

Attica Suite

Construction of Attica-image 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.

Preamble -

Of vital importance to the construction of this image is, at first, an understanding of the realities of the conditions and events at Attica Correctional Facility. The Attica Correctional Facility is a maximum security prison facility located in Attica, New York, about 40 miles east of Buffalo - and, more important to the majority of Attica inmates, about 340 miles and 6 hours Northeast of New York City. This distance cannot be travelled without a car; even today, there is

no public bus route from New York City to Attica, with only privately operated shuttles offered. The standard trip, according to [prisonpulse dot com](http://prisonpulse.com) leaves Manhattan at 9:45 pm (21:45) the night before the trip, and returns at 10:00 pm (22:00) the next day. The current price of this trip is \$160USD: about 14 hours of minimum wage labor.

As detailed explicitly in both the Official Report of the New York State Special Commission on Attica (henceforth the Official Report) and Heather Ann Thompson's "Blood in the Water" - and referenced implicitly in Samuel Melville's "Letters from Attica" and Celes Tisdale's poetry collections "Betcha Ain't" and "When the Smoke Cleared" - the makeup of the Attica prison population was heavily skewed towards one particular socio-economic profile. Of Attica's nearly twenty-five hundred (2,500) inmates, forty percent (40%) were under the age of thirty, seventy-seven percent (77%) were from cities and predominantly urban areas, and sixty-three percent (63%) were African American or Puerto Rican. Eighty percent (80%) of Attica's inmates circa September 1971 had not graduated high school. (Thompson, 2016, p. 580) These statistics point to a particular demographic of inmate - a (relatively) un- or under- educated, non-white, urban, and younger man. Thompson paints portraits of several representative inmates, including:

- James and John Schleich - a pair of nineteen year old twins held in Attica for parole violations, with their initial convictions of "unauthorized use of a motor vehicle" and "cutting a hole in a lady's convertible top",
- Elliot "L. D." Barker - a twenty-one year old inmate who was sent to Attica for driving without a license,
- Angel Martinez - a seventeen year old Puerto Rican, who was incarcerated

for crimes relating to his self-medication for polio with heroin use.

Of note is the non-violent nature of these crimes, the young age of the inmates, and linguistic barriers; Puerto Rican Angel Martinez spoke only Spanish, which made it impossible to communicate with an exclusively English-speaking prison guard. (Thompson, 2016, p. 7)

Soul on Ice and Soledad Brother

A few years prior to the ticking time-bomb that is Attica in 1971, two important incarcerated leaders of the Black Panther Party were writing in California. It is essential to understanding the narrative of prison abolition and carceral justice that one is familiar with the writings of George Jackson and Eldridge Cleaver. Both Jackson and Cleaver were incarcerated at the Correctional Training Facility near Soledad, California. Though they were contemporaries, they were not well acquainted. Due to the nondescript naming and the location, this facility is more commonly known as - both in this essay and in related writings - Soledad State Prison. Cleaver was later also incarcerated at Folsom State Prison, which is where much of his writing in *Soul on Ice* comes from. Similar to Attica, Soledad and Folsom were both heavily racialised in their inmate demographics. Both primarily hold Black and Latine inmates.

Written as an exercise, one of the articles collected in Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* is the excruciatingly detailed "A Day in Folsom Prison", where he summarises the events of an average day in his life. As he narrates, his day begins with a disciplined self-awakening at 5:30 am before the officially scheduled awakening at 7:00 am. He reorganises and cleans his cell, exercises for a little while, takes a "jailbird bath" in the sink in his cell, and listens to the news on the radio - all before he is forcibly moved to the mess hall for breakfast at 7:30 am. (Cleaver,

1968, p. 64) While it is unnecessary to fully recount his day, it is important to note that his schedule is heavily regimented and dependent on the will of the prison officers. Another important statistic is his solitary time: in the course of a usual day in Folsom Prison, Cleaver “spend[s] approximately seventeen hours a day in [his] cell”. On average, according to the Pew Research Center, a person living alone spends about ten (10) hours a day in solitude. (Livingston, 2019) Thus, Cleaver spends, on average, almost double the amount of time alone, whilst still admitting that he makes efforts to engage with others. The life of an inmate is strictly regulated and solitary. Cleaver’s only refuge is writing, particularly letters.

Indeed, letters tend to act as the primary contact an inmate has with the outside world. George Jackson’s foundational collection *Soledad Brother* is much less formal than Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*. Where Cleaver contrasts his (carefully chosen) letters with expository writing, essays, and manifestos, *Soledad Brother* is simply a collection of Jackson’s prison letters. In fact, the very first of these letters is the only one acknowledging such a collection. The others are simply the message atoms of his incarcerated reality.

Letters from Attica

Both *Soul on Ice* and *Soledad Brother* are written in the late 1960’s - about five years prior to the events at Attica. Though the content of these collections are relevant, the physical and chronological distances place Cleaver and Jackson only adjacent to Attica - not far away, but not explicitly related. Of vital importance to this construction of Attica-image is the vibrant and extremely controversial collection “Letters from Attica”, written by Samuel Melville.

