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“We are men”: Constituting the Prisoners’ Rights Movement Through Prison Writing

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Abstract

In this thesis, I investigate how the discourse of incarcerated writers responds to the Attica Prison Uprising across time and geography in prison newspapers and poetry. I first argue that the rhetorical responses of incarcerated writers in the first six months after the uprising construct Attica as an Event, a moment characterized by intense difference where everything becomes possible. A scrutiny of the Event requires dwelling in the moment before clear meanings have been solidified, so conceptualizing Attica as an Event in the writings that are temporally and geographically close to Attica requires speculation. By the time the first-year anniversary of the uprising occurs, the meaning of Attica is intelligible and incarcerated writers are able to utilize Attica as an ideograph and prosthetic memory and thus a political tool. I look at how Attica is deployed by incarcerated writers to constitute the prisoners' rights movement. Further, I argue that the rhetorical responses to Attica in prison newspapers in the months and years following the one-year anniversary of the uprising calls the anti-carceral counterpublic into being.

Keywords: Attica, prisoners' rights movement, the Event, anti-carceral counterpublic

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Table of Contents

A photo I captured of the front of Attica Correctional Facility on September 2, 2023

Introduction

"Abolition Starts at Home"

On a trip to Niagara Falls, New York, I passed a road sign that indicated I was near Attica. I rejected my first impulse to take a detour to see the thing that I have been thinking, reading, and writing about for more than three years. On the way back to Syracuse, I saw the sign again, and I knew I had to get off the exit to see the Attica Correctional Facility, which was

located about thirty minutes off the highway. It was not lost on me how remote this prison is and how difficult it must be for anyone to visit a friend or family member who is incarcerated at Attica. I felt a certain haunting, stepping on the premises, having multiple guards look down at me from the tall walls, surveilling me from a point where so much violence occurred. I walked up to the memorial positioned in front of the entrance to the prison that notably only memorializes the correctional officers who the state shot at indiscriminately. The names of the 29 incarcerated men, who were part of the collective demanding to be treated as humans and subsequently murdered during New York State's brutal suppression of this revolutionary action and retaking of the prison, were nowhere to be found on the grounds of the prison. This absence does not make the uprising's significance disappear, and we must look elsewhere to see how this revolution was circulated and what the impacts of this circulation are.

The prisoners' rights movement is not something that has a clear beginning and end. Prison is a fundamentally colonial structure that is inextricably linked with the systemic dispossession of Indigenous land and the institution of chattel slavery. Christina Sharpe urges us to scrutinize "the ongoing problem of Black exclusion from social, political, and cultural belonging; our abjection from the realm of the human" (Sharpe 14). Sharpe emphasizes that Black exclusion and denial of humanity is not resolved with the passage of laws. The legal, social, and political frameworks of the white supremacist state are the very things that enable Black people to experience routine state violence and be seen and treated as less-than-human. These frameworks caused mass casualties at Attica and allowed for torturous conditions in the aftermath: "The state killed twenty-nine rebels, most of them Black, and ten white hostages. Additionally, they left more than a hundred survivors with serious physical wounds" (Burton 119). Rockefeller knew that he made the call for law enforcement to fire indiscriminately into a

yard of mostly Black and Brown men. The men incarcerated at Attica were not even able to leverage their white hostages to save their lives.

People who are incarcerated today are fighting for the same rights that people who were incarcerated 50 years ago, even centuries ago, were demanding to see changed. The contemporary prisoners' rights movement has continued to become more organized with numerous organizations, like Critical Resistance, Survived and Punished, and Project NIA, working with people who are incarcerated to demand not only humane treatment in prison but, ultimately, the abolition of the prison-industrial complex. These organizations and others have helped to develop a sophisticated and publicized critique of the prison-industrial complex. Critical Resistance defines the prison-industrial complex as "the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems" and prison abolition as "a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment" ("What is the PIC?"). Prison abolition is a term that is fundamental to the ongoing prisoners' rights movement, especially as hashtags like #FreeThemAll4PublicHealth were widely circulated in 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic made it very visible that the lives of people who are incarcerated were treated with a heightened disposability as the government refused to provide incarcerated people with the proper resources needed to survive and decarcerate for the sake of public health. Mainstream conversations about abolition, however, have only emerged recently as one more step in the ongoing and dynamic shifts in the way incarceration, prisoners, and prisoners' rights are discussed.

I was initially reluctant to take on the modern prison-industrial complex as a site of scholarly inquiry because my positionality as a white, non-binary, queer person who is actively

working in academia and has never been incarcerated places me in a social location in which my work has the potential to exploit and objectify people who are incarcerated if I choose to speak for them. However, I strive to ensure that an ethic of care is at the foundation of the work I am doing. An important part of this ethical framework is having people who are incarcerated speak for themselves because they are the ultimate authorities on the prison-industrial complex and resistance to it.

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was one of the monthly reads for Noname Book Club at the exact moment I needed it. This book has opened up a world that reinforces the necessity of praxis and the liberatory potentials of education. It encouraged me to act on theories that I have spent time reading about from the comfort of my home, which is widely understood by abolitionists as one of the first places that abolition starts. My work responds to the belief "that as citizens, educators, and critics, we bear an ethical obligation to confront the prison-industrial complex by engaging the voices of those who experience its wrath" (Hartnett et al. 334). Self-reflexivity is critical to my research and writing as a white rhetorical scholar invested in prison abolition. I am indebted to the theories and practices of Black feminist scholars, who have been instrumental in developing my understanding of abolition. Following Mariame Kaba (@prisonculture) on Twitter, reading *Are Prisons Obsolete?* by Angela Davis, and reading articles by Ruth Wilson Gilmore were a few things that helped me realize just how inadequate prison reform is as it often works to strengthen the prison-industrial complex, a system that I, along with every other prison abolitionist, wish to be destroyed. The work I am engaged in would not be possible without the substantial support and influence of Black feminist insights, and I will continue to be reliant on their scholarship in everyday life and future research and writing.

My thesis seeks to understand the origins of the contemporary prisoners' rights movement. Before there were public discussions of the prison-industrial complex or abolition, the concerns of and for prisoners circulated in other channels and with different rhetorical positioning. In prison newspapers and poetry and other mediums, prisoners shared their concerns, their aspirations, and their critiques. This thesis explores those earlier dynamics in order to gain a better sense of the initial ways the rhetoric of prisoners' rights was articulated and how the current sophisticated social movement emerged. I pursue these ends by focusing on one pivotal moment that shifted the public discourse about prisons and prisoners' rights, the Attica Prison Uprising. Conceiving of the Attica Prison Uprising as a kind of rupture in the public understanding of prisons, or an Event, I trace the way Attica impacted the discussion of prisons and prisoners' rights, especially among people who heard about the Attica Prison Uprising when they were incarcerated and how these discussions helped establish the rhetorical foundations of the ongoing prisoners' rights movement.

My thesis focuses on the circulation of stories about Attica within different prison publications, including newspapers and poems. In order to establish the foundations and procedures for this thesis, in Chapter One, I first lay out a brief history of the overall prisoners' rights movement and the Attica Prison Uprising. Following this brief history, I establish the theoretical foundation for thinking about Attica as an Event and the way prison writing developed a framework for understanding the uprising that called others to become part of the prisoners' rights movement. After establishing the theoretical framework, I offer my method for examining the rhetorical dynamics surrounding Attica within prison writing.

In Chapter Two, I focus on the immediate reactions to Attica. This second chapter focuses on a six-month period when incarcerated writers often described themselves as

unprepared, unwilling, or struggling to engage with the magnitude of the Attica Prison Uprising. I articulate Attica as an Event and work through defining Attica as such by seeing how incarcerated writers inside and outside of Attica immediately respond to this surplus of meaning produced by the uprising and its brutal suppression by New York State.

In Chapter Three, I discuss the subsequent incorporation of Attica into the rhetoric of the prisoners' rights movement as both an ideograph and prosthetic memory. Discussions of Attica in the weeks, months, and years following the uprising served as an invitation to people who were incarcerated to see themselves as part of a bigger movement and, in so doing, helped to constitute incarcerated people as the anti-carceral counterpublic.

Chapter One

Attica and the Prisoners' Rights Movement

As noted in the introduction, it is difficult to identify a single origin point for the modern prison abolition movement. Attica is connected to "supposedly bygone regimes of chattel slavery, racial apartheid, and settler colonialism" (Burton 3). In seeking to understand the rhetorical dynamics of one pivotal moment in this broader struggle for full personhood in the face of anti-Black violence and systemic oppression, I understand the Attica Prison Uprising as an important moment of disruption in the public understanding and discussion of the carceral state. Importantly, this disruption was, as I will demonstrate in Chapters Two and Three, recognized by incarcerated individuals. In my effort to center their voices and understand their rhetorical inventiveness, in this chapter, I lay out the basic parameters of the prisoners' rights movement and the specifics of the Attica Prison Uprising. Following this historical overview, I offer an initial theoretical framework as well as a description of my critical practice.

The Prisoners' Rights Movement

Attica, George Jackson, San Quentin. These are three calls for changes that resonate with incarcerated writers from Washington State Penitentiary to Louisiana State Penitentiary in the early 1970s. These direct actions along with countless others make up the prisoners' rights movement. Orisamni Burton contextualizes the early 1970s as "among the most explosive and lethal [years] in US prison history, due in no small measure to militant rebellions that ruptured carceral institutions across the nation" (Burton 1). Garrett Felber looks back to acts of resistance that occurred a few years earlier: "The years between Harlem and Watts and the Attica rebellions represented one of the most organized periods of prison activism" (Felber 170). The Harlem and

Watts Rebellions did not occur within a prison; however, Harlem, Watts, and Attica all resisted state-sanctioned, white supremacist violence by way of policing and prisons. Rebellion in prisons began long before Attica and continued in the years following: "There were five prison riots in 1967; fifteen in 1968; twenty-seven in 1970; thirty-seven in 1971; and forty-eight in 1972–the most riots in any year in U.S. history" (Chase 74). These statistics defy the mainstream assumptions that rebellion in prisons is isolated and spontaneous "violence."

Questions of whose violence is legitimate overlaps with assumptions of who gets to be human as "the legacies of slavery's denial of Black humanity" (Sharpe 14) continue into the present. Felber posits:

> Such ongoing state violence requires an ideological apparatus to legitimize it. Distinctions between legitimate forms of violence (such as capital punishment, police force, and military power) and illegitimate forms (such as looting and organized self-defense, including judo and rifle clubs) provided one discursive ballast for the carceral state. Another was narratives of spontaneous eruption versus sustained political response. Through such narratives, the carceral state justified itself. (Felber 155)

Because Black and Brown people who are incarcerated are subjected to a system in which they are viewed as less-than-human, their acts of resistance, even acts of self-defense, are deemed illegitimate, violent acts and thus punishable by the state. Part of the difficulty of delineating a certain timeline for this movement is the fact that surviving in prison, a system constructed to produce social and physical death, is resistance, so most quotidian acts are overlooked while the most publicized acts are viewed as unprecedented. The prisoners' rights movement demonstrates that the true monstrosity is the state that enacts white supremacist violence against people who are incarcerated. The development of a collective of incarcerated folks fighting for liberation was

not incidental. Liberation is an everyday praxis that not only frees marginalized people from oppressive systems but also abolishes these very systems. People who are incarcerated are agents in their actions for liberation that seek to abolish systems of policing and prisons. Engaging with the writing of incarcerated folks is critical to learning about their definitions of liberation and their liberatory praxis.

The prisoners' rights movement is an ongoing struggle for rights and freedom. James B. Jacobs defines the prisoners' rights movement as a "broad scale effort to redefine the status (moral, political, economic, as well as legal) of prisoners in a democratic society" (431). The movement consisted of different levels of organization and participation, but a common thread was "a shared sense of grievance and the commitment to enhanced rights and entitlements for prisoners" (Jacobs 432). People who are incarcerated are stripped of their rights when they are kept in cages. During the prisoners' rights movement, recognition of the constitutional rights of people who are incarcerated by the Supreme Court was foundational. Interestingly, Jacobs considered litigation that occurred in the prisoners' rights movement without discussing the direct, grassroots actions that occurred during the movement, yet he emphasizes the limitations of litigation and legislation and how difficult it was to measure the success of the laws passed and overall movement.

While Jacobs provides a broad overview of the prisoners' rights movement, largely through a legal framework, Lee Bernstein considers how George Jackson, one of the most infamous political prisoners, shaped U.S. prison culture in the 1970s by actively working to change incarcerated individuals' self-perceptions through political education that encouraged them to reclaim their agency and take direct actions to improve their material conditions. The Attica Prison Uprising, the most significant direct action of the prisoners' rights movement, was

certainly connected to Jackson's murder since a hunger strike launched as an expression of solidarity allowed a once small Attica Liberation Faction to become a strong coalition of incarcerated individuals from disparate social locations: "Many inmates had only a peripheral knowledge of the political protest movements outside of prison or of the activists in Attica before Jackson's death, but became willing to join the movement" (Bernstein 320) after participating in the hunger strike. Kate Siegfried focuses on the materiality of the Attica Prison Uprising to demonstrate how it "offers a strategy for how to utilize fixed capital as a means of disrupting capital's reproductive processes and enabling revolutionary compositional practices to take shape" (102). Examining the grassroots organizing done by political prisoners provides an opportunity to examine how incarcerated people became (and continue to become) agents resisting marginalization, exploitation, and dehumanization.

The Attica Prison Uprising

The assassination of the revolutionary George Jackson, a pioneer of the prisoners' rights movement, preceded the beginning of the Attica Prison Uprising. Approximately 700 of the 2,243 men incarcerated at Attica expressed solidarity with Jackson by participating in a hunger strike on August 22, 1971, the day after he was murdered by guards at San Quentin Prison. Another protest occurred a little over a week later when three hundred men at Attica demonstrated against the severely inadequate medical care they received at the prison (Kaba 18-19). On September 8, 1971, the day before the start of the uprising, a dispute between prison guards and two incarcerated men forced two prisoners into Housing Block Z (HBZ), a section of Attica characterized by extreme brutality. One man, Roy Lamorie, was not a participant in the dispute and the other man, Leroy Dewer, was hit by officers as he was taken to HBZ (19). These events were just some of the impetuses for the Attica Prison Uprising. On September 9, 1971,

over 1200 prisoners assembled in D Yard after four prison guards were overwhelmed by a group of more than 15 incarcerated men (20). It was by no means spontaneous as the Attica Liberation Faction ensured the presence of an organized and politically educated group with clear demands: "in July 1971, Herbert Blyden joined Donald Noble and Carl Jones-El of the Moorish Science Temple, along with Peter Butler and Frank Lott, to form the Attica Liberation Faction and issue the July Manifesto, a list of twenty-eight demands that include religious freedom for incarcerated Muslims" (Felber 173-174). The "Attica Manifesto" was also focused on bettering the material conditions of the people incarcerated at Attica by improving their legal representation, access to healthcare, and overall quality of life in addition to ending the racist political persecution of people who were incarcerated in the prison and exploitation of their labor. These demands illuminated just how unsafe and unsanitary the conditions at Attica were as people incarcerated at this prison were "provided with only one roll of toilet paper every five weeks" and were only allowed one shower a week ("The Attica Liberation Faction Manifesto" 4). Further, this manifesto demonstrated how intentional the Attica Liberation Faction was about attempting to improve their material conditions diplomatically, but the State of New York responded with continued negligence and an overall lack of urgency.

