

Literary Construction of Attica in Post-Riot Cultural Products

Crystal Mandal

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.

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

References

- Asplund, C. (1995). Frederic rzewski and spontaneous political music. *Perspectives of New Music*, 33(1/2), 418–441. Retrieved April 14, 2025, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/833713>
- Luk, S. (2018). *The life of paper: Letters and a poetics of living beyond captivity*. University of California Press.
- Melville, S., & Melville, J. (2022). *Letters from attica*. Chicago Review Press.
- 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>
- Munro-Bjorklund, V. (1991). Popular cultural images of criminals and prisoners since attica. *Social Justice*, 18(3 (45)), 48–70. Retrieved April 14, 2025, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29766619>
- Rzewski, F. (1983a). Attica.
- Rzewski, F. (1983b). Coming together.
- Rzewski, F. (1995). Inner voices. *Perspectives of New Music*, 33(1/2), 404–417. Retrieved April 14, 2025, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/833712>
- Tisdale, C. (2022). *When the smoke cleared: Attica prison poems and journals*. Duke University Press.