Samuel Melville is an odd figure in the narrative of Attica. He is described

as a terrorist in contemporaneous news articles and as the “mad bomber [and] member of 5 company” in the Official Report. In his son’s words, he is a modern-day John Brown(J. Melville, 2021), and in his own he is a reformed honky.(S. Melville & Melville, 2022, p. 53) ¹His famed collection *Letters from Attica* consists primarily of his letters sent between 1969 and 1971, with some of his manifestos and articles peppered chronologically between certain letters. The existence of this text is itself an argument about the racial tensions and the flattening of narrative at Attica. Due to Melville’s active role in organising prior to and during the riots and his passive role in being white, his actions and influences were, at the time of the Official Report minimized and unfocused - it’s difficult to paint a conflict as a microcosm for race war when multiple racialised factions (some of the same race) are fighting against each other and a primary faction leader was white. Melville’s letters will be discussed at length later.

Geographies

The infamous article on Orientalism by Edward Said (Said, 1977) introduces a core framework of analysis for non-physical geographies. Said’s “imagined geography” is a criticism of the Orient: the Orient is not real, and thus cannot have a location, but it’s discourses physicality imbues it with a geography that cannot be outlined on any world map but in conversation is nonetheless “real”. As Said explains, there is no symmetric field - an “Occidentalism” to study the “Occident” - because the imagined geography of the Orient is only defined by its quality as an Other, and to study and classify a non-Other (a “norm”) would be meaningless. (Said, 1977, p. 163) We can use this framework to

¹This is the first time that a racially charged term - a slur, if you will - is used in this essay. Use of these charged terms is not done for any frivolous purposes, but because the author believes that in racial discourses these terms “pop up”, and it is ideologically dampening and censoring to remove or obfuscate the usage of these terms in the related literature. Further segments in this essay will again use these words. As this is potentially upsetting, I would advise to please take note and be aware.

discourse the physicality of the carceral image. Yes, in the case of Attica, the location of the prison is far away from the cities, and this does contribute to the image of “the prison” as distant, but this is further articulated by the use of letter as communication. As detailed by Sharon Luk in *The Life of Paper* and the USPS website, physical mail travels long distances over long times to get to the recipient. The additional time and financial burden of constructing and sending a message by the post imposes additional barriers to communication. This restricted bandwidth facilitates the Othering of the sender; in an era of instant and widely available, mobile calling, texting, and video communication technologies, it is fundamentally easy to reach someone. This unlimited bandwidth has the opposite effect of superficially familiarising all perspectives.

As recounted in “A Day in Folsom Prison”, mail is to be posted at 8am - only thirty minutes after the scheduled wake-up time.(Cleaver, 1968, p. 64) In certain Computer-Science fields, an “off-by-one” error occurs when two processes fail to properly interact due to incongruent indexing systems. Here, if an inmate begins their day with breakfast, they have missed their window for mailing, and thus the calendar of writing the letter and sending the letter are now displaced.

Additionally, there is much labor necessary for the production of the letter. Other than the arduous task of putting intentions to thoughts to words, one must take extreme care to evade censorship. In Luk’s *The Life of Paper*, Luk analyses the structure of writing from within Japanese internement in World War II America. While it’s beyond the scope of this exploration to truly discourse Luk’s analysis, it’s helpful to at least be familiar. Luk defines censorship rather eloquently as “prohibitions on formal self-representation and dominant reproductions of selfhood as an autonomous rational subject.”(Luk, 2018,

p. 121) That is, censorship not only restricts language use, but, because, as she describes “one’s habits and abilities are judged by his letters”, the affect of one’s writing informs how a subject constructs itself.(Luk, 2018, p. 2) As an example, thus begins a letter excerpted in *The Life of Paper*:

“My dear wife, As the Japanese censor is away again, I write this in English”(Luk, 2018, p. 121)

Quodlibet Fantasia - Excerpts Analysed

Now that a groundwork for discourse has been laid, the following sections will deconstruct several very important excerpts.

Coming Together

i think the combination of age and a greater coming together is responsible for the speed of the passing time. it’s six months now and i can tell you truthfully few periods in my life have passed so quickly. i am in excellent physical and emotional health. there are doubtless subtle surprises ahead but i feel secure and ready. As lovers will contrast their emotions in times of crisis, so am i dealing with my environment. in the indifferent brutality, incessant noise, the experimental chemistry of food, the ravings of lost hysterical men, i can act with clarity and meaning. i am deliberate - sometimes even calculating - seldom employing histrionics except as a test of the reactions of others. i read much, exercise, talk to guards and inmates, feeling for the inevitable direction of my life.(Rzewski, 1983b)