On the first day of the uprising, L.D. Barkley, one of its leaders, recited the "Declaration to the People of America," in which he attributed the reasons for the Attica Prison Uprising to "the unmitigated oppression wrought by the racist administrative network of this prison throughout the year. We are men. We are not beast and we do not intend to be beaten or driven as such" ("'We are Men'"). The men who participated in the uprising reiterated demands similar to those put forth in the July 1971 "Attica Manifesto." Throughout the entirety of the uprising, New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller refused to be present at Attica Prison despite the

requests of various parties, including prisoners, hostages, the State Commissioner Russell G. Oswald, and the Observers Committee. Instead, on September 13, 1971, or "Bloody Monday," he ordered "the bloodiest suppression of a prison rebellion in U.S. history" (Camp 71), which killed 39 men out of the 128 men that were shot (Thompson 187). Both men incarcerated at Attica and their hostages were murdered by prison guards, state troopers, and the National Guard sent by Rockefeller to violently reclaim the prison. This response abided by the Civil Rights Era tradition of state counterinsurgency brutally suppressing radical social movements. In the aftermath, the Department of Corrections and the media amplified the narrative of hostages dying from knife wounds inflicted by incarcerated men, but the coroner's report debunked this narrative the next day and revealed that the hostages died from police gunshot wounds as the people who participated in the Attica Prison Uprising did not have firearms. The harm done to the men incarcerated at Attica did not cease with the retaking of the prison as many were tortured in the aftermath.

The Attica Prison Uprising was a critical direct action in the prisoners' rights movement, but it did not occur in a vacuum. It followed many crucial direct actions by incarcerated people and inspired many more in the years following. Dan Berger and Touissant Losier assert the centrality of the 1960s and the 1970s—the decade the Attica Prison Uprising took place—to what they refer to as the "prison movement": "The uprisings, strikes, and publications coming out of prison shaped a national conversation about whether and how to reform or abolish prisons. Although the overall structure of prisons was left intact, incarcerated people upset the traditional order of American punishment" (12). Attica continues to circulate. More than a decade after the Attica Prison Uprising, the 1983 Sing Sing Revolt demonstrated how Attica remained meaningful to people who were incarcerated as those imprisoned in the B Block of Sing Sing

"chanted 'Attica!' just hours prior to overtaking the block" and in the midst of the uprising, "hung a banner in full view of the assembled media on which they wrote 'We Don't Want Another Attica'" (Bernstein 3). Heather Ann Thompson speaks to the overarching legacy of Attica in the most comprehensive history of the uprising: "The Attica prison uprising of 1971 shows the nation that even the most marginalized citizens will never stop fighting to be treated as human beings. It testifies to this irrepressible demand for justice. This is Attica's legacy" (571). Attica encouraged people who were incarcerated to continue to herald this charge in spite of the continued expansion of the prison-industrial complex. The prisoners' rights movement is not something that started with Attica, but this particular uprising made sure that incarcerated people would continue to struggle for their humanity until they did not need to.

Theoretical Framework

Histories of the modern prisoners' rights movement often portray Attica as a pivotal event. The uprising is often presented as a key moment in the development of the movement, and so, the narratives suggest Attica as a natural outcome of historical forces. Historical narratives, however, are often built upon a deep underlying contradiction. The moments that shift the trajectory of history, the kinds of disruptions that mark change, are often folded into linear narratives as either the inevitable consequence of what had happened before or the natural next step in some evolutionary process that led to the present day. This framework reinforces a sense of history as aimed at the present and a sense that where we are now is expected and inevitable. At the root of this contradiction is the way historical narratives often erase the Event, that moment when things change in ways that are unpredictable. Michel Foucault pushes back against this historical framework that erases the unpredictable possibilities that were present in past moments by offering a theoretical treatment of "the event" as a rupture in the logics of the

present and a moment when virtually everything is possible. As Foucault writes, in "the event," "the incorporeal will dissipate the density of matter; a timeless insistence will destroy the circle that imitates eternity; an impenetrable singularity will divest itself of its contamination by purity; the actual semblance of the simulacrum will support the falseness of false appearances" (168). In other words, in those moments when the norms of the present are radically disrupted, the seemingly inevitable trajectory of historical narratives are ruptured and there is a unique singular experience where the next steps are not prescribed and cannot be predicted. While historical discourses later emerge to transform the radical possibility of the Event into a normalized narrative, the Event itself remains a singular point where normal ways of being ceased to be normal, at least temporarily.

Rhetorical scholars, referring to Foucault's work, like Michelle Ballif consider how the Event is something that disrupts temporality: "The event—as exceptional, as impossible, as a trauma that disrupts and invents—is related 'essentially' so, to hospitality—to receiving the arriving, a radically other, a future that cannot be foreseen" (246). Kendall Phillips scrutinizes the Event and the construction of "spaces of dissension," which he defines as "a space of possibility—an irregular point of incoherence—and determined not by a single factor but by multiple overlapping points of tension" (63). Scholarship on the Event shows that a simple interrogation of continuity and change in the historical record does not work. The Event takes on what was previously deemed impossible, so practices of historicizing need to shift to work to understand Events that are singular and unintelligible and not simply reduce them to spectacle—the Event does something.

The concept of the Event serves as an important framework for my thesis. In seeking to understand the way Attica became part of the prisoner's rights movement, I want to avoid seeing

the uprising as an unavoidable consequence of the dynamics of the past or as an inevitable step toward the modern prisoners' rights movement. Rather, I begin with the way the Event of Attica ruptured the existing frameworks for understanding the prison-industrial complex, the place of prisoners, and the discourses related to prisoners' rights.

Thought of in this way, the 1971 Attica Prison Uprising, as "radically other," can be conceptualized as an Event. There have been other prison uprisings, but Attica is widely understood as the bloodiest suppression of a prison uprising in American history. Situated in the context of the broader prisoners' rights movement, it is too full of meaning to have a fixed meaning, what Ballif refers to as "the 'remainder effects'…the surplus of meaning that destabilizes any meaning, any signification" (252). The Event challenges us to define something that resists defining. People who attempt to extrapolate meaning from the Event attempt to articulate something that is almost impossible to adequately articulate and make sense of. This meaning-making process may reduce the meaning of the Event, which is why it is important to consistently revisit Events like the Attica Prison Uprising, keeping in mind that supposedly clear meanings were almost immediately assigned to it in the midst of mass bloodshed and devastation.

While the development of the prisoners' rights movement can be understood as the development of a public, or counterpublic, in my thesis, I want to recognize the way this counterpublic could not have developed through the texts that circulated without incarcerated writers first reacting to the unpredictability of the Event of Attica. As understood here, the Event disrupts our understanding of what it means to participate in a public (sphere). Jürgen Habermas defines the "public sphere" as "a rational reorganization of social and political power under the mutual control of rival organizations committed to the private sphere in their internal structure as

well as in their relations with the state and each other" (8). But, as I explore in this thesis, the violent rupture of Attica was not met with rational organization, at least not initially. Rather, the Event of Attica first presented a challenge to the existing dominant discourses surrounding the prison-industrial complex and it was the way prisoners responded to this Event, through writing in prison newspapers and poetry and other formats, that a kind of counterpublic became constituted.

One of the keys to understanding this perspective on the development of a counterpublic is the importance of circulation. It was, in other words, the circulation of the responses to the Event of Attica that became key to the development of the anti-carceral counterpublic. Michael Warner argues that publics exist outside of "state institutions, law, formal frameworks of citizenship, or preexisting institutions" and are organized by discourse and its circulation. Gerald A. Hauser explains how counterpublics are created "when official public spheres repress the emergence of rhetorically salient meanings, those meanings are likely to emerge elsewhere in oppositional sites" (36). The material conditions of people who are incarcerated aligns well with Warner's understanding of how publics are structured "as a body of strangers united through the circulation of their discourse" (59). Discourse cannot be separated from publics as it is something that actively constructs a public of "strangers." Even as people who are incarcerated are relative strangers, their struggle is not isolated and the construction of a collective is necessary for their survival in prison.

In seeking to understand the way these circulating texts helped to constitute the anti-carceral counterpublic, I focus not only on the circulation but also on the rhetorical response, or the way individual writings called readers to see themselves as part of this nascent counterpublic. Maurice Charland offers a useful addition to this framework by noting the way circulating texts

not only engage auditors but also invite them to see themselves as part of a public. Charland defines this textual function as constitutive rhetoric, the way a text "calls its audience into being" (135) and "capture[s] alienated subjects by rearticulating existing subject positions so as to contain or resolve experienced dialectical contradictions between the world and its discourses" (142).

In my thesis, I focus on various prison writings that responded to Attica. I trace the way these writings reacted to Attica and the gradual development of rhetorical responses that circulated throughout the prison-industrial complex and called prisoners to see themselves as part of the anti-carceral counterpublic, one that focused on developing prisoners' rights discourse on their path to decarceration and abolition.

Rights discourse contributes to the making of publics as marginalized groups call for the instatement of rights that have been denied or taken by state institutions. Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer consider how publics are formed as resistant to axes of oppression: "Many publics arise as well from the demands made by long-suppressed and marginalized groups for the rights and responsibilities of political membership, collective sovereignty, or both" (2). In the demands for people at Attica to be treated as human, this point is certainly the case. Discussing rights discourse, Laura T. Collins asserts: "Politics as the exercise of freedom (where rights may serve as means) is rare because it insists on non-domination and conceivably on a mutable and fluid identity as 'subject.' Such a politics rests less on identity and more on action and interaction" (Collins 752). When regarding Warner's notion that publics are organized outside of state institutions that are already legitimated, we can think about how agency works in these publics to help marginalized groups resist hegemony and assert their rights and humanity.

The Rhetoric of Prisoners' Rights

Scholars of rhetoric have looked at how people who are incarcerated have resisted subjugation through discursive and embodied acts. Barry Brummett considers how the symbolic form is deployed, specifically by Gary Gilmore when he was on death row, to respond to the state's physical and moral power. In his work on redemption rhetorics in African-American prison memoirs, David Coogan scrutinizes the role of rhetorical invention, explaining, "the disciplinary apparatus of prison, however formidable, cannot block the rhetorical agency needed to invent" (302). Stephen John Harnett, Jennifer K. Wood, and Bryan J. McCann assert the necessity of communicating with incarcerated people through education, letter writing, and advocacy to demonstrate how work done in specific case studies are "key contributions to our collective effort to dismantle the prison-industrial complex" (348). Gerald A. Hauser examines how prison writing is deployed by political prisoners to contribute to the formation of counterpublics and further social movements: "prison writings form a valuable source of information and insight into the ways by which movements are shaped and community sustained in discourses that are banished from official public life, though not necessarily from the general public's view" (38). Altogether, the current rhetorical scholarship on prisons highlights how people who are incarcerated work to reclaim their agency and humanity as the prison-industrial complex actively works to strip incarcerated folks of agency, humanity, and ultimately life. Therefore, scholars of rhetoric must continue to take on the prison-industrial complex and use their scholarship for the sake of liberation.

The discursive act of writing, publishing, and circulating prison newspapers is a means for people who are incarcerated to become agents in constructing narratives of their lives in prison. Eleanor M. Novek examines prison newspapers as journalism produced on the

peripheries "as a tool of ideological struggle" and considers how the fantasy themes of "Heaven, hell, and here" are present in a prison newspaper called *Insight* from a women's state prison in the Northeast (282). Different writers conceive of the prison as a place of redemption and healing—"Heaven," a place of pain and suffering—"hell," and a place where the women who are incarcerated can "envision themselves as competent agents capable of independent thought and action nonetheless"—"here" (296). The notion of "here" is particularly useful for understanding how rhetorical agency is enacted through prison writing.

Building on and shifting away from the work that has been done in the Global North on prison newspapers, Cory Fischer-Hoffman scrutinizes what the single issue of the Venezuelan prison newspaper *La Voz* does in the specific context it is written in. In this context, prison newspapers are deployed as resistant to dominant narratives, specifically using Gramsci's idea of "wars of position; a battle to create hegemony" (16) and the Foucauldian concept of "governmentality" (16) to demonstrate how power is fundamental to knowledge construction and how people who are incarcerated are agents in the "wars of position" as they scrutinize "why and how power operates" (16). The anti-carceral counterpublic absolutely resisted hegemony. As the demands of the people who resisted the racist exploitation and abuse they were subjected to at Attica were circulated, every person who was incarcerated was implicated and could see themselves in the demands that were put forth, which was demonstrated in various prison writings.

Research Questions

My thesis considers how people who are incarcerated immediately respond to the Attica Prison Uprising in their writing and how this discourse shifts in the years following Attica. As incarcerated writers struggle to make meaning of the uprising, Attica becomes an Event. After

scrutinizing Attica as an Event, I consider how prison writing that takes up Attica allows it to take shape as both an ideograph and prosthetic memory. Further, I examine how the anti-carceral counterpublic is called into being through the constitutive rhetoric of these texts.

Method

This project examines how the discourse of incarcerated writers responds to the Attica Prison Uprising across time and geography, or thinking about how the Event circulates and the rhetoric of prison newspapers shifts. JSTOR's "American Prison Newspapers, 1800s-present: Voices from the Inside" archive was crucial to the development of this project. I performed a keyword search of "Attica" in newspapers published between 1971 and 1974. Some of the particular newspapers I examine are *Voice of Prison* from the Washington State Penitentiary, *The Angolite* from the Louisiana State Penitentiary, *The Eye Opener* from the Oklahoma State Penitentiary, and *Pa'ahao Press* from different prisons in Hawaii.

