

Utopia in D Yard

Prefigurative Politics and the Attica Prison Uprising of 1971

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"It's strange to say that something as bad, and as barbaric, to the level Attica was, was like a lifesaver to me. My value system changed. My awareness changed, my consciousnesses changed. You know, my whole mind and my way of looking at life is different now. It feels better."

—Frank "Big Black" Smith, former Attica inmate (in Lichtenstein 2001)

Remembering Rebellion

How do we remember Attica? The legacy of the Attica Prison uprising is evoked across popular and political media spanning Al Pacino's refrain in *Dog Day Afternoon*, John Lennon and Yoko Ono's "Attica State," and poetry by Muhammad Ali. The events of the uprising have been reworked into plots on *Oz*, *Orange Is the New Black*, and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, while actors including Morgan Freeman and Samuel L. Jackson have portrayed fictionalized Attica inmates. Of course, the Attica Prison uprising does not only persist in TV movies and artistic allusions. The rebellion has served as a confluence through which numerous activists and academics have examined mass incarceration, prison activism, New Left politics, Black Power movements, and police terror. Yet, Attica's legacy is marred by dismissal and misunderstanding. Most popular narratives (including in journalism,

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books, films, and other media¹) treat the uprising as a political failure punctuated by gruesome violence. Rioting inmates never won concessions from the state and many of them were prosecuted for their participation in the uprising. Police and correctional officers eventually dismantled their protest through disproportionate force, killing 30 inmates and 9 hostages and wounding almost 100 people in the process. The results of this state-sponsored repression echoed through popular protests for Attica’s victims, legal proceedings against inmates, limited investigations of the state, minor institutional reforms, and—perhaps most notably—a long history of counterinsurgency aimed at preventing prison activism and militancy.²

The Attica Prison uprising forced a sleepy town in rural Western New York to reckon with the reality that approximately half its total residents were incarcerated. The stark contrast between a tiny village sustained by generations of white correctional officers and its disproportionate captive population of Black and Brown urban youth manifested sensationally in a tense stand-off between inmates and prison officials lasting approximately five days in September 1971. The Attica uprising

Figure 1. (previous page) Protesting inmates raise their fists in a show of solidarity during their occupation of Attica State Prison’s D Yard. Attica, NY, September 1971. (AP Photo, File)

1. Journalism: see *TIME* (1971), PBS (2000), Segura (2011), Craig (2016), Leonard (2021). Books: see Bell (1985), Wicker (1975), Jones and Connelly (2011), Miller (2021). Films: see Firestone (1974), Lichtenstein (2001), Reynolds and Segura (2011), Marshall (2012), Nelson and Curry (2021), Chomsky (1980), Frankenheimer (1994), Palcy (2001). Other media: see Shepp (1972), Rzewski (1974), Lennon and Ono (1972), Nas and Hill (1996).
2. It is notable here that although all nine deceased hostages were killed by law enforcement personnel, the Department of Corrections initially reported that inmates had slashed hostages’ throats prior to the retaking of the facility. Governor Nelson Rockefeller and his allies went to great lengths to cover up the actual events of the uprising and prevent investigations into state and law enforcement actions. His administration spent millions of dollars in taxpayer money to investigate protesters’ actions with the sole purpose of prosecuting inmates. The state of New York did not investigate any of the 39 deaths that occurred on the final day of the rebellion and no charges were ever brought against law enforcement personnel. Despite admissions by police officers that they systematically destroyed evidence of their crimes, New York State prosecutor Malcolm Bell was unable to bring any charges against state actors (Thompson 2016:342–58). However, the state of New York initiated cases against rioting inmates in 42 separate indictments totaling approximately 1,400 felony counts, and approximately 40,000 years in potential jail time. These charges were eventually dropped for lack of evidence (Lichtenstein 2001).

