

# A Musical\* Reconstruction of Attica image from Inmate-voiced Post-Riot Cultural Products‘

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## **Research Question:**

**How is the relationship between the image of Attica State Penitentiary and the voice of the incarcerated discoursed in contemporary (and specifically post-riot Music, letters, and essays?**

## **Rationale**

This question analyses the musical discourse of Attica and the inmate. The inclusion of letters and essays may be controversial, but music is not exclusively that which produces sound. By including letters, we also bring into conversation the discourse of music as art outside of performance (are La-Monte Young’s graphic scores music?) and redefine what can be analysed in a musical sense. This is important because Attica is the most important and resonant recent American prison riot, and the following prison abolition

movements were taken extremely seriously at the time: though Attica has faded into history, we can listen to its echoes.

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

## Bibliography

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*.

Samuel Melville and Joshua Melville, *Letters from Attica* (Chicago Review Press, 2022)

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". As a related point, one of Melville's earlier letters is set to music in Frederic Rzewski's "Coming Together".

David Metzer, “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>

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, especially in conversations about carceral representations.

Frederic Rzewski, *Coming Together*, Vinyl LP, 1983

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.

Celes Tisdale, *When the smoke cleared: Attica Prison Poems and journals*  
(Duke University Press, 2022)

“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

## Literature Review

s 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).

## Methodology

This project aims to synthesize a new image of Attica ca. 1971 (contemporary to the riots) to better understand a contemporary (ca. 2025) political climate surrounding mass incarceration. I plan to do this by analysing and deconstructing contemporaneous music, essays, and letters primarily written by Attica inmates. Because of this, my sources seem to be broadly non-musical: essays, articles, letters, poems, and very few scores or recordings. I believe by breaking down these creative works to their fundamental atoms/grains, we can synthesize a better, inmate-voiced image of Attica by connecting themes between these works.

## References

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