Starting in 1971, in the early weeks and months following the Attica Prison Uprising, allows me to scrutinize Attica as an Event. There are attempts by mainstream media sources to reduce the meaning of Attica as a spectacle of spontaneous "violence." Engaging with Attica as an Event is a way to think of Attica as a traumatic rupture. This interrogation consists of looking at immediate responses as they appear in poetry and prison newspapers to consider how Attica is dealt with as something that has a surplus of meaning. The edited collection by Celes Tisdale, *When the Smoke Cleared: Attica Prison Poems and Journal*, has a significant role in conceptualizing Attica as an Event because the poems in this collection were written by men who participated in a poetry workshop at Attica facilitated by Tisdale in the spring of 1972. These men worked to make sense of the trauma of the Attica Prison Uprising through poetry as prose often could not adequately take on the surplus of meaning produced by Attica.

Attica circulates as an Event before its meaning is solidified by the time the first anniversary of the uprising occurs. This solidification of meaning allows Attica to become an ideograph. By looking at the prison newspaper discourse that directly references Attica from 1972 to 1974, I am able to understand how rhetorical responses to Attica constitute the anti-carceral counterpublic. I contextualize the particular conditions of the prisons that certain newspapers are published in and who writes about Attica in these newspapers with the understanding that there often needs to be some sort of buy-in from the prison administration in order for prison newspapers to be published, so self-censorship and/or administrative censorship informs what is and is not written.

This thesis is ultimately about listening to and centering the voices of people who are incarcerated. I use the approach of "situated listening," or "listening as an orientation that approaches situations with an open framework, assuming that the critic's particular positionality illuminates some things while limiting others" (Scott and Edgar 226). My goal is to read in a way that is "generative, rather than prescriptive" (226). In this thesis, it is critical for me to let the texts written by incarcerated people speak instead of working to prescribe these texts with meaning myself.

Chapter Two

Attica as Event

Introduction

The Attica Correctional Facility is a maximum-security prison tucked away in the small, relatively quiet village of Attica, New York. In 1971, Attica imprisoned 2,243 men who were "overwhelmingly young, urban, under-educated, and African American or Puerto Rican," over two-thirds of whom were previously incarcerated (Thompson 6). The corrections officers at the prison were white except for one Puerto Rican corrections officer who was encouraged to not speak Spanish to incarcerated men who couldn't speak English (7). In "Declaration to the People of America," L.D. Barkley, one of the leaders of the uprising who was murdered during the state's retaking of the prison, proclaimed that Attica was the result of "the unmitigated oppression wrought by the racist administrative network of this prison throughout the year" (Kaba 21). While much of the mainstream media depicted "violent" prisoners as the cause of the uprising beginning on September 9, 1971, many incarcerated individuals saw it as part of a longer struggle against the oppressive, racist, and dehumanizing conditions of the carceral state. This struggle to be treated as human was exemplified in this statement by Barkley: "We are men. We are not beasts and we do not intend to be beaten or driven as such. The entire prison populace, that means each and every one of us here, have set forth to change forever the ruthless brutalization and disregard for the lives of the prisoners here and throughout the United States" ("'We are Men'").

The five-day uprising ended on September 13, 1971 when Governor Nelson Rockefeller ordered law enforcement to stop the uprising by shooting indiscriminate bullets into D-Yard,

killing mostly Black and Brown men and revolutionaries and some of their white hostages. The violent response to the uprising aligns with critical geographer and prison abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore's definition of racism as "the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (Gilmore 247). Everything about the brutal suppression of the Attica Prison Uprising relates to this definition. Governor Nelson Rockefeller permitted predominantly Black and Brown men to be massacred to quickly put an end to the uprising and enabled the men who survived to be tortured in the aftermath.

The mainstream media was quick to respond to the Attica Prison Uprising because they had existing frameworks, undergirded by white supremacy, to make sense of prison uprisings. The day after the uprising was crushed, mainstream media sources circulated the narrative that the participants of the uprising murdered their hostages. A *New York Times* reporter purported that the men who participated in the uprising murdered Attica Prison's correctional officers in D-Yard, explaining, "The deaths of these persons by knives and gunfire reflect a barbarism wholly alien to civilized society. Prisoners slashed the throats of utterly helpless, unarmed guards whom they had held captive through the around-the-clock negotiations, in which the inmates held out for an increasingly revolutionary set of demands" ("Massacre at Attica"). This statement makes it seem like the assault on the prison was justified by framing the retaking as a reaction to the uprising's participants killing correctional officers. However, this justification does not work because this information is false. The following day, the coroner confirmed that all of the hostages died of gunshot wounds exacted by law enforcement, confirming that the state was culpable for these murders (Ferretti). Even with this revision, such an unsubstantiated claim inflicted harm on the perceptions of incarcerated folks by contributing to widely held beliefs that people who are incarcerated are in prison because they are violent and thus deserving of

violence. Worse, this statement adheres to existing frameworks by feeding into the racist trope of civilization versus barbarism, identifying the hostages as helpless, white victims while casting incarcerated folks as unfeeling monsters.

The mainstream media's usage of racist tropes allowed narratives to circulate that read people who are incarcerated as less-than-human. In another editorial, Vice President Spiro Agnew boldly claims: "To position the 'demands' of convicted felons in a place of equal dignity with legitimate aspirations of law abiding American citizens—or to compare the loss of life by those who violate the society's law with a loss of life of those whose job it is to uphold it—represents not simply an assault on human sensibility, but an insult to reason." The language deployed by the second highest governmental official in the United States functions to justify state-sanctioned violence against incarcerated people. In this statement, upholding the law becomes more important than maintaining human life, especially if the people who become victims of state violence are not white, "law-abiding" citizens. These age-old racist attacks align with Frederick Douglass's 1883 statement "about the South's tendency to 'impute crime to color'" (Davis 30). In 1971, this inclination to criminalize people of color was pervasive outside of the South and vested in prisons across the United States. This default racist lens functioned to delegitimize the democratic demands advanced by incarcerated folks prior to and during the Attica Prison Uprising.

Attica meant something different to people who were incarcerated in the early 1970s. For many of those living in America's prison system, the default assumptions that state violence was always already justified was unacceptable and so, their interpretations of the Attica Prison Uprising deviated from the frames provided by the state and the mainstream media. While we cannot know all the conversations that went on among incarcerated people, prison newspapers

and writings allow us a glimpse into the interpretive process among some incarcerated individuals. From this archive, we find that many incarcerated writers were unwilling to conform to mainstream media interpretations as different writers had unique responses to Attica in the months that followed. These responses were not one-size-fits-all across prison newspapers. The interpretations in prison newspapers indicated a struggle over the meaning of the Attica Prison Uprising. Where the state and mainstream media had readily available symbolic resources for making Attica meaningful, for some prison writers, it was clear that Attica felt different, and interpreting Attica would require critical thought and reflection. While "Attica" would eventually become a readily understood and even powerful statement for incarcerated individuals, as I will attend to in Chapter Three, in the initial months after the uprising it seems clear that at least some incarcerated writers struggled with what this moment of state violence meant and how it would change the lives of those who were incarcerated across the country.

In this chapter, I seek to dwell in this space of ambiguity to inquire into the contours of resistance by some prison writers to interpret or explain the Attica Prison Uprising. In order to attend to this moment of uncertainty for some incarcerated writers, I turn to the concept of the Event. This chapter considers how incarcerated writers immediately responded to Attica. Immediacy is defined in two ways—in terms of temporality and geography. The selection of newspapers in this chapter are temporally close to Attica. They were published less than a year after the Attica Prison Uprising took place. The poems from the collection *When the Smoke Cleared: Attica Prison Poems and Journal*, an extended version of the 1974 publication of *Betcha Ain't*, are geographically close to Attica. They were written by people who were incarcerated at Attica during the uprising. There was no one writing about the Attica Prison

Uprising who was physically and mentally closer to this revolutionary action than this group of men, who were left to grapple with the traumatic Event of Attica.

The Event in Rhetoric

As noted in Chapter One, rhetorical scholars have tended to neglect the Event as historiographies are regarded as generally stable, so there is an assumption that there is always a prior text to draw from in constructions of meaning. Michelle Ballif defines the Event as something that disrupts temporality: "The event—as exceptional, as impossible, as a trauma that disrupts and invents—is related 'essentially' so, to hospitality—to receiving the arriving, a radically other, a future that cannot be foreseen" (246). The Foucauldian concept of the Event is instructive in considering how incarcerated writers constructed the meaning of Attica in prose and poetry. When the Event arises, there is no prior text to draw from. The Event is about difference. Foucault explains "its absence indicates its repetition devoid of any grounding in an original, outside of all forms of imitation, and freed from the constraints of similitude" (177). There have been a multitude of prison uprisings with the ultimate goal of liberation, but Attica is singular. As I will demonstrate in the next section, many contemporary incarcerated writers knew that Attica was different. To emphasize the singularity of Attica does not mean that it was completely shocking to people who were incarcerated in 1971. Before Attica, revolution was brewing, and the future of prisons was unknowable. But, as I will argue, Attica felt different even to people who had witnessed previous uprisings. It might be easy, if anachronistic, to imagine that the writers responding to Attica in the days, weeks, and months after the bloodshed somehow knew that Attica would become a vital touchstone in the next phase of the prisoners' rights movement. Such an interpretation, however, erases the singularity and uniqueness that was felt by people at that moment and, in essence, erases the Event by explaining it through what

would come afterward. My goal in this chapter is to pause at the moment of the Event, to linger with those initial written responses and to examine the way incarcerated writers struggled to find meaning in the Event of Attica. While Attica would eventually become immediately intelligible as part of the prisoners' rights movement, the topic of Chapter Three, in this chapter, I attend to the initial rhetorical efforts to understand the Attica Prison Uprising. I do this by attending to both writers at other prisons who struggled to make sense of the news reports coming out of the uprising and the poetry of incarcerated individuals at Attica. In order to honor these writers and their struggles to come to terms with the Event of Attica, I focus on the writing itself rather than seeking to anachronistically connect it to the movement that would come later and, in so doing, seek to examine the ways this writing helped to shape the interpretation of the Event. An embrace of "evental rhetoric" requires us to interrogate difference and view "speech [and actions] as eventful" (Biesecker 20) as opposed to understanding things through a simple cause-and-effect schema. Conceptualizing Attica as an Event forces us to sit with just how precarious this moment was.

Attica as Event in Prison Newspapers

Attica was a rupture for every person who witnessed it. In prison newspapers, it took as little as a few weeks for incarcerated writers to engage with Attica, but most newspapers took more than a few months or more than a year to comment on Attica. Colorado State Penitentiary's *Interpreter* had potentially one of the earliest considerations of the Attica Prison Uprising in their Summer 1971 issue. Because the particular summer month was not identified, it is difficult to know just how early this mention occurred. This early engagement was relatively succinct, but an ardent desire for change is clear as Jerry Nemnich, the editor of the *Interpreter*, suggested a series of reforms "with all due respect to the brothers who died trying to get someone's attention

in Attica" (2). In October, Florida's Avon Park Correctional Institution's *What's Up?*, Oklahoma State Penitentiary's *The Eye Opener*, Washington State Penitentiary's *Voice of Prison*, and Iowa State Penitentiary's *Presidio* mentioned Attica in their publications, but the respective willingness of each publication to engage with and thus begin constructing the meaning of Attica were distinct. My reading of these diverse writings from across the carceral state observes five themes relevant to crafting a meaning for the uprising: the unique view of those inside the prison system, a sense that Attica was "too hot" to fully discuss, positing Attica as evidence of an on-going threat to the system, a search for alternatives to "violent" uprisings, and, finally, recognition that a new movement was beginning to form.

Understanding from the Inside

The work of incarcerated writers often focuses on illuminating the actual experience of prison, which mainstream media sources could rarely report on adequately. The sentiments of some of the incarcerated commentators who reflect on Attica in the early stages of meaning construction appreciate the people who are able to approach the subject with an ethic of care and understanding—currently and formerly incarcerated people. There is an implied assumption that people who have never been incarcerated cannot understand the breadth and depth of the Event of Attica. Accordingly, a section titled "A Messenger of Hope, Courage and Cheer" by Tom De Ville, published in Avon Park Correctional Institution's *What's Up?*, demonstrates gratitude for Joe Grant, a formerly incarcerated man who edits the "International Penal Digest." De Ville writes:

> With so much publicity focussed [SIC] on Attica and Raiford by prolific and mostly uninformed writers, whose viewpoints are slanted by their shallow understanding and prejudices. It is refreshing to find an intelligent and certainly informed man like Joe

> Grant, opening not a new frontier, but a new concept for examining an old problem in depth. There are no simple answers to the complex problems of today' [SIC] prisons. Certainly the answer is not going to be found through the sensational type writings on pathos, brutility [SIC], activists, racism and rural guards which so many reporters dwell on. Such reporting simply tends to solidify the prejudices already established, by those on both sides of the wall. (2)

With this statement, De Ville juxtaposes the "shallow understanding and prejudices" of "mostly uninformed writers" with the "intentionally and certainly informed" perspectives of Grant. The difference between Grant and the unknowledgeable writers is incarceration. The "ignorant" writers employed by mainstream media sources do not have the positionality that grants them a thorough understanding of the carceral state. Thus, incarcerated folks like De Ville take ownership of a true grasp on the Attica Prison Uprising. The Event of Attica could allow them to reject the mainstream narratives that were circulated about the uprising. Instead, incarcerated writers worked to take control of and undermine the dominant narratives written about them, becoming agents in the narratives written about incarceration.

"Too Hot"

The October 1971 issue of Oklahoma State Penitentiary's *The Eye Opener* mostly consists of broad discussions of prison reform, with topics ranging from the benefits of work-release programs and the lack of resources people newly released from prison receive, and musings on daily life in prison interpolated throughout. In 1971, *The Eye Opener* had a sum of 3,500 issues circulated with circulation on the outside being 950 (2). The paper is not solely focused on experiences at Oklahoma State Penitentiary, which is exemplified in a section titled "Memos to the Penal Press" where the editor Joe Carnes responds to the contents of other prison

newspapers. Carnes's communication with incarcerated folks who wrote and published prison newspapers across the country demonstrates how "a body of strangers [is] united through the circulation of their discourse" (Warner 59). Prisons function to isolate people from the "free" world. The publication and circulation of prison newspapers is a way for people who are incarcerated to speak to the people who are incarcerated in their prison and outside of it. The discursive practice of claiming rights through prison writing is a critical enactment of agency. Stephanie L. Kerschbaum's definition of agency as "a rhetorical negotiation between speakers and audiences, a negotiation in which individuals do not have full control over their own identity" (60) relates to how people exercise freedom by working against hegemonic powers and discourse by reclaiming their identity to defend their right to be seen and treated as human.