ultimately failed in obvious ways. Inmates were denied amnesty for the initial rebellion that led to nearly 50 correctional officers and civilian staff taken hostage and four people (including one correctional officer) killed. They sacrificed any chance of marginal concessions from the state by asserting their unwavering commitment to holding the prison's D Yard. The perceived failure of the rebellion contributes to Attica's historical salience as a state-sponsored massacre. This reading is particularly relevant due to the uprising's coincidence with the intensification of mass incarceration fueled by postindustrial urban policing and radical political organization—including antiwar and racial justice activism—on the Left. The American public was galvanized by anti-Vietnam War activism and the struggle for racial equality as left-wing politics and civil rights advocacy proffered meaningful alternatives to authoritarianism. The influence of revolutionary political organizations such as the Black Panther Party was apparent in social unrest that extended from urban rebellions and popular protests to the “forgotten places” of US penitentiaries (Gilmore 2022:327). This spirit of radical politics permeated various disruptive actions at prisons throughout the country, ranging from silent protests and strikes to violent revolts and attempted escapes. This tradition of revolutionary praxis is essential to understanding the Attica Prison uprising, which has come to emblemize a range of rebellious strategies during this period of radical politics in prisons throughout the 1970s and '80s.

The specter of the Attica uprising as a failed political experiment manifests in continued discourse surrounding *prefigurative politics*—that is, a method of community organization that supplants hegemony by transforming repressive institutions, creating alternative ways of life, and fostering new social relations, in contrast to protest strategies that appeal to or reproduce the domineering authority of the state (Raekstad and Gradin 2020:40). The intellectual history of prefigurative politics as such proceeds from a 1977 essay by social theorist Carl Boggs that names a specific social organization in Marxist and socialist political formations across temporal and spatial contexts. His definition of prefigurative organizing connotes “the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal” (1977:4). More recently, Paul Raekstad and Sofa Saio Gradin have proposed a holistic definition for prefigurative politics as “the deliberate experimental implementation of desired future social relations and practices in the here-and-now” (2020:16). This framework suggests that replacing certain social structures requires us “to reflect some aspect(s) of the future structures we want in the movements and organisations we develop to fight for them” (17). Accordingly, these scholars suggest, prefigurative politics should not be framed as an *alternative* to struggle, but affirmed as a crucial strategy for carrying it out. This emphasis on intentional experimentation troubles the dominating perception of organizing *for* liberation and encourages an analysis of organizing *as* liberation. This framework is especially relevant in the context of prison organizing, as political action among incarcerated subjects unsettles common sense notions of freedom, privilege, and reform that underscore critiques of prefigurative methods.

The historical narrative of Attica's failure is especially relevant for prefigurative political analysis because prefigurativism troubles the assumed futility of “failure,” unsettling common critiques of idealism or ineffectiveness. More recently, this pervasive criticism flourished in discourses around Occupy Wall Street, which is taken by many scholars of political theory as a paragon of prefigurative political action. In October 2011, philosopher Slavoj Žižek addressed demonstrators in Zuccotti Park in lower Manhattan with a warning reflecting antiprefigurative critique:

Don't fall in love with yourselves. We have a nice time here. But remember, carnivals come cheap. What matters is the day after, when we will have to return to normal lives. Will there be any changes then? [...T]here is a long road ahead. There are truly difficult questions that confront us. We know what we do not want. But what do we want? (2011)

Žižek's questions echoed broader concerns about Occupy as an essentially prefigurative movement, as organizers, journalists, and scholars weighed the protest's disruptive power against its perceived disorganization. Today, scholars and activists aligned with Žižek routinely contest the legitimacy of prefiguration as a strategy for political change, equating prefigurative experimentation with

building a “radical clubhouse” (Smucker 2017:68). Academic discourse often favors reform over antiorganizational—that is, “stressing the movement before the organization” (Breines [1982] 1989:50)—approaches to political action, while the dichotomous treatment of means and ends thwarts the prefigurative assertion that “[o]ur societies don’t need resistance; they need reconstruction” (Raekstad and Gradin 2020:9). Thus, debates about prefigurative politics reveal a pervasive tension between strategic, efficacious, realistic, or reform-minded political efforts and affective, embodied, idealistic, or abolition-minded organizing. Attica is an important case study in prefiguration because its stakes necessarily problematize normative perceptions of political action, including notions of choice, privilege, and reform in Leftist politics; its proximity to foundational prefigurative movements; and its relevance as a model of prefigurative social change. Highlighting the intangible yet crucial outcomes of prefigurative organizing challenges the normative critique of political failure. The afterlives of Attica must be reframed in terms of political innovation rather than violent retaliation.