This passage by Samuel Melville is remarkably vivid and dense. The rhythmic

pulse is deliberate - calculating - in its disorienting nature. Samuel Melville was known for utilising unique sentence structures and capitalisation schema for different tones and voices. Here, the lack of capitalisation serves to save ink and effort, but also act as a subtle reminder that “the indifferent brutality, incessant noise, experimental chemistry of food, [and] the ravings of lost, hysterical men” all take their toll on the human spirit. In setting this to music, Rzewski chose this text for it’s haunting nature. As described in Metzger’s *Prisoner’s Voices*, Rzewski’s setting is a minimalist piece with asymmetric phrase length and text setting and a very unusual and rigid structure. Though it’s not important to get into the dense musical analysis, it is quite helpful in understanding the suffocating nature of this work. The constructive atoms that we can use from *Coming Together* primarily describe the physical and mental toll the repetitive prison environment has on the inmate. It is most important to recognise “the incessant noise” and “indifferent brutality”, as well as the expedited passing of time as the atomic elements of *Coming Together*.

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)

“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)

Cleaver’s *On Becoming* from *Soul on Ice* demonstrates a particular racialisation of carceral oppression. The letter begins with a striking thought: until Cleaver’s experience with incarceration, being black wasn’t as relevant to his

life. Cleaver's depictions in *A Day in Folsom Prison* paint his prison life as regimented and soul-destroying, yes, but his conversations in *On Becoming* shape them as distinctly Black experience. Also illuminating is his reassurance of Luk's claim that "ones habits and abilities are judged by his letters". (Luk, 2018, p. 2) When Cleaver decides that it is time to do something in Hell, he chooses to write.

Soledad Brother

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)

Jackson's letters perfectly and concisely demonstrate the imagined distances between inmates and the outside world. To Jackson, the humble letter is the closest contact he has to anyone else. How far must the Prison be that the distant letter - as discussed earlier in this exploration - is reimagined as "close"? Further, his writing is displaced even more from his own voice by the restrictive censorship. It's enlightening and frightening to note the similarity in language between Melville's "incessant noise [and] ... ravings of lost hysterical men" and Jackson's "constant bombardment of nonsense".

When the Smoke Cleared

1st Page

They say our isolation is justifiable
So, when I'm released
I'll find a house or hut to live in
In a lonely countryside
With Atticka on my mind.

- Daniel Brown(Tisdale, 2022, p. 36)

Just Another Page

(September 13, 2972)

A year later
And it's just anoother page
And the only thing they do right is wrong
And Attica is a maggot-minded black blood sucker
And the only thing they do right is wrong
And another page of history is written in black blood
And old black mamas pay taxes to buy guns that killed their sons
And the consequence of being free... is death
And your sympathy and tears always come too late
And the only thing they do right is wrong
And it's just another page.

- John Lee Norris(Tisdale, 2022, p. 52)

Finally, at the end of our journey, we can appreciate and dissect the pearls of meaning from the poets (inmates) at Attica. These two poems were written in Attica in 1972, just a year after the riots. Much of the hostility towards the Officers and the revolutionary sentiment is still prevalent, and the imagery is

very vivid and direct. There is nothing Romantic about the pastoral dream in **1st Page**. Brown's careful choice of the word "hut" is also quite important. Even when the inmate is released from prison, the experience is so haunting that the inmate will continue to relive it for years. The act of finding a house or a hut is written passively to disconnect the outside, "free" life from the eternal shadow of incarceration. Brown's subject need not find a hut - the inmate may be eligible for and strive toward any type of housing they wish - but is doomed to find a cell only slightly better than the one at Attica.

For Norris, the Attica Riots were simply a passing event. Norris corroborates earlier Jackson and Cleaver's notions that the Prison runs off of Black exploitation - "black blood". Further, Norris goes on to critique the system that perpetuates Black grief and violence. The taxes that Black people pay simply supports the corrupt, anti-Black police (and thus, incarceration) systems in America. For the Black inmate - before or after incarceration - being free is Death.

Coda

All of the above discourse can be made more direct and concise. To better understand and navigate a contemporary Prison-image, it is sufficient to understand Attica-image ca. 1972. As argued by Luk and Metzger, the song, poem, and letter are information-dense messages, and are thus perfect cultural products to encode information about Attica as subtext. The letters of Melville, Cleaver, and Jackson all make very clear that Prison enforces harsh living conditions on the inmates, especially with regard to self-regulation and determination. Cleaver and Jackson further motion that Prison treats the inmate as Black, and that the Black inmate is stripped of all power as a man. Finally, the poems from Attica inmates highlight the residual impact of their experiences at Attica and

the Riots.

Though much is left to discuss regards Attica and Attica-image, the above work constructs and clarifies a very basic image from fundamental creative atoms as analysed from letters, essays, songs, and poems. The conversation is here best ended with a story and a quote.

In 1971, after the Riots, as Black Activist Richard X. Clark was being escorted out of Attica and past Attica village limits, he was asked how it felt to put Attica behind him. He responded

“Attica is in front of me.” - Richard X. Clark

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