In the month following the uprising, *The Eye Opener* was still trying to figure out how to wrestle with what Attica meant. In part of "Memos to the Penal Press," Carnes writes "You will note an absence of any discussion about the Attica thing. We feel that it is too hot an item to touch at this time. In any case, the news media has said it much stronger than we would ever dare" (13). The absence of Attica is something that Carnes felt obligated to acknowledge. Attica was this "singular and depthless" (Foucault 189) thing that Carnes and other writers for *The Eye Opener* were unwilling to engage with in the moment. Their normative understanding of prison uprisings was torn apart. They were not ready to parse through what Attica made possible and how their identities as incarcerated folks were impacted. By letting the mainstream media speak about Attica, they were giving up some of their power in negotiating their identities as a way to resist hegemonic constructions of people who are incarcerated. However, the precarious position of prison writers likely prevented them from publishing a scathing reprimand of state violence.

Oklahoma State Penitentiary was known for issues spawning from overcrowding, which must have had implications on what was permitted for publication and what was not. The issues at Oklahoma State Penitentiary culminated in the court case *Battle v. Anderson*, in which the "court ordered remedial action in several areas: (1) racial segregation and discrimination; (2) procedural due process; (3) conditions of confinement; (4) medical care; (5) correspondence and publications; (6) access to the courts, public officials, and attorneys; (7) religious freedom; and (8) security and staffing" (Tilly 526). Based on this court-ordered remediation, the conditions of this prison likely resulted in censorship by the prison administration prior to publication since there had to be buy-in from the prison administration in order for the publication to "freely" run. Alternatively, self-censorship of more radical perspectives may have occurred to avoid punitive measures that could harm individual writers and prevent the steady functioning of *The Eye Opener*.

The Threat of Another Attica

On the other hand, *Voice of Prison* from Washington Penitentiary State (popularly known as Walla Walla) readily began constructing the meaning of Attica in their issue published on October 6, 1971, less than a month after the uprising. People who were incarcerated at Washington State Penitentiary were in a unique position to criticize the prison-industrial complex because they were able to establish a system of self-government in their prison, which was a frequent topic of discussion in the paper. It was "designed to give inmates actual policy making responsibilities through a system of collaborative management" ("INMATE SELF-GOVERNMENT"). Because of the system of self-government, it is likely that they had more agency and swifter access to information. The first mention of Attica in this issue is located in an unattributed political cartoon where Nixon, with an exceedingly big head, is sitting in a small

chair looking dejected. A thought bubble above his head reads, "I should contact B. J. Rhay……We can't afford… another Attica or Quentin……." (13). Nixon's idea to contact B. J. Rhay, the Superintendent of Washington State Penitentiary, to avoid another Attica or San Quentin points to how incarcerated writers grappled with the rupture that was Attica as they began to understand Attica (and San Quentin) as a threat that loomed for the federal government and prison administrations across the country. The Event of Attica disrupted normative, racist assumptions about incarcerated folks. Figures like Nixon were intent on ensuring that the dominant narratives that consistently stripped people who were incarcerated of their humanity were maintained. Walla Walla's system of limited self-government granted the men incarcerated there the opportunity to sever traditional power dynamics in prison. Attica created an opportunity for them to demand more. The agency provided by self-government likely empowered individuals imprisoned at Walla Walla to speak frankly and act in pursuit of freedom, placing Rhay and the prison administration in a fraught position. How do you take away power without being reactionary? How do you take away power without eliciting a reaction? Incarcerated commentators embrace the difference of Attica because it reveals that something different is possible. In fact, in the moment of Attica, everything was possible for people who were incarcerated.

In the same issue of *Voice of Prison*, another reference to what the Event of Attica made possible occurred in an article titled "20 Years" written by Virgil Keel, a person who was formerly incarcerated for 20 years before becoming a consultant to Corrections Departments in four different states and Washington, D.C. (14). It is striking that Keel, as a formerly incarcerated person, works in corrections. His positionality grants him a unique perspective that many people who work in corrections are missing—the actual experience of decades in prison.

The act of incarcerating is very different from the experience of being incarcerated. Keel can understand the demands for change because as someone who was formerly incarcerated, he was once a member of an incarcerated public, which allows him to understand calls for change by prisoners as "intelligent" and demonstrate solidarity with the prisoners' rights movement.

Keel acknowledges that there is an increasing presence of revolutionaries in prisons across the United States at this moment in time. He asserts that Attica is "only the beginning of what is to come" (14). Because the demographic shift in incarcerated folks created a population of people demanding radical change, the revolution for prisoners' rights was not stopping any time soon post-Attica. Keel predicted what would happen if the Corrections Departments across the nation did not meet the demands of people who are incarcerated: "So if prisoners are continually denied their intelligent pleas for change, and corrections people remain keepers, we shall continue to have the turbulence of the Atticas and San Quentins" (14). In the wake of Attica, revolutionary fervor was pervasive, and Attica became a rallying cry for incarcerated people. The necessary demands put forth at Attica were called for in many prisons throughout the United States, and despite the massive amount of bloodshed at Attica, there had not been enough done to change the plight of people who are incarcerated. The Event of Attica allows incarcerated folks to mobilize around what is possible in a post-Attica future. Michelle Ballif explains: "To await a *future to come*, the event to come, the future and the coming must remain open—that is, unpredictable, unforeseeable, unknowable" (248). The potentials that Attica opened up were boundless. Incarcerated people recognized that people in the "free" world now had an increasing awareness of just how unsettled prisoners were by their oppression. Attica provoked the question of who would tip the scale and when. If the carnage of Attica kept happening in prisons across the country, a wider public might begin to question the common

racist narratives fed to them about the criminality of incarcerated folks and instead express solidarity with people who are incarcerated as their circumstances became more visible. A loss of faith in punitive institutions and tough-on-crime stances would no longer allow business as usual in prisons.

Alternatives to Attica

Iowa State Penitentiary's September/October 1971 issue of the *Presidio* includes an editorial by Wallace Turner from the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* titled "Attica Alternative? Inmate Council Has Say in Washington Prison Life" that parses through one of the possibilities that arise from the Event of Attica—self-government in prisons across the country. The focus of this article is the aforementioned system of self-government at Walla Walla. Turner explains: "Supporters of the prison's new philosophy feel that it has national implications and frequently speak of it as 'an alternative to Attica or San Quentin.' But it began long before the convict revolt at the New York prison and the killing at the California institution" (17). The people incarcerated at Attica presented a series of reforms related to demanding humanity and decarcerating. The consequences of Attica could not be known in the moment, but a framework for understanding what reforming punitive systems could look like existed long before the Attica Prison Uprising thanks to Walla Walla. The self-governing body at Walla Walla is an exceptional way to operate a prison, and it would be shocking to see prison administrations across the country willingly adopt this reform. However, the Event of Attica, as this "radically other" rupture, unmasks the routine cruelty of the government and prison administrations. The Event thus provides an opportunity for systems of self-government to be widely implemented as a way to disrupt the harmful power dynamics that enable often unchecked abuse and

exploitation. Such a system imparts a blueprint for carceral structures where incarcerated folks can participate in democracy by speaking and acting for themselves.

Attica is a Movement

The Attica Prison Uprising is positioned in the broader context of pleas for democracy and liberation put forth in the Civil Rights Movement and protests of the Vietnam War. The mainstream media and people who actually participated in these various social movements are bound to a pattern of struggling over the meaning of these movements. The hegemony of the mainstream media was often used to deflect the purposes of various social movements and frame the direct actions of different participants in a negative light, even as these moments were violently suppressed by the state. These events are frequently dramatized and misunderstood. As typically credible institutions, mainstream media sources use their power to take control of depictions of different revolutionary actions. The Attica Prison Uprising became a victim to this trend. Yet, incarcerated writers did not allow these depictions to be circulated without contest. The November/December 1971 issue of the *Presidio* responds to and challenges these interpretations. In the section, "In The Key of 'E'—THE EDITOR," an article titled "TO UN-DRAMATIZE THE DRAMA" seeks to demystify prison strikes and uprisings across the country as non-normative and infrequent. Rob Loney, the editor, writes, "Most of the 'uprisings' were considered 'minor disturbances' with little amount of injuries to persons and property. But no matter what label the news media tacked on to each individual institutional outburst—they all are considered as 'parts' of the whole 'drama,' with the Attica massacre taking the spotlight" (2). With these "dramatic" interpretations of Attica and other direct actions carried out in prisons across the country, the meaning of these movements, according to mainstream media, are reduced to spectacle, and the desire for radical change that undergirds these actions is drowned

out. The relative frequency of strikes and small-scale acts of resistance with little to no bloodshed did not usually warrant significant media attention. Loney recalls: "On November 29th, 1971, this penitentiary at Fort Madison, Iowa, hit the news as part of the drama that is sweeping our nations. What the news failed to report was the fact that **every year** the Fort has a minor disturbance" (2). Attica forces the broader public to direct, not divert, their eyes to the collective frustration of people who are incarcerated across the country. The Event of Attica provides an opportune time for incarcerated writers to take control of what is being written about their subjection. Their interpretations need to be central. For the mainstream media, prison and the acts of resistance that occur within them are dramatic, but Loney urges us to think of the quotidian lives of people who are incarcerated. At Iowa State Penitentiary, even whispers of resistance pose a threat to prison administrators and lead to unwarranted crackdowns. Accordingly, the Event of Attica operates as a moment in which incarcerated folks could finally take control of their identities and break down prison walls so that they could be seen and understood in accordance with the narratives they have written about themselves.

A further scrutiny of the relationship between Attica and the system of self-government maintained at Washington State Penitentiary occurs in a February 8, 1972 issue of *Voice of Prison* as incarcerated writers continue to think of Attica as part of a larger movement. Like Keel, the author of the article "Penal Democratization: 'The Story of Self-Government in Prison,'" presumably the editor of the newspaper, is concerned with an "articulate new breed of prisoner [who] is politically motivated and is demanding social and human reform at every level" (1). They also see that Attica serves as a forecast of what's to come if the demands of people who were incarcerated were not met: "Unless society provides humane treatment aimed at restoring the millions of incarcerated to a useful life, the ugly threat of Attica and the thunderous

hail of bullets hangs over every prison in America today" (5). Every incarcerated person is able to see themselves and their prison in Attica. Attica becomes an "ugly threat" for the federal government and prison administrations because it revealed the discontents of people who were incarcerated in an incredibly public way. The prospects of the walls of prison becoming more see-through or coming down altogether would create an identity crisis for punitive systems. Attica asks society as a whole to do something. Failure to act by prison administrators and government officials caused the rupture of Attica. Continued passivity could only result in more turmoil. The Event of Attica could have provided a way out for incarcerated folks as people witnessing the deafening trauma of these five days in 1971 could understand that prisons were functioning exactly the way they were supposed to. This way was unacceptable for people who were incarcerated and a broader public touched by the aftershock of Attica, who recognized Attica is more than five days of revolutionary struggle.

Taken together, the various ways that Attica is dealt with in prison newspapers demonstrates that the Event opens up diverse possibilities for amplified resistance. Incarcerated writers might be held back from speaking freely due to the threat of heightened punishment in an already brutal system, but this reluctance does not lead to silence from every incarcerated writer. Some writers choose to tread lightly. Other writers take the threat of Attica in stride, recognizing their chance to demand more from prison administrators who are afraid of what could erupt after Attica. These efforts are coupled with current and formerly incarcerated writers struggling to reclaim agency and authority in writing about their experiences of prison and thus taking control of their identities.

Attica as Event in Poetry

In the spring of 1972, less than a year after the uprising, Celes Tisdale, a Black poet and English professor at Buffalo State College, began facilitating a poetry workshop at Attica Correctional Facility every Wednesday, which he believes was "the first poetry workshop in American prison led by a non-inmate and African American" (Tisdale ix). Prior to the uprising, the limited classes offered at the prison were taught by white men, who were mostly concerned with upholding white surveillance of Black people rather than critiquing the racism of the prison-industrial complex (Nowak 4). Tisdale was not working in the context of a wholly reformed Attica Correctional Facility, and the prison administration would postpone the workshop when tension arose from unresolved issues of racist neglect, abuse, and exploitation. In a July 20, 1972 journal entry, Tisdale wrote: "Our workshop session was canceled yesterday because Supt. Montanye's declaration of a state of emergency at the facility. Prisoners (approx. 900 of 1,200) have stayed in their cells the past two days protesting conditions. A specific protest centered around a nurse's termination. She was reinstated amid protests" (Tisdale 78). Despite disruptions and oversight, the workshop allowed a small group of incarcerated students and poets to reflect on the ghosts of Attica in a more embodied way.

Poetry enabled men at Attica to capture what prose often cannot. The select number of poets who participated in this workshop defined poetry as: "Personal, deals with emotions, historical, compact (concise), eternal, revolutionary, beauty, rhyme, rhythm, a verbal X-ray into the soul" (Tisdale 76). These understandings relate to John Dewey's consideration of what poetry does differently than prose in *Art as Experience*: "It condenses and abbreviates, thus giving words an energy of expansion that is almost explosive. A poem presents material so that it becomes a universe in itself, one, which, even when it is a miniature whole, is not embryonic any

more than it is labored through argumentation" (Dewey 241). Timothy O'Leary summarizes Dewey's conception of poetry, stating, "the potentially explosive intensity of the poetic is capable of liberating us from the constraints and barriers that narrow our experience of the world" (O'Leary 555). This use of poetry as resistance is particularly pronounced in the traditions of Black radicalism. As Gwendolyn Baxley and Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz observe, "poetry has historically been leveraged as a tool of protest, helping to capture current realities and imagine new ones into existence" (311). Examining poetry, in turn, offers "a mirror to Black resistance and a window through which we can see our collective struggle" (Baxley and Sealey-Ruiz 312). Through this workshop, some poets were able to capture the explosiveness of Attica in few words. Other poets worked to capture *their* history of Attica. They wanted their voices to be heard, and they recognized how recording fragments of their experiences, thoughts, and feelings in their poetry could allow them to address their trauma while simultaneously working to take control of the meaning of Attica and its implications. The text, subtext, pauses, and silences of poems from *When the Smoke Cleared* call to the Event.