The most revealing details of the Attica uprising, especially the four days during which D Yard remained under inmate control, distinguish Attica as a spontaneously organized movement for liberation rather than a riot, a revolt, or a massacre. In refuting some of the most pervasive critiques of prefigurativism through this retelling of Attica, I also demonstrate the potential of performance studies analysis within the scholarly discourse of prefigurative politics. Performance studies can both explain and unsettle tensions about prefigurativism as a strategy for social change; a concerted analysis of social performance facilitates more serious consideration of the affective and aesthetic facets of social organization and suggests that process and product cannot be so easily separated. A performance-centered framework also challenges conceptions of liberation that neglect the shared social world as a site of political transformation, asking *what happens* when bodies assemble, neighbors turn into comrades, and communal institutions supplant mechanisms of political control. “Performance” denotes acts that bring about a new reality in their doing, taking seriously the function of embodied behavior “as a system of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge” (Taylor 2003:16). The relative absence of performance studies in political theory discourse precludes comprehensive understandings of prefiguration as a transformative political strategy. In fact, prefigurative politics is necessarily situated at the intersection of politics and performance, and both fields have much to gain from rethinking their enmeshment at this site of social-political action. This hybrid framework generates potentially new considerations for remembering performance in contexts of political struggle. Within the carceral geography that is Attica, political organizing and self-determination have a special significance as both a means and an end for collective liberation.

The internal life of Attica’s D Yard—its political organization, syncretic culture, and social life—is largely ignored by historical narratives. Much of the popular media that has been produced about these events focuses on the violent retaking of the prison by law enforcement personnel and staggering loss of life on 13 September. Sensational accounts trace the events of the uprising through the initial riot; days of negotiation and visits to the yard by politicians, activists, and observers; and mounting state pressure to initiate a retaking with disproportionate force and weaponry. However, more recent scholarship has revealed the inner workings of inmates’ struggle for control over the facility and its resemblance to numerous other protest demonstrations, civil disturbances, and revolutionary actions throughout the tradition of Leftist politics (Camp 2016; Gilmore 2022; Burton 2023). Although the initial events of the uprising and its brutal conclusion are undoubtedly crucial to understanding the broader context of Attica, my focus is on the duration of the inmates’ protest while occupying D Yard.

My account of the Attica Prison uprising draws from audiovisual recordings captured by Roland Barnes and Jay LaMarche for WRG-TV Buffalo, first-hand testimonies, and interviews for various documentary projects conducted between 1974 and 2021. This retelling highlights inmates’ social and political formations and their adherence to essential prefigurative principles. A performance studies perspective tracks inmates’ collective social and political consciousness through performative negotiations at the individual and interpersonal levels in the micro-society of the yard.

Situating personal transformation within the broader contexts of carceral geographies, interpersonal relationships, and social roles, this study demonstrates that prefigurative performance can be a crucial intervention in punitive confinement.

Prefigurative Politics and the Attica Prison Uprising

The affective dimensions of the Attica Prison uprising are instrumental to understanding its significance as a radical political action, as various accounts attest.³ The initial events of the uprising surprised few who lived or worked at the prison. Many feared that a violent confrontation would soon come to pass, as tensions at the facility were exacerbated by brutal living conditions, hostile inmate-guard relations, and growing solidarity among inmates. Conflict first arose after a “company” of inmates was unexpectedly locked in a prison tunnel after breakfast on 9 September 1971. Unbeknownst to the inmates who expected to be let into the yard and the correctional officer who struggled to lead them there, the door was locked because a lieutenant decided that their “company” should instead be returned to their cells in retaliation for rushing into the dining hall that morning so an inmate who fought with a guard the day prior would not be excluded from breakfast. Fearing violent punishment with no escape, the men overpowered their accompanying correctional officers and opened the doors to the adjacent D Yard. In the ensuing struggle for control over a large portion of the facility, inmates destroyed prison infrastructure and took staff hostage. Almost 1,300 men flooded D Yard carrying food, medicine, clothing, and homemade weapons. Chaos gave way to celebration as the men recognized their newfound freedom, as former inmate Al Victory describes: “We had nobody threatening us [...] it was a moment of exhilaration, of somehow doing something to have some control over your own life” (in Nelson and Curry 2021). Other former inmates consistently describe the early hours of the uprising as a “festive time” of astonishment and jubilation (in Nelson and Curry 2021).

