

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.

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,

All of these disparate, loosely-related statistics are

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 discursive 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 silly. (Said, 1977, p. 163) We can use this framework to discourse the physicality of the carceral image. Yes, in the case of Attica, the location of the

prison is far away from the cities

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 it 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 me 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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