In the previous section, the discussion of the Event of Attica centered around incarcerated writers who were distant from the uprising. They did not have boots on the ground in D-Yard like the poets in *When the Smoke Cleared* did. The uprising at Attica was an Event for the nation and especially for those incarcerated, but the poetry produced in this workshop brings the trauma induced by state violence and anti-Blackness into sharp relief. Timothy Bradford emphasizes the substantive impact of workshops like the one Tisdale facilitated: "even if teaching creative writing workshops on the inside remains fraught with difficulties, the power and agency they engender endures and makes them, as this important and timely collection shows, and important and transformative response to the continual state-sponsored violence of the US carceral system"

(Bradford 77). The workshop enabled the poets at Attica to dwell on their embodied experience of the uprising, which is crucial to how they make sense of the Event of Attica. Dori Laub provides crucial insights about the necessity of recounting one's trauma: "There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one's story, unimpressed by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life" (Laub 61). Poetry becomes a useful vehicle for sharing this embodied experience because, as Kamari Smalls argues, "poetry is consciousness, it transcends language of the world making the hidden known, and it is necessary for survival because it is where hopes for survival and dreams of change are founded and articulated" (74). The form of poetry enables these men to address the exceptional difference of the Attica Prison Uprising, consider just how traumatic and life-altering it was for the people who were there, and eventually arrive at their truths.

Because the Event is about exceptional difference, this concept aligns well with Cathy Caruth's conception of trauma as "always out of context" ("'Who Speaks from the Site of Trauma?'" 63). She further discusses that: "Trauma, as an experience, as a missed experience, causes you to ask, precisely, why it is that all the frameworks you have previously used, all the models, aren't adequate to describe this experience" (51). The Event is initially unintelligible. Accordingly, the poets at Attica worked to form a new language to respond to their trauma and resist dominant narratives constructed by the carceral state that enabled the Event of Attica to occur. Kendall Phillips explains how "the Event of dissension" opens up "the conditions in which people are afforded a space in which to question the intelligibility provided by the dominant social consensus, to push back against the identity into which they have been placed and to think differently" (Phillips 67). The prison-industrial complex marginalizes people who

are always already marginalized by their race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, dis/ability, and other parts of their positionality. Hegemonic constructions of people who are incarcerated further allow them to be reductively viewed as a monolith of "criminals." As the poets who witnessed and survived the bloody suppression recount the Event, they deploy their work to reclaim both interpretations of Attica and their identities. These incarcerated writers exemplify what Caruth calls the "life drive" ("Parting Words" 25) in their poems. She discusses the role of the "life drive" in trauma: "The witness of survival itself – the awakening that constitutes life – lies not only in the incomprehensible repetition of the past, that is, but in the incomprehensibility of a future that is not yet owned" (23). The survivors of the Attica Prison Uprising are bound to the "life drive," and they work to make the incomprehensible past and future comprehensible in their poetry.

In the following sections, I will consider the distinct way the incarcerated poets take on Attica. For Christopher Sutherland, it was necessary to freeze the moment of Attica in a slow and perceptible narrative of the struggle to survive the massacre of state terror in the moment and aftermath. The poetry of Hersey Boyer and Isaiah Hawkins reflects Attica as an Event of embodied trauma characterized by white supremacist, state-sanctioned violence and the struggle for manhood. The historical continuity of anti-Black violence is scrutinized in poems by Sam Washington and Mshaka. All of these poems work to capture the incendiary nature of the Event of Attica. While the published poems from this workshop are varied and rich, in this final section I will focus on three prominent themes that help shed light on the nature of Attica as Event: an emphasis on the singular moment of the uprising, the embodied nature of their critique of the system, and the visceral reality of anti-Black violence.

Freezing the Moment

In the moments before and during the massacre at Attica, the men who participated in the uprising could not have forecasted that they would witness death callously dulled out on a massive scale. Everyone in D-Yard was proximate to death that day. An indiscriminate bullet could have hit anyone and ended their life decades early. Despite such proximity to death, many men survived, and some men were able to recount the "incomprehensible repetition" (23) of their traumatic past in the poetic form. The poem "Sept. 13th" by Christopher Sutherland was an illustrative account of the brutal suppression of the Attica Prison Uprising that froze the moment in time. You can feel the men at Attica bracing to die in that moment as Sutherland writes "R-E-A-D-Y !" (line 4), "A-A-A-I-M !" (line 10), and "F-I-R-E !" (line 18) in between each stanza. This sort of countdown recalls the anticipation felt before the massacre and demonstrates the explosive nature of poetry. The premonition of a massacre is felt in Sutherland's description of shoulders stiffening in the moment before (line 5). Despite this tensing up, he foregrounds the bravery of the men massacred at Attica, describing how heads were held high (line 6) prior to their deaths. In this anticipatory moment constructed by Sutherland, pronounces: "Let the world take note / That proud, black men / Are here about to die" (lines 7-9). In this second stanza, he works to resist narratives that portrayed people incarcerated at Attica as belligerent and dangerous people. Rather, he underscores the righteousness of the men who were massacred at Attica. They died struggling to be treated as men. In the final stanza, Sutherland demonstrates how the Event is oriented in the future as he recognizes the possibilities that stem from Attica. He identifies the prospect of unity: "As we die, / In their fighting spirits we live" (lines 13-14). The rupture of Attica could proliferate a movement that continues to fight for what these men

died fighting for, but these poets had to consistently defer to the past in an effort to take ownership of their future.

Embodied Trauma of MEN: Critiquing the White Supremacist State

The "life drive" is apprehended in how the poets at Attica embody their trauma in their writing. "Attica Reflections" by Hersey Boyer, described as "one of my best [poets]" by Tisdale (80), brings you into a cool, dark prison cell at Attica Correctional Facility, where the men incarcerated here have been left to struggle with their trauma:

> It isn't strange to awake in the silence
> Of midnights,
>
> To hear MEN weeping, in harsh and gravelly voices
> That turn away your lies.
>
> They have witnessed the slaughter
> And heard your songs of merriment
> As you filled your cups with blood.
>
> Anoint yourselves with madness,
> Dance with Hitler's ghost

Boyer accounts for the repetitiveness of trauma responses by noting the commonality of a quiet rest being disrupted by "MEN weeping" (line 3). In the "life drive," Caruth explains: "The departure into life is not simply the awakening that repeats an original death, but an act of parting that distinguishes, precisely, between death and life" ("Parting Words" 25). This departure is a movement toward survival (25). The capitalization of men underlines the simultaneous shock and understanding of grown men crying in their cells, frequently revisiting their trauma in their drive for life when they were alone with their thoughts in their cells. The weeping also appears to be an indication of the sadness and frustration they carry with them in their efforts to survive. The men incarcerated at Attica are so unsettled by the lies the government and prison

administration have circulated about Attica in an effort to maintain hegemonic constructions of the uprising.

The Attica Prison Uprising is informed by the broader context of the ongoing Civil Rights Movement in which the phrase "I *AM* A MAN," a phrase synonymous with freedom, became a rallying cry (Green 465). This phrase became popularized during the 1968 Memphis sanitation strike. Laurie B. Green explains how "'I *AM* A MAN' drew on a political language that considered manhood a universal signifier of humanity and independence, rejecting racist images that cast blacks outside humanity or marked them as household dependents" (468). In the early 1970s, these poets shared the language of the exploited sanitation workers. In the context of the Civil Rights Movement, "I *AM* A MAN" is already imbued with meaning, so the incarcerated poets' use of "MEN" works to emphasize the continuation of a struggle for humanity, which punitive institutions continually stripped these men of in a metaphorical and physical sense. With the violent response to Attica, these men witnessed just how disposable their lives were in a bloodthirsty, white supremacist state. With the statement "Dance with Hitler's ghost" (line 9), Boyer relates Hitler's racist and white supremacist beliefs and actions to Nelson Rockefeller's governance. "Attica Reflections" refuses the institutional perspectives that justify the indiscriminate killing of predominantly Black and Brown men. The Event of Attica in this poem is demonstrated in the juxtaposition between the grief and trauma amplified in the first two stanzas and the references to celebratory narratives of the state in the final two stanzas.

The themes of white supremacist state terror are woven into the texts, pauses, and silences of the poems that recollect the uprising. "13th of Genocide" by Isaiah Hawkins poses resistance to state narratives by identifying the devastation at Attica as a genocide, which advances the point that terror against Black and Brown folks is a deliberate tactic of the state,

which supports the racist "exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (Gilmore 247). Hawkins understands white supremacy as a fundamental aspect of incarceration: "For the white folks were coming / to lay some black brothers away." (lines 3-4). The groups of law enforcement that were perched on the high walls of Attica on September 13th were there with the intent to kill. He underscores the mindset of Rockefeller and the people who executed his order: "kill all you can. / For they don't have the right / to live like men." (lines 12-13). Christina Sharpe urges us to "think through containment, regulation, punishment, capture, and captivity and the ways the manifold representations of blackness become the symbol, par excellence, for the less-than-human being condemned to death" (Sharpe 21). Similar to "Attica Reflections," the inhumanity of the state is juxtaposed with the dignity of the men who were murdered that day:

> Then from a distance
> came a black brother's cry.
> "I'm a man, white folks,
> and like a man I'll die."

This declaration of humanity by an incarcerated Black man disrupts the frameworks of a white supremacist state that conflates Blackness with criminality and consistently strips Black people of humanity. The Event of Attica was a moment for everyone who participated in the uprising to build a world where they were fully accepted as human and treated as such. The lines "I'm a man, white folks, / and like a man I'll die." (lines 23-23) function as a rejection of racist structures that dehumanize. This incarcerated Black man struggles to renegotiate his identity in the face of death as he asserts that he is unwilling to falter to white supremacist assumptions about Blackness.

"Rifles and shotguns:" Continuity of Anti-Black Violence

The incarcerated poets at Attica consistently subvert state justifications for their violent response to the uprising. "Was It Necessary?" by Sam Washington demonstrates how the repetitiveness of trauma disrupts real time. The lines "Was it really necessary? / Did they really have to carry / Rifles and shotguns?" (lines 1-3) repeating at the beginning of each stanza reveals the inadequacy of language when it comes to considering living through such trauma and looking back as a survivor. It is still so near, and these men have to face what they lived through every day they are incarcerated at Attica in the aftermath. With this repetition, Washington points out how mass murder was a simple solution to the problems prisoners at Attica demanding better, more humane treatment caused New York State. These acts of violence are not without precedent. They have roots in the institution of slavery, the Jim Crow Era, and white supremacist attempts to crush the Civil Rights Movement. Christina Sharpe provides important insights on the implications of ongoing state-sanctioned violence: "The disaster of Black subjection was and *is* planned; terror is disaster and 'terror has a history' (Youngquist 2011, 7) and it is deeply atemporal" (5). The uprising did not need to end with a massacre. The negotiations at Attica were ongoing. It could have ended with less devastation and more democratic demands met, but Rockefeller instead chose to rely on historical precedent that planned Black subjection. The repetition of "Let's ask the gov', / Who's so full of love?" (lines 4-5) in each stanza emphasizes the culpability of Governor Rockefeller in the massacre at Attica. The irony of these lines highlights the callousness of the state that is supposed to protect the livelihoods of the people it serves. Yet, because the condition of incarceration disenfranchised the folks imprisoned at Attica, the state did not treat them as equal citizens and was able to justify such violence on the basis that the law determined they had fewer rights than people on the outside.

Frustration with the continuity of state terror is indicated by the intensification of each line that follows the aforementioned three repeated lines. The second stanza qualifies these lines with "Against sticks and knives! / Was it worth 43 lives?" (lines 9-10). These two lines contrast the power of the state with the power of the 1200 incarcerated men who gathered in D-Yard and were armed with makeshift weapons. Cathy Caruth's insights about the My Lai massacre resonate with Washington's interrogation:

> They were fighting as if it were a battle, but it actually wasn't a battle. In that sense, we can say that the repetition is historical; it takes the form of an action, and it's an action that is intended to erase a previous action. To get to the distinction between memory and history, the erasure is happening not through "I don't know how to tell my memoir" or "I have a bad dream and I can't express it." It's not "I can't remember it." It's actually that the event itself—the repetition without grasping—is the erasure. ("'Who Speaks from the Site of Trauma?'" 62)

Herbert Blyden, one of the elected leaders of the uprising, referred to "the massacre [as] 'My Lai Two'" (Felber 178). Law enforcement sent by Rockefeller were shooting as if it were a battle against the men incarcerated at Attica, but it wasn't. The government swallowed five days of revolutionary efforts with less than an hour of extreme violence. Gunshots from the walls above enacted more harm than makeshift weapons ever could. He groups the death tolls of the incarcerated men and the correctional officers together, which shows that both groups were victims of indiscriminate shooting. These lines also push against mainstream narratives that only accept the murdered correctional officers as victims while contributing to constructions of predominantly Black and Brown incarcerated folks as dangerous and less-than-human.

Washington understands state terror as planned disaster, considering how the indiscriminate killing of the men in D-Yard continued "even when they lay still!" (line 17). This line has a double meaning as it underscores the unnecessary number of bullets fired at already dead men and also how incarcerated folks were impetuously shot at even when they surrendered. He further emphasizes the white supremacy that bolsters these violent actions: "While troopers were killing with hate and glee. / Rock was safe in Albany!" (lines 23-24). Rockefeller never stepped foot in Attica during the five-day uprising, despite the pleas from "the hostages, prisoners' representatives, civilian observers and finally Commissioner Oswald" ("Timeline of Events"). Instead, he allowed prison guards, state troopers, and National Guardsmen to do his dirty work for him. Rockefeller could momentarily hide from his direct order to violently suppress the uprising, which relates back to quickly debunked attempts by the state to deflect responsibility by blaming incarcerated folks for the deaths of hostages. At the same time, these different groups of law enforcement were able to legally kill predominantly Black and Brown people throughout this violent response. In such circumstances, the white supremacist state does not hold these murderers accountable because they are the law, which means they are often able to evade responsibility for wrongdoing. Washington expresses his anger and grief, stating "my heart pains me!!" (line 34), demonstrating how the men who survived the uprising there and remain incarcerated there have not had the time and space to apprehend their trauma. The concluding lines deviate from the repetition of "Let's ask the gov', / Who's so full of love?" (lines 4-5) in the previous four stanzas as Washington declares "Don't ask the governor nothing, Man, / Cause he's full of it" (lines 37-38). He calls Governor Rockefeller a liar, demonstrating a severe lack of trust in the state. As the victims of state terror, they have witnessed just how far

the state will go to maintain law and order as on September 13, 1971 they aptly disposed of the lives of men who had decades of life left to live.

"Formula for Attica Repeats" by Mshaka (Willie Monroe) ruminates on how the aftermath of the uprising amplified contempt for the state. Mshaka's perspective on Governor Nelson Rockefeller is reminiscent of the sentiments put forth in "Was It Necessary?" By Sam Washington. A deep disdain for the governor is central to the syntax of both poems. A witty play on words transforms Rockefeller into "Rock/The/Terrible" (line 5). His cruelty is emphasized in his persona as a "refuser / of S.O.S. Collect Calls, / Executioner." (lines 6-8). The power imbalance between the state and the incarcerated men is illuminated. The men who survived Attica recognize Rockefeller as the man responsible due to his unwillingness to negotiate with the incarcerated men, instead calling for a quick and violent end to the uprising. He wielded the power of the state and permitted a massacre. His official title to them is no longer Governor. He becomes an Executioner. Assigning Rockefeller the role of Executioner highlights the violent actions of the state. The men incarcerated at Attica will not allow Rockefeller to hide behind the violence he permitted.