As quickly as chaos turned to celebration, the uncanny anxiety of freedom called for strategy. Many of the men incarcerated at Attica had been transferred there after recent uprisings at Auburn Prison and Manhattan Detention Complex (known as the Tombs). They recognized that their actions would cost them greatly if they did not secure leverage over prison officials with clear aims in mind. The protest grew remarkably calm as a few trusted men appealed for unity across the yard (Thompson 2016:93). Members of the Black Muslims formed a human barrier around a hostage area while notable leaders from the Black Panthers and the Young Lords Party, respected white radicals, and authors of the recently formed Attica Liberation Faction’s (1971) manifesto gathered around a picnic table in an ad hoc committee.⁴ These men held status among the general population due to their collective legal expertise, radical politics, and educational attainment. Thus, the occupants of the yard complied as the improvised group asked them to relinquish their weapons,

3. A note on language: I use several terms to refer to incarcerated people and various aspects of incarceration in the United States, including inmate, prisoner, offender, rehabilitation, and reform. Several of these terms have contributed to the dehumanization of incarcerated people by prison administrators, state officials, and government agencies. These terms tend to naturalize criminality and insinuate that people who are incarcerated are inherently deviant. These terms are also historically specific in that they reflect prevailing beliefs about the prison system at the time of the Attica Prison uprising. The same goes for terms like *rehabilitation* and *reform*, which, while problematic in their institutionalized deployment, are not rejected outright by many incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. My use of these terms does not reflect any tacit agreement with the concepts they describe or their use throughout the US carceral project, but rather their relevance to and consistency with discourse about Attica.

4. The Black Muslims, Black Panthers, and Young Lords were the most cohesive groups present in the yard. Barring a few Maoists, some Marxists, a member of the Weather Underground, and another from the American Indian Movement, these three groups were the only collective political players in the prison and were considerably visible during the uprising and occupation. The Attica Liberation Faction’s manifesto was submitted to Commissioner of Corrections Russell Oswald and Governor Nelson Rockefeller in July 1971 and included 27 demands for better prison conditions (in Addison 1972:95).

food, medicine, and cigarettes to the area in front of the table and integrated these supplies into a communal stock. At this point, “[w]e came together as a community,” former inmate Alhajji Sharif recalls. “That’s when there was no such thing as black, white, Hispanic, whatever. It was about—we are inmates, and we need to be able to survive whatever’s going on” (in Nelson and Curry 2021).

The spontaneous leadership committee decided to form an inmate security force, taking steps to recruit white and Puerto Rican inmates in addition to the Black Muslims guarding the hostages. Inmates who fought in Vietnam built hooches (simple tents) to serve as personal quarters and set about digging a latrine. Meanwhile, volunteers with medical experience administered care to injured inmates and hostages using supplies looted from the prison hospital. Several former inmates attest that the treatment they received at this makeshift medical station far exceeded their regular medical care while incarcerated at Attica.⁵ Men were called up by cell block to receive their share of supplies while the security force portioned out meals. As the general organization of the yard came into view, hostage correctional officer Michael Smith was astonished, “thinking that these guys on the inside seem to be getting their act together faster than whatever we have working for us on the outside” (in Marshall 2012).

The efforts of the men at Attica to represent diverse racial groups and political ideologies among their leadership reflects their implicit understanding that personal experiences would form the foundation of their collective politics. Notably, government suppression of radical Black, feminist, and antiwar movements in the early 1970s filled prisons like Attica with young people of color who were disproportionately engaged in political protest.⁶ The personal identities of inmates in the yard formed the base ideology for leaders of the protest, who overcame a common mistake of socialist organizations that see “political analysis and revolution as a kind of pristine ‘objective science’ that could neatly be detached from people’s social context and experiences” (Raekstad and Gradin 2020:39). Their spirit of economic cooperation and interracial unity reflected the protest’s antecedents in the Black Panthers’ social programs and other communal institutions in economically and socially marginalized communities.

