

# Literary Construction of Attica in Post-Riot Cultural Products

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Cleaver, E. (1968). *Soul on ice*. McGraw-Hill

Soul on Ice is a collection of Letters and Essays by Black Panther party member Eldridge Cleaver. The text was written from Folsom State Prison in 1965: 6 years before the Attica Riots. The chronology of carceral abuse from 1965 to 1973 can be traced through the writings in this book and through the writings of Sam Melville's later Letters from Attica. I plan to use primarily the "Letters from Prison" section and the "Prelude to Love" section. The Letters "On Becoming", "Soul Food", and "A Day in Folsom Prison" can be used to better understand Cleaver's reform in prison, with "A Day in Folsom Prison" specifically an itinerary and reflection on the brutality of life in Folsom. Important to note is the harsh nature of both Cleaver's writing style and content. This book has been subject of a Supreme Court case about book banning in educational institutions and libraries due to its graphic content. I will not be censoring the parts of this text I plan to use, though I will not necessarily be discussing the parts about gendered violence that garnered much controversy when it was first published.

Jackson, G. (1972). *Soledad brother*. Coward-McCann

George Jackson's *Soledad Brother* is a much more direct and unfiltered work in comparison to the equivalent *Letters from Attica* and *Soul on Ice* by Sam Melville and Eldridge Cleaver respectively. *Soledad Brother* features a shorter introduction and exclusively epistolary writing: Jackson inserts no essays, manifestos, or articles into this collection. The product is a concentrated look into prison life at Soledad State Prison and into the minds of a growing Black Power movement. Most interesting is the similarity in language of letters dated in 1970 to the language used by Melville in his 1970 letters, though the two never met or spoke. I plan to use snippets of Jackson's text as evidence for racial institutional bias and violence in the prison system.

Luk, S. (2018). *The life of paper: Letters and a poetics of living beyond captivity*.  
University of California Press

Sharon Luk's *The Life of Paper* is a remarkable - though painfully dense - work narrating The Letter's role as voice and as communication line for incarcerated peoples. Chapters Two (of Genealogy and Diaspora), Four (of Censorship), Five (of Ephemerality), and Six (of Profanity). The work's complexity is just barely comprehensible, though it offers glimpses of truly life-altering revelations. I plan to reconstruct my understanding of her epistolary framework to apply to Jackson, Cleaver, Melville, and Tisdale's Letters, Essays, and Poems to illustrate the prevalence of the figure of the prison in their writing. By illustrating the figure of the prison, I can then compare it with the depictions of prison in contemporaneous pieces like Rzewski's *Coming Together*, as well as historic pieces like Oscar Wilde's famous *De Profundis*.

Melville, S., & Melville, J. (2022). *Letters from attica*. Chicago Review Press

Letters from Attica is a collection of Letters, Essays, and Newspaper articles written by political prisoner Samuel Melville during his time served in various American prisons. The Collection is preceded by a statement from Samuel's son, Joshua Melville, who reflects on the difficulty of collecting and printing these letters, as well as the Government censorship surrounding the Attica Prison Riots. I plan to use some of Sam's letters as creative "grains" in constructing an image of the "indifferent brutality" of pre-Attica-Riot living conditions for the incarcerated. Highlights include a particularly poetic and resonant letter from 16th May, 1970, detailing Melville's experience at "The Tombs" (a nickname for Manhattan Detention Complex.), a report entitled "An Anatomy of the Laundry", and snippets of a section Melville published in the Attica Newsletter titled "The Iced Pig".

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>

This source is a unique perspective of a Musicologist. Here, Metzer argues that the construction of Rzewski's music is itself discourse on prison architecture, image, and abolition. Though Metzer indicates that much of Rzewski's music is relevant to this conversation, he focuses primarily on the works "Coming Together" and "Attica", which are uniquely related in that they are both written about and in the aftermath of the Attica State Prison Riots. He argues that the minimalist, repeating musical structure of the pieces is representative of the mental landscape of one in isolation, leading to a restless *moto perpetuo* in "Coming Together" and a still reflection in "Attica". Metzer's work is foundational in contextualising music as informationally dense and a strong carrier of political messaging.