Attica established the possibility for a series of prison uprisings to erupt across the country. Mshaka concludes his poem with an orientation towards the future, embracing what the Event of Attica made possible:

> They came
> like so many unfeeling fingers
> groping without touching
> the 43 dead men
> who listened …
> threatening to rise
> again….

The indiscriminate killing of the incarcerated men and hostages in the D-Yard was a once unfathomable violation that became a reality. The people shooting from the high walls of the prison did not have to face the people they murdered. Rockefeller did not have to face the people he murdered. Once it was revealed how the incarcerated men and hostages were killed, Rockefeller could not deflect his culpability by leaning on racist normative assumptions. He called the shots. However, the response of incarcerated folks was not fear and passivity. The lines "threatening to rise / again….." (lines 20-21) puts pressure on the government and prison administrations who recognize the similitude of carceral institutions across the country. For official stakeholders in the carceral state, it was only a matter of time before the next Attica would occur.

While the syntax of each of the poems under consideration is distinct, the proximity of these poets incarcerated at Attica to the uprising facilitates a more cohesive understanding of the Event of Attica. These poets practice critical memory, which "works to illustrate the continuity, at a black majority level, in the community-interested politics of black publicity in America" (Baker 4). They work to delegitimize a state that is built on white supremacy and protects itself by enacting violence against any group that undermines the routine, often murderous, functioning of the state. These poets are conscious of what their resistance makes possible, but they must first and foremost grapple with their trauma to fully flesh out just how different Attica was and how meaningful it was to them and a burgeoning movement.

Struggling with the Event

The Event is something you have to sit with. The difference of the Event means that there are no prior texts to draw from to make meaning. This work requires speculation. It is difficult to grapple with just how exceptional the Event is, so rhetorical scholarship has tended to neglect the

Event because it is easier to skip over it. The starting point has frequently consisted of forcing eventful objects into normative historical frameworks of continuity and change and thus rejecting the embrace of the difference of the Event and the possibilities that explode from it. The prose of newspapers tends to challenge the reduction of meaning that occurs in mainstream media when they position Attica as an effect in a linear history by scrutinizing an unforeseeable future. The poetry of Attica supplies the deployment of a new language to work through the Event. To view Attica as "eventful" means that we must give up aiming for certainty in favor of speculating in the face of uncertainties.

Part of the difficulty in exploring the rhetorical dynamics of the Event lies in the way subsequent rhetoric erases that initial, singular moment of possibility. For later writers, "Attica" became immediately intelligible and, indeed, a potent word for those protesting oppressive systems. In the next chapter, I attend to this shift and the ways the word "Attica" became an important element in the prisoners' rights movement.

Chapter Three

Constituting the Anti-Carceral Counterpublic

"Just Another Page (September 13, 1972)"

A year later
And it's just another page
And the only thing they do right is wrong
And Attica is a maggot-minded black blood sucker
And the only thing they do right is wrong
And another page of history is written in black blood
And old black mamas pay taxes to buy guns that killed their sons
And the consequence of being free … is death
And your sympathy and tears always come too late
And the only thing they do right is wrong
And it's just another page.

John Lee Norris

Introduction

In a September 1972 issue of the *Liberated Guardian*, an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist, radical newspaper based in New York City, the focus is on the increased presence of resistance in prisons across the nation in the months following Attica. In the article "Prisons: A Year of Resistance," the unattributed author states: "For many of us, the death of George Jackson and the Attica rebellion and subsequent massacre played a very heavy role in raising our consciousness about prisons and the prison struggles that have been going on all around the country" (1). This article emphasizes the necessity for people on the inside and outside of prison to apprehend the praxis of people who are incarcerated and actively struggling for liberation. Readers should learn from their collective struggle and solidarity and celebrate their collaborative efforts, such as showing up to the trials of incarcerated organizers and sending commissary money to incarcerated folks. Two shorter pieces appear on the same page. One

discusses the direct actions that occurred in prisons across the United States post-Attica. The other piece is authored by people who were forced into HBZ, Attica's block of solitary confinement, for their participation in the uprising. Reflecting on the first anniversary of the Uprising, they discuss its significance: "This September 13th is a milestone symbolic of our belief that only in unity can we survive and move toward our universal goal of peace" (1). Despite repressive tactics by the state and respective efforts to demarcate Attica as sensational violence, the meaning of Attica was becoming clearer for those resisting the carceral state. It was the foundation of a growing movement.

In the previous chapter, the Event of Attica was grappled with as something so utterly different that its meaning was more ambiguous to the small group of incarcerated writers who struggled with what Attica would and could mean. With the one-year anniversary of Attica, more incarcerated writers were willing to engage with Attica. A year of continuing struggle against the U.S. prison system began the process of making Attica more immediately intelligible and soon its meaning became locked in, especially for incarcerated individuals. The ease with which Attica was understood and discussed was indicated by the numerous engagements with Attica in prison newspapers once the anniversary hit. In part, this ready discussion of Attica came as a response to the findings of the McKay Commission, which were released on September 13, 1972, the first anniversary of the Attica Prison Uprising. Garrett Felber identifies the issues with the findings of the McKay Commission: "the McKay Report on the Attica uprising followed the script of other state narratives following urban rebellions by distilling years of organized political resistance to state violence into 'a spontaneous burst of violent anger . . . [that] was not planned or organized in advance'" (Felber 178). Renouncing state interpretations and recognizing broader

support for their movement, incarcerated people responded to this kairotic moment in their writing.

In this chapter, I discuss how incarcerated writers take up Attica as a rallying cry to join the prisoners' rights movement and pass the memory of Attica onto a wider audience, who then are called to take responsibility for the trauma of those who experienced the state violence. I explore this rhetorical process through two key concepts: the ideograph and prosthetic memory. The ideograph, as I will detail below, provides a way of exploring the ways a single term or image can become deeply invested with ideological meanings for audiences and so, possess great rhetorical power. Since Attica was a specific traumatic event, the term "Attica" carries not only political and ideological meaning but also memories. Thus, I employ Allison Landsberg's notion of prosthetic memory to identify ways that the traumatic memory of Attica is passed on through the rhetoric of "Attica." In my reading of prison writing post-Attica, I identify the ways the term "Attica" was used in the service of bolstering the prisoners' rights movement through constitutive rhetoric that calls, what I will refer to as, the anti-carceral counterpublic into being.

Once the first anniversary of the Attica Prison Uprising occurs, we see more prison writers willing to engage with Attica because they know what Attica means and are able to use it as a political tool. The development of Attica as an ideographic term is, in part, possible because of the way that people who are incarcerated adopt Attica as a "prosthetic memory," or a memory that they have taken ownership of despite not experiencing it directly. Most incarcerated folks were witnesses to the rebellion at Attica and the circulation of this memory helped to constitute those witnesses into a counterpublic. Thus, much of the prison writing concerning Attica served as what Maurice Charland calls "constitutive rhetoric," a type of message that calls particular people into seeing themselves as part of a public. The deployment of constitutive rhetoric by

incarcerated writers enables them to form the anti-carceral counterpublic, which is not to say a (counter)public of this kind has never existed. Rather, the deployment of Attica as an ideograph enables the anti-carceral counterpublic to be strengthened.

I will engage with prison newspapers published from 1972 to 1974 in geographically disparate locations. The geographic reach of Attica is demonstrated in how it gets through to prisons, more than 1,000 miles, sometimes even a few thousand miles, away. This selection of newspapers includes articles with direct references to Attica in their respective discussions of what Attica has done for the prisoners' rights movement and its path forward. Washington State Penitentiary's *The Voice of Prisons* (referred to as *Voice of Prison* in the previous chapter), Oklahoma State Penitentiary's *The Eye Opener*, and Colorado State Penitentiary's *Interpreter* were all newspapers that readily interrogated the meaning of, the once illegible, Attica in the weeks and months after the uprising. Their struggle to assign meaning to Attica against hegemonic interpretations allowed Attica to become an ideograph. Hawaii's *Pa'ahao Press*, Louisiana State Penitentiary's *The Angolite*, and Mississippi State Penitentiary's *The Inside World* are newspapers that picked up Attica as an ideograph and prosthetic memory more than a year after the uprising.

Attica as Ideographic and Constitutive of the Anti-Carceral Counterpublic

As suggested in Chapter Two, Attica was a contested term in the months immediately after the rebellion. Incarcerated writers worked to make sense of the Event and the possibilities that derived from it, and this struggle to assign meaning was done in opposition to official state interpretations. In the years following the one-year anniversary of the Attica Prison Uprising, the term Attica is solidified as an ideograph in the prisoners' rights movement. Michael McGee defines the ideograph as:

> an ordinary-language term found in political discourse. It is a high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal. It warrants the use of power, excuses behavior and belief which might be perceived as eccentric or antisocial, and guides behavior and belief into channels easily recognized by a community as acceptable and laudable. (15)

For some incarcerated folks, Attica becomes a staple in their discourse on reforming prisons for the purpose of decarceration and ultimately abolition. A central tenet in their implicit and explicit abolitionist demands was the demand to be seen and treated as human. Attica, as an ideograph, is a term to rally around for folks who are incarcerated and actively striving for change in their project for liberation.

In addition to carrying powerful political energy, Attica operates as a prosthetic memory. Alison Landsberg describes how these memories "become part of one's personal archive of experience, informing one's subjectivity as well as one's relationship to the present and future tenses…these memories are not 'natural' or 'authentic' and yet they organize and energize the bodies and subjectivity that take them on" (Landsberg 26). As incarcerated folks adopted the Attica Prison Uprising as their own, they utilized this memory as something to organize around. Attica was a constitutive term. It became the prior text incarcerated writers drew upon to build their movement. The term "Attica" stood in for a wide variety of prison trauma and violence and so, the specific events of the uprising in New York became rhetorically intertwined with the experiences of other prisoners in other prisons becoming a powerful rhetorical term that helped to create a common ground for fighting against systemic abuses.

The establishment of a common ground among prisoners in various prisons across the country was established, in part, by the circulating memory of Attica. The circulating ideograph

of Attica helped to call individual prisoners into the collective identity of the movement. Thus, constitutive rhetoric becomes a crucial third analytic term for examining the ways Attica served to solidify and expand the prisoners' rights movement. Constitutive rhetoric is essential for social movements like the prisoners' rights movement because "it positions the reader towards political, social, and economic action in the material world" (Charland 141).

The outcome of the rhetorical circulation of Attica was, in part, to craft the prisoners' rights movement as a counterpublic. To be clear, I do not mean to suggest that Attica was the origin of such a counterpublic or that there were no efforts for prisoners' rights prior to 1971. Indeed, in important ways, as discussed in Chapter One, the prisoners' rights movement is deeply intertwined with more than 400 years of activism demanding dignity for BIPOC and other marginalized communities. Orisamni Burton insightfully argues for an understanding of prisons as "war," or "domains of militant contestation, where captive populations reject these white supremacist systems of power and invent zones of autonomy, freedom, and liberation" (3). When discussing the ongoing prisoners' rights movement, or what he calls "the long Attica Revolt," Burton urges us to think of Blackness "as much, if not more, a collective *political* designation as an individual identity" (4). In the war zone of prisons, he further encourages us to consider who gets to be human in a white supremacist state "if we understand that Black manhood has never been a stable phenomenon, and that—per Sylvia Wynter—white, Western, bourgeois man 'overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself,'" (Burton 104). Thus, the widespread pleas for humanity should be framed within a project for liberation that abolishes both prisons and the concept of the human.

The relatively modern concept of the public sphere provides one lens to understand distinct social and political formations in the present. Jürgen Habermas's conception of the

public sphere informs all of the more recent scholarship on public sphere theory. In "Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere," Houston A. Baker Jr. points out the shortcomings of the Habermasian public sphere: "Habermas understands fully that his most valued notion of 'publicity' (*Offtenlicheit*) is exclusionary, overdetermined both ideologically and in terms of gender, overconditioned by the market and by history, and utopian in the extreme" (Baker 9). The exclusionary nature of the public sphere necessitated new formulations of public spheres. The notion of the Black public sphere is one iteration that encourages us to revisit and revise *the* public sphere in order to acknowledge the presence of multiple *public spheres*. Catherine Squires discusses how enclaves are situated in Black public spheres: "The enclave is signified by the utilization of spaces and discourses that are hidden from the view of the dominant public and the state. These clandestine places and communications are dedicated to Black interests and needs. Thus, the creation of discourses and media by and for Blacks dominate the enclave response" (Squires 458). The precise conditions of prison make it an enclave for incarcerated people in which they find different ways to transform this site of oppression into a site of resistance. Resistance takes many shapes in prison. These acts can be discursive, embodied, or both. Some common forms included sharing radical texts, circulating underground newspapers, engaging in hunger strikes, and participating in work stoppages.

The presence of public-facing prison newspapers is indicative of the constitution of a counterpublic. Squires explains how a counterpublic is able to form "in response to a decrease in oppression or an increase in resources" (460). While countless prison manifestos do not suggest that people incarcerated in the early 1970s were experiencing a decrease in oppression (with the exception of prisons like Walla Walla that maintained systems of self-government), prison newspapers were a resource that allowed incarcerated writers to speak to their fellow prisoners,

people incarcerated in other prisons in the United States, and anyone in the "free" world who expressed solidarity with their struggle. Counterpublics are further "signified by increased public communication between the marginal and dominant public spheres, both face-to-face and mediated forms" and "travel outside of safe, enclave spaces to argue against dominant conceptions of the group and to describe group interests" (460). As enclaves are useful in circulating information in the underground to implement political education within prison walls, public-facing prison newspapers function to not only discuss the quotidian lives of people who are incarcerated but to also connect prisoners in the common struggles they experience from different locations in the prison-industrial complex. In distinct publications, it becomes clear that the oppression endured in prisons is not isolated to a few prisons. Oppression may be experienced in varying degrees of severity, but every incarcerated person is abused and exploited. Ultimately, prison writing is deployed in the constitution of the anti-carceral counterpublic, in which prisoners already engaged in the struggle for decarceration, abolition, and liberation write in order to bring other people into the movement and advance their goals.