Hours into the spontaneous uprising, the yard held elections to establish a democratic decision-making body. Utilizing existing social infrastructure, they agreed to elect two men per cell block as representatives. Each block elected the most politically engaged of their group as representatives. Former inmate Melvin Marshall explains that 21-year-old Elliott “L.D.” Barkley subsequently became the face of the uprising because he “had a way with words [...he] knew how to explain things in a very intelligent way. So he would ask to be the spokesman for us. That’s how he got his leadership role” (Marshall 2012). The bullhorn was subsequently turned over to the people, who waited in line to speak about issues at the prison. Al Victory recalls that nobody was turned away, as “everybody wanted a voice. Good, bad, and whacked out. So, nothing went easy, but it went” (in Nelson and Curry 2021). As they listened to the testimonies, which were amplified throughout the yard, the ad hoc leadership committee drafted an official statement of demands to share with prison officials. They summarized what the men wanted to accomplish, distinguished between urgent and nonurgent issues, and proposed a list of outside observers to oversee their negotiations with the state. After voting for consensus on each point, the inmates had their first list of demands.⁷

5. See the George “Che” Nieves interview that appears in the film directed by Stanley Nelson and Traci A. Curry (2021).

6. Approximately 63% of men incarcerated at Attica were Black or Puerto Rican. More than two thirds had been incarcerated at least once prior to arriving at Attica, 77% came from cities, and 80% had not finished high school (Thompson 2016:23, 696). Of the men occupying D Yard, approximately two thirds were Black, about 25% were Puerto Rican, and about 10% were white (New York State Archives 1971).

7. The first list of demands included: 1. Complete amnesty from reprisals; 2. Speedy and safe transportation out of confinement to a nonimperialistic country; 3. Intervention of federal government to be under direct federal jurisdiction; 4. Reconstruction of Attica Prison by inmates and/or inmate supervision; 5. Immediate negotiation through several attorneys, politicians, and activist groups; 6. All communication on their terms and guarantee safe transportation (Thompson 2016:105–06).

The inmates' strategic adherence to prefigurative tactics is exemplified in their democratic election of leaders whose primary function was to confirm popular consensus. While prefigurative tendencies are often perceived "as lacking in knowledge about how to organise properly," historian Wini Breines argues that popular movements deliberately enact horizontal organization "because their political aims [...] are not served by centralised or hierarchical organising" (Breines 1980:423). This participatory model crucially enables the entire population to develop political consciousness and organizational capabilities without appealing to centralized authority or social hierarchies. In prefigurative traditions, this antihierarchical approach extends beyond decision-making structures to social relationships and internal culture. Prefiguration at Attica can be traced from the inmates' formal political structures to their counter-institutions, or "institutions outside the established order organized along radical egalitarian principles as a means of building the new society within the shell of the old," through which they shared meals, built shelter, exercised, and played music together (Raekstad and Gradin 2020:52). Thus, inmates considered "not only formal rules and arrangements, but also the ways in which social norms, roles, values, and divisions of labour affect people's abilities and power" to organize effectively in the yard (102).