New York State Special Commission. (1972). *Attica: The official report of the new york state special commission on attica*. Bantam Book

The New York Special Commission Report on Attica (hereafter and in further writing simply the “Attica Report”) is a very special and controversial document. It was written in the year following the Riots and published one year later in September of 1972. The Report seems a reasonable and complete documentation of the events of the Riots, with special consideration to the events as they chronologically occurred and the justification of force of the Prison Guards. In essence, however, the function of this report is not to inform the public but rather to propagandize. Though the report details the conditions at Attica, the aim of the report is to justify these conditions, not to critique. As such, much of the report is dedicated to *what* happened and *how* it happened and *when* it happened, but little about *why* it happened. This report is quite helpful to understand the scale and physical and legal impact of the Riots, as well as being one piece that cements prison as an othered, alien state.

Oswald, R. G. (1972). *Attica - my story* (R. Campbell, Ed.). Doubleday

“I was the man in charge at Attica” - thus begins the memoir of Russel G. Oswald and a tome of evading blame and virtue signalling. It is true that Oswald, both in his story and in his actions, was and claimed to be a prison reformer. He spends the first chapter of his book denying his responsibility in the massacre and fallout of the riots by minimising his effect to six *decisions* and spends the rest of the book justifying said decisions at the blame of the prisoners and a “new breed” of radical inmates. Oswald’s memoir on Attica, because of his biases, serves as a perfect example of the conspiracy and narrative displacement and censorship that exists at the heart of the image of Attica in contemporaneous cultural discourse. I’m most interested in dissecting his references to Abraham Lincoln and Angela Davis, as well as his pride in the efficiency of the Officers’ actions.

Rzewski, F. (1983b). Coming together

Frederic Rzewski was a very unique musical voice. Much of his music (as emphasized in David Metzger's "Prisoner's Voices") is politically charged, contemporary, and specifically related to anti-war and prison abolition movements. Coming Together specifically is a piece written in the wake of the Attica Prison riot, with text from one of Melville's letters. Rzewski noted that he was impressed by "poetic quality of the text and by its cryptic irony". Encoded in the text and in the musical construction is the image of Attica: a bleak, rigid structure that restrains a Revolutionary Black Soul. "Coming Together", along with partner piece "Attica" functions as a primary impetus for this project. They will both function as major creative products from 1970's post-Riot in my synthesis.



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

“When the Smoke Cleared” is a marvelous collection. This collection of poems was written in the years following the Attica Riots by inmates still residing at Attica State. The collection was compiled from works written in editor Celes Tisdale’s poetry writing workshops. Tisdale served as teacher at Attica from 1972 to 1975, where he ran three 16 week poetry workshops, as well as other classes. Of note is the emotional friction and contrast between the writings of visitor Tisdale and his students, who all seem to be warmer, more direct, and more violent (though Tisdale uses the language “unpolished”) in their approaches to poetry and writing than Tisdale. The primary poems I wish to analyse and use in my cultural synthesis are:

- Poet - Raymond X. Webster
- Black Dolphin and Haiku - Harold E. Packwood
- What Makes a Man Free? - Clarence Phillips
- The Cure - “Jamail” Robert Simms
- 1st Page - Daniel Brown
- Remember This - Celes Tisdale

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

Heather Ann Thompson's *Blood in the Water* is simply what the Attica Report could have been were it written to inform, not to propagandize - and also if it were written 45 years later. *Blood in the Water* is a comprehensive report on the when, where, how, what, and, most importantly, *why* of the events that occurred at Attica during the riots. The Attica Report starts with an encounter between inmate Dewey and Officers Maronie and Curtiss. Though the encounter is equally described in both the official Report and in *Blood in the Water*, Thompson's recording focuses primarily on the voice of the prisoners and the dissenting officers. By the publication date of *Blood in the Water*, it is well understood that the brutality of incarceration is obscured in the public eye, and that the official reports on Attica (as assured by Joshua Melville in *Attica's Ashes*) was in many ways intentionally inconclusive - particularly in the racial makeup of the different factions in the Attica riots and the militance of several "celebrity" figures. I plan to use *Blood in the Water* as a way to "check and balance" the information and the records in the official Attica Report, as well as to reinforce the idea of oppression of the prison image.

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