Attica Against Erasure

Pa'ahao Press was a prison newspaper published out of Honolulu, Hawaii with a more radical slant, likely due to the settler colonial context the newspaper was published in. The purpose of *Pa'ahao Press* is to resist dominant narratives about prisons by functioning as a voice for people who are incarcerated. The publication invites participation from "prisoners and ex-inmates of Oahu Prison, Halawa Jail, Koolau and Kawailoa, as well as their families and others interested in prison change" (9). Perhaps not surprisingly, the writers for *Pa'ahao Press* situate Attica within a longer history of settler colonialism and racism with a particular emphasis on the way the voices of those oppressed and massacred have been erased. By emphasizing the way

official state accounts of Attica have removed the voices of incarcerated individuals, the writers deploy Attica as a shared memory among an enclaved group and, in so doing, call for prisoners across the nation to resist erasure and make their voices heard.

An article published in the December 1972 issue of *Pa'ahao Press* titled "Massacre Report" provided a critique of what was present and absent in the findings of the McKay Commission report. The author emphasizes how "the prisoners themselves, their lives and hopes, somehow, despite over 3,000 interviews remain hidden" (3). The absence of incarcerated voices in the final report indicates overt exclusion from the white bourgeois public sphere and the corresponding need for the anti-carceral counterpublic. The McKay Commission is another part of an extensive line of institutional initiatives that misinterprets the constitutive components of the prisoners' rights movement. Incarcerated people are always already politicized. The prison, as an enclave, forces political education to be experienced in the everyday, whether or not it is intentional. Accordingly, the author of "Massacre Report" recognizes resistance in prisons as inevitable: "While the report contains all the facts and logistics of the seizure, again, the human factor, the emotions, the sense of sacrifice and cause, falls outside its realm. The report speaks in terms of the 'spontaneous burst of violent anger' vs. 'pre-arrangement'; it fails to grasp how the two have become intertwined with each other through the years" (3). The assumption that rebellions in prisons must be "spontaneous" or "pre-arranged" is a false dichotomy established by the state. As this incarcerated writer takes up the prosthetic memory of Attica, they overturn state assumptions by understanding "spontaneity" and "pre-arrangement" as seemingly opposed yet synergistic parts of the anti-carceral counterpublic. Because prisoners' collective consciousness is shaped by frameworks of resistance, uprisings will always be both pre-arranged

and spontaneous. The state ordains both options as unfavorable and deflects how the oppressive conditions of prisons allow for resistance with clear principles to occur at any moment.

The Attica ideograph enables incarcerated writers to understand and connote its exact position in the prisoners' rights movement. The author of the "Massacre Report" further undermines the "whitewashing" of the McKay Commission report by clarifying what Attica means to them: "The prisoner uprising at Attica was a statement of life, of human concern for survival with dignity, addressing all-too-clearly the backwards and armed forces of racism, exploitation and death" (3). McGee discusses how ideographs are bound to the culture they reside in, and community members are "socialized, conditioned, to the vocabulary of ideographs as a pre-requisite for 'belonging' to the society" (15). There may be slight variations in how incarcerated folks define Attica, but members of the prisoners' rights movement understand Attica as a critical, ongoing project for liberation. In the white bourgeois public sphere, the ideograph of freedom is about domination. For people who are incarcerated, freedom means something different. Attica, as a prosthetic memory, is embodied in every person who survived it, whether or not they directly experienced it. The author asserts "the spirit of Attica, of faith, dedication and struggle remains. It is another reminder that we must achieve the victory desired by all humankind" (4). The culture of the prisoners' rights movement is constructed in collective struggle. Victory is not prison reform. The state wants people who are incarcerated to think prison reform is a win, but reform keeps them in prison and thus unfree.

The February 1973 issue of *Pa'ahao Press*, in addition to discourse on imperialism, discrimination against incarcerated women in Hawaii, support for the anti-war movement, and expressions of solidarity for the San Quentin Six, protracts the discussion of the "spontaneous" versus "pre-arranged" resistance false dichotomy. A section titled "A Chronology of Resistance"

discusses the events that preceded and followed the Attica Prison Uprising. The author explains: "It is clear that the government wants people to believe that prison uprisings are not the result of prison conditions but simply planned actions by small groups of cruel and barbaric 'militant revolutionaries'" (9). Through this interpretation, the state works to reduce the meaning of Attica in its attempt to demobilize incarcerated folks across the country. If the belief that prison uprisings are not widely supported is disseminated, then people do not have to question their previously held assumptions that prisons keep people safe. The state illuminates the supposed "barbarism" of a few revolutionary prisoners to disregard the fact that the prisoners' rights movement is a nationwide, even global, movement with a significant base of support. State media apparatuses are used to strengthen the prison-industrial complex in the face of a growing movement. The group of incarcerated writers under consideration reject state narratives as they take hold of Attica as a memory of their own. The sentiment that Attica is any and every prison resonates with a substantial portion of the incarcerated population and informs how they organize and situate Attica as central to their movement.

As the "Chronology of Resistance" operates as a prosthetic memory, the writer works to set the record straight about Attica. This piece further aligns with the mission of the paper by ensuring that incarcerated people—in this case, the people incarcerated at Attica—are centered in telling the narrative of *their* resistance. Building a case against the state's false dichotomy, the author discusses what was happening at Attica two months prior to the uprising in the section titled "Before The Uprising" (9). The Attica Liberation Faction [ALF] put forth demands in these two months prior in the hope that the prison administration and New York State would accept and implement the proposed reforms. The ALF insisted: "'There is no strike of any kind to protest these demands. We are trying to do this in a democratic fashion. We feel there is no need

to dramatize our demands'" (9). This statement demonstrates that Attica, as it occurred from September 9th through 13th, could have been prevented by meeting more of the basic needs of the people who were incarcerated at the prison. However, these reformist demands were not their only demands. The language of the organization's name itself, the Attica Liberation Faction, directly identifies that liberation is their ultimate goal. Freedom is not something that is found within prison walls, even as the enclave of prison actively forces collective struggle to take place in the pursuit of freedom. The proposed demands would only alleviate some of the abuses and exploitation they were subjected to inside prison walls. They were not liberatory demands. Rather, these demands were voiced as initial steps on the path to liberation. The "before" of Attica clarifies the role of organization in resistance. The people incarcerated at Attica had very straightforward needs, and their stipulations needed to be met quickly to ward off resistance. Attica's prisoners could control which demands they asked the state to implement, but they could not plan how the state responded to their requests. The state's deferment of necessary demands is what breeds "spontaneous" resistance, a misnomer given everything that leads up to it. Almost every incarcerated person experiences a life in which all of their human needs are not met, so they can assume the state's failure to ensure that the basic needs of the men incarcerated at Attica were met not just as a shared experience but as their own memory.

The chronology notably does not account for what occurred during the five-day uprising, yet its focus on the fallout in the section titled "After The Uprising" reveals how Attica did not end after five days. Attica is ongoing. The violence and neglect that preceded Attica intensified in the aftermath as the prison administration worked to suppress the growing anti-carceral counterpublic by separating, isolating, and transferring prisoners they identified as leaders of the resistance. The author emphasizes how attempts to pacify collective resistance had failed:

"Despite increased security, Attica has not been quiet" (9). The fact that heightened punitive measures could not stop the people incarcerated at Attica from engaging in direct actions, like striking to get a recently hired nurse reinstated and participating in Black Solidarity Day, attested to the strength of their convictions and movement. Their response to continued violence and their refusal to be put down helped constitute the anti-carceral counterpublic within and outside of Attica. As prison administration and New York State still failed to meet the immediate needs of the people who were incarcerated at Attica, they continued fighting: "The prisoners sent out a 'Manifesto from the Monster Attica' in the end of November with demands not very different from those issued at the time of the uprising. Said one inmate, 'At present officials seem to feel that unity is subversive. For us unity is dignity'" (10). The constitution of the anti-carceral counterpublic is necessitated by the state's unending neglect. Every member of this counterpublic became oriented towards taking action in the world as a collective. The state and prison administration recognizes unity as "subversive" because collective action by people who are incarcerated forces prison officials to implement reforms that they would not care to without pressure from a strong counterpublic. They organized around interests opposed to the dominant punitive public. The state proved they were willing to invest in prisons by heightening security measures; however, it was unwilling to support the livelihoods of people who were incarcerated by ensuring that they had access to basic necessities like adequate healthcare and religious freedom. People who were incarcerated at Attica, at every prison, were continually denied basic needs and recognized that the only way to guarantee that their basic needs were met was through collective action. Their fight was not just about making sure people who were incarcerated had their basic needs secured. They were struggling for a life outside of and after the carceral state.

The only way to achieve this life was through the constitution of the unified, anti-carceral counterpublic.

Self-Governing Perspectives

The necessity of the existence of the unified, anti-carceral counterpublic is apparent in prisons like Walla Walla where prisoners have agency in governing themselves. The December 7, 1972 issue of *The Voice of Prisons* began with a reflection on the prison's first two years of self-government. The system was in the midst of reevaluation since a new constitution was being implemented to address its past faults. The article "The Voice Speaks !!!: *DREAMS BECOME REALITY*" considers how the system of self-government at Walla Walla was enacted at the right time: "It came just in time to prevent another Attica, and though nearly two hundred years late, we finally witnessed a strong attempt to correct a sick system" (1). The effort to stop "another Attica" from happening is a sentiment that has been reiterated by people who are incarcerated, prison administration, and the state—notably for vastly different reasons—since Rockefeller made the call to attack the uprising's participants. This sentiment underscores resistance in prisons as inescapable, especially when the voices of people who are incarcerated and their needs are neglected. The impulse to move from enclave to counterpublic seems clear as does the writer's sense that Attica was one of the motivating factors for this move.

Washington State Penitentiary, with their system of self-government, is an exceptional case because this structure of government grants them a unique position that is not mirrored in many other prisons at all. The author clearly understands that the ability to have some control over one's destiny in prison is a "dream" for many and a reality for few. Because this governing structure is a reality at Walla Walla, the people incarcerated here discern that they are at a distinct point in their struggle while also understanding that the system of self-government also

functions as a tool to pacify resistance. For prisoners at Walla Walla, they register Attica as an ideograph of both organized and unorganized resistance in prisons. While the presence of an underground movement in Walla Walla is difficult to gauge based on the contents of their public-facing newspaper, the system of self-government conveys a more organized plot of resistance. Washington State Penitentiary, at this time, operates as one of the most visibly changed parts of the anti-carceral counterpublic. The people at the behest of this "sick" system had some real power to change it, and by adopting the ongoing structure of Attica, they could do more to tear down prison walls.

Situating the meaning of Attica in the context of a growing prisoners' rights movement was widely practiced by the incarcerated writers under consideration. The article "Hard Road To Progress: As It Was" appears on the same page of this issue of *The Voice of Prisons* and adheres to this common thread. The author describes the prison-industrial complex as a "cancerous sore [that] had risen to such heights" to the point where it could no longer be ignored (1). This metaphor represents the transition from enclaves to counterpublics in prison, particularly the moment the resistive work in the underground or on the peripheries must become visible. Attica was a rupture that seized the awareness of people, mainly in the "free" world, who previously were not paying attention or those who did not think something like Attica could ever occur. The unnamed author asserts: "The men of Attica…proved to the world 'there has to be a better way'" (1). The everyday occurrence of resistance in prison is unrecognizable by, overlooked, and/or intentionally suppressed from people on the outside. Most people who were incarcerated in the United States in the early 1970s heralded this need for improvement. Yet, it took suffusing Attica with the meanings of every act of resistance, from the small, quotidian acts to the highly publicized direct actions, for this term to become an ideograph and be called upon as something

to build a movement around. Incarcerated folks seized on the attention that Attica grabbed among members of the dominant punitive public to show that resistance was not an isolated occurrence, and every prison could be Attica if prisoners were pushed far enough. The spectacle of the Event of Attica added urgency to the emergence of the anti-carceral counterpublic as well as rhetorical power to their emerging voice.

Attica provides a foundation for the continuation of the prisoners' rights movement, so people who were incarcerated continued to struggle. The author, writing from the perspective of someone incarcerated in a self-governing system, identifies the prison-industrial complex as a "rot" and "glaring disgrace" and the institutions within it as "cesspools of hell" in emphasizing the tumultuous forward trajectory: "The hard road to progress in penal reform is strewn with the bodies of human beings such as those men of Attica, keeper and kept…In order to continue whatever progress is intended for the prisons of America, the prisoners must be permitted to take a prominent role in the efforts to correct the system" (6). The phrase "whatever progress is intended for the prisons of America" leaves the direction of the prisoners' rights movement open-ended. Progress could take the form of Walla Walla's self-government as a first step but ultimately pivot to decarceration, community-based solutions, and abolition. The author, as a person incarcerated at Washington State Penitentiary, understands what it means to have the agency to think and act more freely. Their experience of incarceration affords them the perspective of knowing something different is possible because they are in the midst of this difference. Their language invites prisoners to recognize themselves as stakeholders in the anti-carceral counterpublic by asserting that they are in a position to take control of their identities and contribute to fundamental changes to the carceral state, whether or not they are consciously engaged in a marked abolitionist struggle.

Who Gets to be Human in the Carceral State?

The issue of who gets to be human, or granted full personhood, is central to the development of the anti-carceral counterpublic in the prisoners' rights movement. Almost two years after the uprising, prisoners continued to deploy Attica in their continued fight for their right to be treated as human beings. Weheliye encourages us to think critically about what it means to be human: "The conjoining of flesh and habeas corpus in the compound habeas viscus brings into view an articulated assemblage of the human (viscus/flesh) borne of political violence, while at the same time not losing sight of the different ways the law pugnaciously adjudicates who is deserving of personhood and who is not (habeas)" (Weheliye 11). For incarcerated writers this question of humanity was visceral, and for the many Black and Brown people subjected to the punitive system, this question was one with a long history. The Louisiana State Prison, or Angola, a maximum security prison constructed on the grounds of a former plantation that became known as "'the bloodiest prison in the South'" in 1962 due to frequent stabbings ("History of the State Penitentiary"), is just one of many prisons where incarcerated writers struggle with how political violence against Black and Brown people and the law has signified that they do not deserve to be treated as people because they are not viewed as fully human in a white supremacist system. In a June-July 1973 issue of *The Angolite*, a prison newspaper produced at Angola, Leo Toomajano, the newspaper's associate editor, discusses how Attica forced all eyes on the prison-industrial complex. He explained how the prisoners' rights movement was "reaching an apex but not ending with the bloodshed of Attica" (1). Attica only receives a brief mention in this editorial, but its presence shows how it has contributed to the further politicization of prisoners. Incarcerated writers, like Toomajano, understand that Attica is about constant struggle. Considering how the common person on the outside is encouraged to

view incarcerated people as deserving of being kept in cages, separated from their loved ones, he describes what the prison means to him:

> The oft heard expression that individuals are sent to prison as punishment and not for punishment finds little realization in a correctional system which demands total psychological subordination of the prisoner. The inmate describe[s] this situation best in their plea to be treated like men. While other factors such as racial attitudes, status concerns, and socio and economic level conflicts are undoubtedly involved; the overriding problem in officer-inmate relationship is that of the conflicting means used to accomplish the mutually contradictory goals of rehabilitation and punishment. (Toomajano 1)

Toomajano's assertion that punishment is incompatible with the prospect of rehabilitation is by no means unique; however, drawing on the uprising as an "apex" before making this statement shows how Attica rhetorically constitutes an audience of people who were incarcerated as not mere spectators but active agents in the struggle for decarceration and abolition. The anti-carceral counterpublic reveals the various tactics of the dominant punitive public that amplifies the various axes of oppression incarcerated folks are subjected to in prison. The "plea to be treated like men" is a callback to L.D. Barkley's proclamation that shaped the five-day uprising and everything that came after it. The consistent circulation of this proclamation confirms Attica's clear meaning in the anti-carceral counterpublic, which was diametrically opposed to the dominant punitive public. The incompatible goals of the respective counterpublic and public propelled the prisoners' rights movement forward as Attica is proof of the state's preference for violence. For the anti-carceral counterpublic, organizing around common ideals was essential to strengthening their movement and showing the state that Attica was ongoing.