The men's aspirations looked beyond their immediate conditions as they strove to contribute to a larger movement for Black freedom and prison reform. This impulse was influenced by the proliferation of Black Power organizations throughout the prior decade and contemporaneous prison protests after the 21 August 1971 killing of activist George Jackson, who was incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison in California and cofounded the Marxist-Leninist Black Power group Black Guerrilla Family there in 1966. At least 700 Attica inmates participated in a day-long silent hunger strike protesting his death on 22 August, only weeks prior to the uprising, while riots across the country and within the New York State prison system bolstered the tide of prison activism. In addition to meeting with Department of Correctional Services (DOCS) Commissioner Russell Oswald, the inmate leadership requested that television crews be brought into the prison yard, hoping especially to reach economically and socially marginalized members of the public and rouse their sympathy for the cause at Attica. Elizabeth Fink, an attorney with Attica Brothers Legal Defense, recalls that "the Attica brothers [...] thought that if they told everybody what the situation was, that people would support them" (in Lichtenstein 2001). The solidarity solicited by the inmates was, in turn, extended through their actions, as their demands pertained to all New York State carceral institutions, not just Attica Prison. "Support us all the way," inmate Charles "Flip" Crowley pleaded to the cameras with a microphone in hand, "We're doing this for everybody" (Barnes and LaMarche 1971; in Lichtenstein 2001). Inmates moved seamlessly between the context of their own political mobilization, the broader landscape of the prison system, and, finally, the urban centers and marginalized underclasses through which the carceral apparatus exerted its control, issuing a warning against isolating their struggles. Accordingly, L.D. echoed their plea for solidarity in his first official statement to the press on 9 September 1971: "We call upon all the conscientious citizens of America to assist us in putting an end to this situation that threatens the lives of not only us, but each and every one of you" (in Wicker 1975:28). The inmates' appeals to a base of "poor working-class people, the people who have sons and daughters and uncles and fathers and husbands and nephews in places like these" (Champhen in Wicker n.d.), exemplifies what academic and organizer Chris Dixon considers one of the four main aspects of prefigurative politics: the growth and spread of a movement through inclusive organizing (Dixon 2014; see also Raekstad and Gradin 2020:41).

As the first night darkened D Yard, many inmates were overwhelmed with their newfound authority. The prison walls seemed to fade into the background of a new world—a micro-utopia that effaced years of captivity in its possibilities. "I felt free," former inmate George "Che" Nieves explains, "I mean, prison was there, but, you know, I felt free. I didn't have to hear the doors locking... And it was a good feeling, that first night" (in Nelson and Curry 2021). "The hope was stronger than the doubt," James Asbury confirms: "The point was that whatever happened, it just had to make a difference. Change had to happen. You had to embrace hope" (in Nelson and Curry 2021). The affective dimensions of their sustained protest must not be dismissed as superficial or excessive compared to formal political organization, but rather acknowledged as a glimpse of the "worlds

proposed and promised” by their collective action (Muñoz 2009:1). Indeed, José Esteban Muñoz instructs that “[t]urning to the aesthetic,” reckoning seriously with the atmosphere of D Yard as an expression of its political aspirations, is not an escape from the social realm, but a generative act that determines future social relations (1).

This community coherence was tested as negotiations began but quickly stalled on the issue of legal amnesty for inmates who participated in “rioting.” A group of negotiations observers including representatives requested by the inmates (*New York Times* editor Tom Wicker, civil rights lawyer William Kunstler, *Amsterdam News* publisher Clarence B. Jones, state representative Arthur Eve, and so on) and those called in by prison officials (US Representative Herman Badillo, State Senator Robert Garcia, Bronx school superintendent Alfredo Mathew, and so on) were allowed into the yard on 10 September to assist in the negotiations process. In what he regarded as his best offer to the yard, Commissioner Oswald agreed to 21 of their 33 demands but refused to grant legal amnesty. On 11 September, negotiations observer William Kunstler read Oswald’s 21 points aloud, but the inmates effectively rejected the deal after the issue of amnesty was addressed. According to Alhaji Sharif:

We said as a group that we was going to stand in solidarity with everyone. If they could not give amnesty to everybody, then we was not gonna leave anyone in the clutch or throw anybody under the bus. (in Nelson and Curry 2021)

Al Victory adds:

We acted together. We understood that this was us, that if we didn’t stand together now, we never would, and we would live like dogs for the rest of our lives. We understood that. (in Nelson and Curry 2021)

Victory further recalls that the men were warned by observers that things “could get very bad [if they did not settle without amnesty]. And, of course, we talked amongst ourselves, and we just couldn’t go without the amnesty, ’cause it would’ve been literally sending all our leaders to the dogs” (in Nelson and Curry 2021). Solidarity in the yard prevailed as inmates faced an uncertain future as a unified front. Their refusal to accept a deal without amnesty indicates their understanding that prefigurative organizing is not about “acting as though the desired future society is already here” by “[p]retending that one already lives in a free, equal, and democratic society,” but by working to embody that reality in the present strategies that best give rise to it (Raekstad and Gradin 2020:106). Their steadfast assertion of solidarity further indicates the uprising’s radical potential as a site of prefiguration and its essential threat to carceral logics.

