

Literary Construction of Attica in Riot-Era Cultural Production

Crystal Mandal

April 14, 2025

Topic Selection

I don't know anyone in prison. It's a question I've been asked when I talk about prison abolition in any way or mention that I'm interested in carceral politics. I wish I could say that I have a wide political interest and my interest in prison abolition is one of many injustices I feel strongly about, but that is unfortunately not the case.

I am a music major. In 2021, renowned pianist, composer, and political activist Frederic Rzewski passed away, spurring a resurgence of interest in his music. It was in the aftermath of his death that I first heard and appreciated his music. Of particular interest to me was the distinctly American political voice in his music. Much of his music experiments with American musical form and style, especially contextualised in critique and/or conversation with

the contemporaneous political atmosphere. Of distinguished interest to me is his couplet of pieces “Coming Together” and “Attica”, written in the 1970’s. Both pieces, written in the aftermath of the Attica Riots, paint an image of Attica not only as brutal and transformative but also distinctly as *unnecessary*. This dethroning of incarceration as a necessary social structure is not something that I was aware of prior to engagement with Rzewski’s music, the emotional reponse I had and still do have to his oeuvre and those two pieces in general fully inspired me to do further reading and become invested.

The topic I’m most interested in researching is less about the actualities of incarceration and carceral policy, but more about the representation of American Prison Systems in contemporary conversation. The Attica Riots were remarkable, publicized, and revolutionary, occupying a great deal of contemporaneous public consciousness, but have since faded into obscurity. I wish, by analysing and relating different poems, letters, pieces of art and music, and journals, to construct a literary image of Attica to better understand the revolutionary, galvanizing effect the riots had on contemporary society.

I believe this is currently just as relevant as it was 50 years ago. Though we might not hear as much about current-day prison riots, the conditions for incarcerated peoples are still just as terrible as, if not worse than, they were at Attica: what little prison reform was passed in the 70’s was later repealed in the 80’s and 90’s. Some of the sources I’m interested in consulting and

using in my construction of Attica-Image are these:

References

- Asplund, C. (1995). Frederic rzewski and spontaneous political music. *Perspectives of New Music*, 33(1/2), 418–441. Retrieved April 14, 2025, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/833713>
- Cleaver, E. (1968). *Soul on ice*. McGraw-Hill.
- Jackson, G. (1972). *Soledad brother*. Coward-McCann.
- Kutchins, H. (1973). *Social Work*, 18(4), 120–122. Retrieved April 10, 2025, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23711135>
- Luk, S. (2018). *The life of paper: Letters and a poetics of living beyond captivity*. University of California Press.
- Melville, S., & Melville, J. (2022). *Letters from attica*. Chicago Review Press.
- Metzer, D. (2021). Prisoners' voices: Frederic rzewski's coming together and attica. *The Journal of Musicology*, 38(1), pp. 109–139. Retrieved April 10, 2025, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48771517>
- Munro-Bjorklund, V. (1991). Popular cultural images of criminals and prisoners since attica. *Social Justice*, 18(3 (45)), 48–70. Retrieved April 14, 2025, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29766619>
- New York State Special Commission. (1972). *Attica: The official report of the new york state special commission on attica*. Bantam Book.
- Oswald, R. G. (1972). *Attica - my story* (R. Campbell, Ed.). Doubleday.

Rzewski, F. (1983a). Attica.

Rzewski, F. (1983b). Coming together.

Rzewski, F. (1995). Inner voices. *Perspectives of New Music*, 33(1/2), 404–417. Retrieved April 14, 2025, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/833712>

Thompson, H. A. (2016). *Blood in the water: The attica prison uprising of 1971 and its legacy*. Pantheon Books.

Tisdale, C. (2022). *When the smoke cleared: Attica prison poems and journals*. Duke University Press.