Further opposition to the dominant punitive public appears in "Petticoat Junction," an article written by Brookie Knudson, the Women's Division Editor of *The Eye Opener*, a prison newspaper produced in the Oklahoma Correctional Institution. This article appears in the July 1973 edition of the newspaper. In this piece, Knudson discusses Vice President Spiro Agnew's dismay at the fact that editorial writers mourned the incarcerated men at Attica who were murdered by New York State in a similar manner to how they mourned the guards at Attica who were murdered by the same indiscriminate bullets of New York State. His distress resulted from his belief that incarcerated folks were worth less than prison guards. This view demonstrates how incarcerated folks are seen as less-than-human at every level of government. Knudson takes issue with Agnew's beliefs, rejects his state-endorsed determination of who gets to be human, and affirms the personhood of people who are incarcerated:

> Mr. Agnew, who at the moment, could become the highest official of the United States government, should understand and uphold the underlying ideas and principles of the government he serves. No idea or principle is more basic than that the value of a man's life transcends his pedigree or pigmentation or politics or personality or property. Nor is any notion more alien in our society that some men have the right to abuse other men because their power to do so is sanctioned by qualitative standards. (7)

Knudson uses the idea of constitutional rights—rights that the Vice President of the United States should be upholding—against Agnew. They specifically draw on the text of the Reconstruction Amendments to undermine the Vice President while simultaneously reflecting on how these rights have been consistently thwarted. Knudson refuses the legal frameworks that ascribe a less-than-human status to people who are incarcerated: "The fact that a man has become a prisoner, does not mean that he has ceased to be a human being" (7). People who are

incarcerated are conscious of the rights that whiteness grants white victims. Weheliye considers the power of whiteness in authorizing and refusing humanity: "as an object of knowledge whiteness designates not actually existing grouping but a series of hierarchical power structures that apportion and delimit which members of the Homo sapiens species can lay claim to full human status" (Weheliye 19). Agnew, the second highest official in the government, actively upholds white power structures by not accepting the humanity of incarcerated people. As the dominant punitive public does not sanction the full personhood of prisoners, the presence of the anti-carceral counterpublic allows people who are incarcerated to resist the less-than-human status that has been assigned to them by hegemonic institutions and be agents in mourning the men at Attica working to liberate themselves from these very same structures. The counterpublic also honors their legacy by advancing this project for liberation. Incarcerated writers, like Knudson, consistently call on Attica to build a world in which they can be human, a belief that drives the prisoners' rights movement and connects every member of the anti-carceral counterpublic to one another.

One of the most direct calls for the constitution of the anti-carceral counterpublic is present in a January-February-March 1973 issue of the *Interpreter*, a prison newspaper produced at Colorado State Penitentiary. On a page dedicated to the newspaper's former editor, Lafayette Locke, called "Passages from The Prophet," a number of Locke's revolutionary ideas are quoted. In one of these quotes, Locke considers what Attica does for the prisoners' rights movement: "'After George Jackson and Attica, the possibility for convicts to work for constructive change against the repressive forces in their situation and in their community outside can become a reality. But we can do this only as we become aware of what's happening and achieve unity and understanding among ourselves'" (7). Attica's positioning as an ideograph in the prisoners'

rights movement pushed forward heightened consciousness-raising among people who were incarcerated across the United States. He is not just speaking to people who were incarcerated at Colorado State Penitentiary. Locke's use of "convicts" following a direct reference to Attica functions to bring the constructed audience of people who were incarcerated across the country into the anti-carceral counterpublic. He is exposing the conflict this collective has with the "repressive forces" of these hegemonic punitive systems. Locke understood the basic condition that needed to be met to constitute the anti-carceral counterpublic—unity. The anti-carceral counterpublic was struggling against the dominant carceral ideology that was embedded into tangible structures. The circulation of Attica allowed incarcerated folks to recognize that their struggle to be treated as human was a collective struggle for liberation that would free everyone from the firm hold of punitive ideologies and systems.

Prison Breeds Resistance

The January – February – March 1974 issue of Colorado State Penitentiary's *Interpreter* is yet another prison publication that holds a mirror up to the prison-industrial complex. This mirror shows the state, prison administrations, and guards that they are maintaining a system where discontent is built into the structure. In the paper's "EDITORIAL," the author rationalizes resistance in prisons: "Perhaps that's why Attica had to 'talk crazy' or why McAlaster launched its rebellion with 'This is a revolution!' People understand how greasy fat meat is when it costs them $20 million and too many lives to find out. That is, if they're not still busy being shocked while the very ideals they try to suppress slap them in the face with a reflection of their own humanity" (2). Similar sentiments are put forth in "ANATOMY OF A STRUGGLE" by M. D. Bass, a piece in the same issue, proclaims: "Prison conditions create the George Jacksons, the Atticas, and the McAlaster 'revolutions'" (Bass 28). Bass continues: "a riot/rebellion is generally

the outgrowth of a collective frustration" (28). White Western "civilization" always already delegitimizes violent, uneven struggles against the state and its oppressive structures while members of "civilized," white society can enact violence seamlessly and without punishment. The carceral state frames revolution as a threat because it demands the destruction of the systems that protect whiteness. Thus, revolutionary demands by incarcerated folks are reduced to "'talk[ing] crazy.'" However, members of the anti-carceral counterpublic are unwilling to assent to state interpretations of revolution because they know what Attica means for their movement.

The March 1974 issue of *The Angolite* echoes the understanding that the precise structure of prison is what creates the need for rebellion, especially as the state only demonstrates a willingness to create incremental changes. Douglas Dennis emphasizes how incarceration fuels resistance in an article titled "DRASTIC OVERHAUL IN APPROACH TO CORRECTIONS RECOMMENDED,": "Neverless [SIC], the painful lessons of the recurrent wave of prison riots, apitomized [SIC] by Attica, Raiford, and a multitude of other disturbances, is that the present system has created and nurtures even more threats to security and public safety caused by the frustration and desperation that drives men to rebellion" (11). Dennis further substantiates Attica's ideographic state by denoting that the uprising was emblematic of the broader prisoners' rights movement. His statement that the state "nurtures even more threats to security and public safety" suggests that the dominant punitive public works to legitimize itself by broadcasting these "disturbances" as events that necessitate the prison-industrial complex. However, Dennis asserts that the punitive system is the issue, not the people who are subjected to it, and concludes with the need for a "drastic restructuring" (11). Attica undermines a punitive system that consistently sanctions violence when direct action is taken to change the material conditions of the people who are disparaged by it. The lack of transformation from minimal reforms forces the

anti-carceral counterpublic to demand meaningful change by taking direct action, realizing anything other than active resistance will allow for the continuity of violent subjection corresponding with the absence of freedom.

Conclusion

The Inside World was a newspaper published out of Mississippi State Penitentiary, or Parchman Farm, another plantation-turned-prison in the Deep South. Smith and Hattery discuss how Parchman Farm operated following the abolition of slavery: "Parchman was established to ease the transition for Mississippi White between the end of slavery and the development of sharecropping. In this setting Parchman served two main functions: social control and forced labor" (85). Prison abolitionists commonly understand prison as tools of social control, a belief that is both implicit and explicit in the writings of all of the incarcerated writers under consideration. Parchman Farm cannot be detached from its history of Black subjection in slavery, sharecropping, and convict leasing. As these systems are recapitulated in the form of the modern prison-industrial complex, the white supremacy that structures them does not dissipate, and whiteness is able to determine that Black and Brown people are not able to achieve full personhood within this system. This assertion of the inhumanity of prison is present in an article written by Johnnie Johnson titled "WOMEN IN PRISON" which appears in the March 1974 issue of *The Inside World*. This piece reflects on a documentary of the same name, which articulates prisons as a site of state-sanctioned dehumanization, before expressing thanks for the implementation of recent reforms at Parchman Prison. In this discussion, Johnson directs his appreciation towards Attica: "Penal reform is a nation wide movement that is not to be denied. I can only express my gratitude and vow to help in any way I can. We don't need anymore Attica's where the convicts get shot down because of their insignificance. However we must be

grateful to the men in Attica that seemed to be the spark that set fire to Penal Systems around the country" (23). Overt gratitude is rarely included in incarcerated writers' recognition of Attica's rhetorical constitution of the anti-carceral counterpublic, but it is, at least, present in the subtext of many of these publications. As much as Johnson lauds reform in this piece, identifying Attica as "the spark that set fire" to punitive systems points to the desire for more than reform. This particular metaphor incites abolition as the ultimate goal of the prisoners' rights movement. Attica is a constant struggle, and he understood the uprising as something that strengthened an existing collective organized around common goals. Attica is a structure of ongoing resistance that remains a central part of the prisoners' rights movement.

Conclusion

The "Incomplete Abolition" of Attica

In this thesis, I worked to listen to the voices of incarcerated writers who constructed rhetorical responses to the Attica Prison Uprising. There is an undoubted precedent for resistance to captivity, whether it's against violent acquisition, the establishment of territorial boundaries, or the construction of fortified walls. Attica aligns with this tradition, and yet it has its own unique contours. Attica is not exceptional because it was a prison uprising. Attica was a prison uprising with mass casualties that was highly publicized, and incarcerated writers recognized Attica as something characterized by its intense difference. The Event opens up a realm where everything is possible. Conceptualizing Attica as an Event pushed me to go back to a moment in time when incarcerated writers were actively struggling with the meaning of Attica while the state and mainstream media circulated interpretations that attempted to reduce the meaning of Attica by framing it as a spectacle. People who were incarcerated were working towards an abolitionist future that the state worked to foreclose, and engaging with prison writing allowed me to see how incarcerated writers recognized the radical difference of Attica. Because the rupture of Attica created a moment where everything was possible, my work often focused on speculating on what could have happened after the violent suppression of the uprising based on how incarcerated writers responded to the Event in prose and poetry. Ultimately, there is a struggle in recognizing that there is something like an Event, so it's important for rhetorical scholars to struggle with the Event in order to go back to this moment before because it enables us to understand how we move from moments of ambiguous meanings to the moment in which the meaning of something is solidified, which is where rhetorical scholarship typically starts.

Grappling with the Event allowed incarcerated writers to arrive at a moment in which Attica reached an ideographic state, and incarcerated writers understood Attica as an ongoing struggle for liberation and deployed it as a political tool. As prison writers began circulating their views of Attica, their perspectives began to create a more solid sense of what the uprising meant. After some time, "Attica" took on an ideological meaning that was almost immediately recognizable and a powerful invitation to other incarcerated people and their allies to join in with the modern prisoners' rights movement. Attica became identifiable as an entry point into something broader and more expansive. Orisamni Burton provides crucial insights about the abolitionist praxis of Attica: "Attica was an incomplete abolition, not only because it occurred on a temporally and geographically limited scale but also because it necessitated other forms of captivity. Still, Attica represented something worth fighting for. And fight they did, in visible and invisible ways" (Burton 95). The prison writing under consideration in this thesis contributes to this "incomplete abolition." I worked to use prison newspapers across temporal and geographic ranges that revealed how limited this scale was. Despite the limited scale, we see an impressive constitution of an agential rhetorical audience that was intent on changing their material conditions, deploying Attica as an ideograph and prosthetic memory to help construct and strengthen the anti-carceral counterpublic of the early 1970s.

Working in digital archives was central to the development of this thesis. JSTOR's "American Prison Newspapers, 1800s-present: Voices from the Inside" open-access archive is, without a doubt, a necessary and valuable resource, and this thesis would not be possible without it. However, people construct archives, and thus exclusion is a foundational part of constructing archives. This archive afforded me the opportunity to access newspapers that would be challenging for me to access in person. Yet, my work was confined to what newspapers were

present in this archive, so whatever this archive made absent was also absent in my work. Future scholarship might seek to expand these archives by seeking out additional writings and engaging in interviews with those who were incarcerated during this period. Future research might also focus more directly on the mainstream media accounts of Attica to expand our understanding of how this Event had such a profound impact on public discourse around the prison system.

The poetry published in *When the Smoke Cleared: Attica Prison Poems and Journal* was also invaluable to the development of this thesis. While Tisdale's journal entries provide insights on the progression of the poetry workshop and the publication of *Betcha Ain't: Poems from Attica*, the precise dates and contexts the poems were written and revised in are unknown. The poems that did not get selected for publication are also not easily accessible, so there were/are likely even more poems that expanded the meaning of Attica that have been erased from the archive. Future research should be conducted to explore these and other forms of writing around the Event of Attica.

Emphasizing the insights of some of the incarcerated writers under consideration, including Tom De Ville, a writer for Avon Park Correctional Facility's *What's Up?*, I acknowledge that my positionality will never allow me to truly understand what it means to be incarcerated; however, I have used my abolitionist frameworks to resist hegemonic interpretations of prisons and people who are incarcerated to center the discursive acts of incarcerated people of the early 1970s, one of the most revolutionary periods of the prisoners' rights movement. My commitment to contributing to the abolition of the prison-industrial complex will persist, so I hope to continue to develop my abolitionist praxis within and outside of rhetorical scholarship and find different ways to express solidarity with people who are incarcerated. For now, I will dwell on this abolitionist adage from Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "'where

life is precious, life *is* precious'" (Kushner), because incarcerated writers of past and present have worked to build an abolitionist future where life is precious.

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