditions depicted on television. These relationships between the prison and society reinscribe the gothic imaginary, even as they normalize the prison's continuation in the realm of culture. Prison tourism registers the production of a long cultural memory that remains in the institution's afterlife. It is also part of the long tradition of prison reform, a winding and labyrinthine structure that, once entered, is difficult to escape.

The exit from mass incarceration requires an exit from prison reform and a reconceptualization of mass incarceration from a moment in time to a form of political status. The number of people in prison can be reduced to a "normal" use of cages and wall, but the walls will still stand as articulations of state violence. The buildings can be taken apart, but they will be given new life if they remain bound to the idea of civil death as a status assigned to the body. In taking down the gothic formulation of civil death brick by brick, prison abolition, as an idea with a very long life, requires learning from the history of mass incarceration about the processes that entrenched the carceral state. This book has tried to think beyond the prison's architecture and to reimagine terrains of democracy and justice that come from the abolitionist tradition. Having examined how the state articulates the meaning of mass imprisonment over time, it ends by asking what it would mean to redesign a theory of the state not bound to the project of the prison.