

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.

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