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Behind Prison Bars and Gunshots: An Examination of *The Animals At Attica*

On the 45th anniversary of the Attica Prison riot, thousands of United States prison inmates made their voices heard across the country. Together, they shared a common goal: to put an end to the mistreatment of inmates inside the nation's prisons and correctional facilities. This event, however, was part of a chain of familiar narratives throughout American history—the oppression inmates face and the disproportionate ratios of the hyperincarceration of racial and ethnic minorities. This essay will address how, while often overlooked by the master narrative of history, the United States' tendencies for punishment and incarceration is a complex problem that has its roots in the social perceptions of deemed 'outsiders,' as exemplified by the article *The Animals At Attica* in the Mervyn Dymally collection of California State University, Los Angeles.

The Mervyn Dymally collection is an assemblage of documents, correspondence, and other papers concerning Cal State LA alumnus Mervyn M. Dymally (1926-2012), who proposed many reforms for educational, political, and social practices. With many of his actions involving human rights, one of the papers in the Mervyn Dymally collection sent to him is the *New York Times* article *The Animals at Attica* written in Washington on September 15, 1971, by political writer Tom Wicker. In the face of growing tensions not only between inmates and officers but

also between different racial and ethnic groups in the civil rights struggle, Wicker was known for his coverage and papers about prison uprisings in the 1970s. According to *New York Times* article *Tom Wicker, Times Journalist, Dies at 85*, "[Wicker's] most notable involvement took place during the uprising by 1,300 inmates who seized 38 guards and workers at the Attica prison in upstate New York in September 1971….Mr. Wicker was asked by Attica's rebels to join a group of outsiders to inspect prison conditions and monitor negotiations between inmates and officials" (McFadden). Most likely due to his involvement with the event, Wicker was motivated to write *The Animals at Attica* two days after the riot and put this issue in the public spotlight.

Similarly, Wicker's intended audience was probably the general public, as the riot was a publicly known event and was part of a wider problem of segregation. This is also proven by the opening line: "After the massacre at Attica, Governor Rockefeller issued a statement that began with this sentence: 'Our hearts go out to the families of the hostages who died at Attica'" (Wicker), which is not only used to show how Rockefeller did not comfort the families of the dead prisoners, but also as a way to respread the message to more of the public. Wicker's argument sympathizes with the prisoners at Attica and puts them in a humanly light, which was not done by the correctional officers and many government officials. Essentially, Wicker's involvement with the Attica prison riot of 1971 was most likely his primary motivation for writing the article intended for both the general public and officals, as well as the injustice in American society that the riot symbolized.

In the time leading up to the 1971 Attica prison riot, tensions were already growing in the civil rights movement as well as in the prisons. As put by Wicker in his article, "...every guard at

Attica is white... but the prisoners are 75 percent, or maybe 85 percent—no one seems to know for sure—black and Puerto Rican. There is no Spanish-speaking doctor." The hyperincarceration of black and Puerto Rican prisoners paired with a lack of resources fueled the sparks of the riot demanding justice. As for the large number of black and Puerto Rican prisoners, the U.S.' criminal justice system often marginalized and punished people of color, and continued to use forms of retributive justice to attempt to combat the crime rates many officials and politicians associated with them.

This push against inequality was also seen outside of the prisons around the 1960s and 70s. The Watts riots in 1965, which took place in Los Angeles and was caused by the arrest of Marquette Frye, an African-American man who was arrested and beaten by a Californian patrol officer, who accused him of driving intoxicated (Edy). The riot was barely the beginning of a widespread anger towards government officials due to unfair treatment. The King assassination riots after the murder of civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 are another instance of this. Although the riots were mainly caused by King's death, it also occurred due to the "discriminatory housing policies, white flight disparities, and income disparities [that] pushed many black urban residents into largely African-American, low-income areas" (Blakemore). Between 1910 and 1970, six million black Americans moved to Northern urban areas from the South in the Great Migration to flee from the racial horrors and economic depravity inflicted upon them, as well as to start a mass antiracist movement to defy "the claim that Blacks' political-economic plight was their fault" (Kendi 192). These happenings signified the civil unrest rising due to the rising problems regarding segregation.

In Los Angeles, this period of turmoil signified the corrupt legal system present throughout the country, leading to the anger of minorities and prison inmates both in the 1970s and in 2016, during the 45th anniversary of the Attica prison riot. In Los Angeles' history, many of those who spoke for equality were silenced, whether it be by a bullet or life behind bars. The rhetoric in Wicker's article, such as the use of 'animals,' demonstrates what stereotypes were present in the country's society and the racial bias it took, though the article itself contains no racial biases. From this, the conclusion can be drawn that the history of oppression in Los Angeles' history is impacted by happenings throughout the country and a struggle to spotlight the perspectives of activists like Martin Luther King Jr.

During the aftermath of a peak point of political and social unrest, Wicker published *The Animals At Attica*, which reflects and criticizes the perspective many took to both prisoners and people of color in the 60s and 70s. Wicker writes that the special observers at Attica heard the prisoners plead for others to treat them as humans and give them the rights of such. "Once, in a negotiating session through a steel-barred gate that divided prisoner-held and state-held territory, Assistant Correction Commissioner Walter Dunbar told the prisoner leader, Richard Clark, "In thirty years, I've never lied to an inmate." "But how about to a man?" Clark asked quietly" (Wicker), implying that Clark knew Dunbar and other officials did not consider the prisoners to be men. Likewise, the polygenesis theory, which proposed that Africans were a completely different species than humans (Kendi 37), runs parallel to the treatment of prisoners as animals. The black and Puerto Rican prisoners at Attica were not given human rights such as health care because they were seen as animalistic. In the eyes of Attica's guards, they were not worth giving food to, as "a guard bringing [the prisoners] a box of food said as he put it down, 'If I'd known it

was for you people, I wouldn't have brought it'" (Wicker). The Japanese, the indigenous, women in history, and many other oppressed groups discussed by Takaki and Kendi have faced similar struggles as Attica's prisoners described in Wicker's article, whether they were deemed too inferior, inhumane, or otherwise for basic human and civil rights.

Thus, it can be said that almost the entirety of the master narrative of the history of race and ethnicity is a mere euphemism of the truth, as was the euphemism of the Attica prison being a "correctional facility." Today, the unjust morality of the hyperincarceration of people of color and the treatment of those prisoners as animals that Wicker described is still present (Human Rights Watch). *The Animals at Attica* from the Mervyn Dymally collection at Cal State LA shows one perspective of this complex issue, at the heart of which is a fight against inequality and stereotypes based on a single aspect of a population. Yet by analyzing the cruelties of the past through perspectives such as Wickers', we may perhaps be able to uncover what is underneath the sugarcoating of the issue and see all people equally, no matter their color, background, or actions.

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