

Literary Construction of Attica in Post-Riot

Cultural Products

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## Introduction

On the 5th of November, 2025, members of the California public voted on Proposition 6. According to the California General Voter's Guide, Proposition 6 ends slavery by "replacing involuntary carceral servitude with voluntary work programs". The bill ran unopposed but still failed among the public: that is, California voted against an abolishment of slavery.

The primary identifier in the wording of Proposition 6 is "carceral" - of or relating to the nature of prisons. What about the nature of prisons justifies a contemporary, protected installation of slavery?

Sharon Luk's "The Life of Paper" details a framework of incarceration that establishes the use of threat of incarceration as silencer of dissenting voices. The Governing Power constructs the prison such that the mere threat of incarceration is a policing force. There is a great deal of conversation constructing the prison as an ideal in academic and social contexts with a "top-down" or "subtractive" model (by starting with a general concept and imposing restrictions and filters to increase the resolution). In this literary exploration, I wish to construct a framework of (contemporary, American) prisons with a "bottom-up" or "granular/additive" model (that is, by starting with a sample set of "grains" and modulating, interpolating between, and resampling them to produce a model) by examining poems, letters, and pieces of music to generate a cultural image of Prison.

Now, the image of the American Prison System is massive - and quite unfeasible to construct in a short exploration. From the 9th of September, 1971, to the 13th of September, 1971, the Attica State Prison Riot was publicised in such a meaningful way that New York State Governor Rockefeller delayed police

action away from prime television hours to minimise viewing of the atrocities. In following years in America, Attica remained a primary image of the American Prison, and still remains culturally relevant, with recent Television Show “Orange is the New Black” Season 5 both referencing directly Attica and paralleling the chronology of the Attica Riots. The massive impact of the Attica Riots on contemporaneous political and artistic movements (especially in the American Folk Revival) as well as in contemporary cultural landscapes (with references in “Orange is the New Black” and, though a little older, still relevant and beloved “If I Ruled the World (Imagine That)” by NAS) cements Attica as a representative singular image of The American Prison.

If Attica is representative of The American Prison, then construction of an image of Attica is representative of the cultural image of The American Prison. By analysing, relating, and resampling the cultural response to Attica in 1970’s America, we can begin to construct an contemporary image of The Prison. In this exploration, I will analyse the depiction of Attica in the Prison Letters of Samuel Melville, the Music of Frederic Rzewski, and the published Poems of Attica Inmates post-Riots, and use the underlying connecting strands to fabricate a new, “bottom-up” construction of Attica.

## Outline

1. Preamble - On Attica (brief history + chronology)
  - racial makeup - 64% black inmate population in D yard, (New York State Special Commission, 1972, p. 490) no black guards (Melville & Melville, 2022, p. 147)
  - inhumane living conditions - low temperatures, minimal activity,

poor hygiene offerings, insufficient food(Thompson, 2016)

- government censorship + obfuscation(Thompson, 2016, p. 573)

## 2. On Letters

- Discussion of Luk's "Life of Paper"

### – Letter as Voice

- \* "one's habits and abilities are judged by his letters"(Luk, 2018, p. 2)
- \* "This is what I think: people don't write to a prisoner either out of indifference or because of a lack of imagination"(Luk, 2018, p. 6)
- \* "it don't come out near what i want. in four tries on a letter to kenny i still havn't sent anything. . . .he's just not a person with whom one has verbal communication"(Melville & Melville, 2022, p. 87)
- \* "I'm sorry if some of this is illegible. I wrote if off the top and I don't really have much to say, evidently."(Melville & Melville, 2022, p. 144)

### – Letter in Prisons

- \* "My dear wife, As the Japanese censor is away again, I write this in English"(Luk, 2018, p. 121)

### – Systematic Censorship of Writing

- \* “affect as mode of historical intervention”, “prohibitions on formal self-representation and by dominant reproductions of selfhood as an autonomous rational subject”(Luk, 2018, p. 121)
- Now that letters have been introduced as substantial, subtext-heavy, pieces of writing, introduce Jackson + Cleaver
  - On Becoming
    - \* “Of course I’d always known that I was black, but I’d never really stopped to take stock of what I was involved in.”(Cleaver, 1968, p. 3)
    - \* “I defied the law and they put my in prison. So why not put those dirty mothers in prison too?”(Cleaver, 1968, p. 4)
    - \* “All I could recall was an eternity of pacing back and forth in the cell, preaching to the unhearing walls”(Cleaver, 1968, p. 11)
    - \* “That is why I started to write. To save myself.”(Cleaver, 1968, p. 15)
  - Similar elaborations on Cleaver’s “Soul Food” and, especially, “A Day in Folsom Prison”
  - Jan 12 1967 - “Your Letter was well received; it left me feeling better than I have felt for years. I have never felt as close to any human as I do to you now.”(Jackson, 1972, p. 99)
  - Jan 23 1967 - “I tried to write several times these last couple of

weeks but my letters all came back with a note attached explaining what I can and cannot say.” (Jackson, 1972, p. 101)

- Oct 17 1967 - “I suffer a constant bombardment of nonsense from all sides.” (Jackson, 1972, p. 139)

\* interesting parallel with “[in the] ravings of lost hysterical men i can act with clarity and meaning” (Melville & Melville, 2022, p. 110) (this text is also represented in coming together, by frederic rzewski)(Rzewski, 1983b)

### 3. Poems

- The poems collected in *Betcha Ain't* and *When the Smoke Cleared* by Celes Tisdale
- text of *Coming Together* and *Attica*
- text of *If I Ruled the World*

### 4. Music

- Analysis of *Coming Together* and *Attica*(Metzer, 2021)
  - 8x8 phrase construction - small section length to depict claustrophobia of cells
  - rigid phrasing - rigid but asymmetric phrase length rules to depict rigid but arbitrary policing and ruling by guards
  - repeating source material - “[in the] ravings of lost hysterical men”

- Personal analysis of Nas' *If I Ruled the World*

#### 5. Granular Synthesis

- physical + mental brutality,
- racialisation,
- censorship,
- geographical disconnection

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