

Literature Review

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As discussed in this course, the voice of an oppressed subject - physically, socially, aurally - is a rich subject for musicological discourse. Of note is that musicological discourse need not concern itself exclusively with a musical subject. In this project, I aim to clarify - or at least focus - an image of Attica State Penitentiary as a microcosm of the American Mass Incarceration system by examining music, essays, and letters from and about Attica Inmates around 1969 to 1973 - contemporaneous with the Attica Riots.

Some of my most important texts are:

- The Life of Paper, by Sharon Luk

Sharon Luk, *The Life of Paper: Letters and a poetics of living beyond captivity* (University of California Press, 2018)

- Coming Together, by Frederic Rzewski
Frederic Rzewski, *Coming Together*, Vinyl LP, 1983
- Letters from Attica, by Samuel Melville
Samuel Melville and Joshua Melville, *Letters from Attica* (Chicago Review Press, 2022)
- Prisoner's Voices, by Daniel Metzger
David Metzger, "Prisoners' Voices: Frederic Rzewski's Coming Together and Attica," *The Journal of Musicology* 38, no. 1 (2021): pp. 109–139, ISSN: 02779269, 15338347, accessed April 10, 2025, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48771517>

The Life of Paper is, while incredibly dense, foundational in my understanding of letters as information-dense carriers for incarcerated/interned voices. Luk argues that the construction of the letter as message-over-distance and the asynchronicity of the messages (that is, the discrete and substantial amount of time between the sending of and receipt of the message), as well as the physical act of censorship and screening by prison officials, bestows the prison with an imagined, distant geography - that is, the usage of letter as principal communication distances the inmates from any neighbourhood and lumps incarcerated/interned voices together. Further, this usage of frameworks of imagined geographies links conversations about incarcerated/interned voices and critiques of Orientalist movements. Musicology is

quite well prepared to discourse Orientalism in creative analysis - there is much literature of the music of Debussy and Ravel and Godowsky and Cage and their Oriental inspirations. Just as Luk analyses the form of the letter as a lexical prison, Metzger analyses the construction of Melville's letters and Rzewski's music - and puts the two into more explicit dialogue than Rzewski's own writing - to better formulate a musical understanding of incarceration. To Metzger, the structure of Rzewski's musics is fundamentally related to Rzewski's critiques of incarceration. These rhythmic patterns and structures can be used to analyse the structures of Melville's Letters and Tisdale's Collected Poems in "When the Smoke Cleared" (another source of mine).

References

- Luk, Sharon. *The Life of Paper: Letters and a poetics of living beyond captivity*. University of California Press, 2018.
- Melville, Samuel, and Joshua Melville. *Letters from Attica*. Chicago Review Press, 2022.
- Metzer, David. “Prisoners’ Voices: Frederic Rzewski’s Coming Together and Attica.” *The Journal of Musicology* 38, no. 1 (2021): pp. 109–139. ISSN: 02779269, 15338347, accessed April 10, 2025. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48771517>.
- Rzewski, Frederic. *Coming Together*. Vinyl LP, 1983.
- Tisdale, Celes. *When the smoke cleared: Attica Prison Poems and journals*. Duke University Press, 2022.