Social Performance, Political Action, and Attica as a Social World

In contrast to normative conditions of carceral punishment, the Attica uprising demonstrates the capacity for incarcerated people to experience personal transformation *inside of* community transformation, exemplifying the prefigurative potential of political organization in carceral geographies more broadly. This dynamic of personal transformation within community transformation is crucial to understanding prefigurative politics through its effects on individual subjects, a framework that is particularly meaningful in the carceral context. This process is inherently social, predicated on the existence of a shared social reality, and generated through social performance in the world. For this reason, I will refer to this personal change as “social transformation.” I propose a framework for social transformation that, drawing from Lisa Guenther’s explanation of the imperative to justify oneself to others, works “to challenge offenders [...] to give them a chance to be taught [...] and to be ethically commanded by an other to put the world in common language” (2013:250). In the context of Attica, this view asserts that “there is no liberation *possible* in isolation” and that social movements proffer “a generative praxis that creates the condition to grow and recenter alternatives” to repressive political systems and social roles (Walia 2013:18). Liberation is a fundamentally social affair.

Considering the issue of personal reform through a phenomenological account of intensive confinement, Guenther identifies a total breakdown of meaningful experience and derangement of social identity with “social death.”⁸ As incarcerated subjects are deprived of the social networks and reciprocal identification required to establish a sense of reality, they are increasingly unable to distinguish the self from others. Yet, under these conditions, the carceral apparatus demands that prisoners achieve personal reform. This fundamental incongruity is evident in broader carceral developments: sequestering unwanted populations to forgotten places, for example, reflects a predominant logic of warehousing. Furthermore, this strategy ensures that meaningful solidarity or recognition of “crime” as a social condition is precluded by antisocial and psychological derangement. As Allen Feldman instructs, “arrest is the political art of individualizing disorder” (1991:109). Thus, intensive confinement works to reproduce deviant and antisocial behavior, compounding “the violence of crime rather than demanding something more or something different from the offender” (Guenther 2013:197). The prefiguration of shared political consciousness is essential to combatting social death precisely because it is generated from individual action that is oriented toward a shared social world. Attica exemplifies prefigurative praxis as a significant intervention in social death across carceral geographies.

The role of community, and the intermediary goal of creating community through political transformation, further reflects the prefigurative tendency at Attica. Breines attests that community formation proceeds from the recognition that a truly liberatory “movement should represent something more genuine and human, a way of life that call[s] for equal and caring relationships” ([1982] 1989:48). This approach also invokes the concept of “healing justice,” which Cara Page describes as “a political and philosophical convergence of healing inside of liberation” (2010). The practice of healing justice supplants the punitive individualism of incarceration by rejecting isolation both in struggle and in healing (see Walia 2013:152). The Attica uprising fostered “loving social relations forged in the process of struggle” as both a means and an end of inmates’ protest (152). Attica is an extreme case study in this sense, as its very sustainability hinged on unwavering solidarity among inmates. Their project of community formation was facilitated through localized social transformation, as inmates took on specific roles to maintain order, protect the hostages, provide for their people, and negotiate the terms of their demands.

The link between community formation and social transformation at Attica is best understood through an analysis of its smallest and most formative units of performance. I lean on Diana Taylor’s definition, which distinguishes performance “as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity” through behavior (Taylor 2003:2). Performance is both process and product; as an epistemology, it cannot be separated into these distinct parts. It is an embodied way of knowing, passing down knowledge, understanding oneself, and interacting with the social world. Furthermore, “[p]erformance, almost by definition, relies on spectators to complete it” (Taylor 2020:123). Who we are and “[w]hat we know, in part, depends on our being there, interacting with others, unsettled from our assumptions and certainties” of fixed social life (9). Accordingly, the social world of D Yard was co-constituted through shared performance strategies among inmates, observers, hostages, and agents of the state. Although the state still fundamentally controlled the extent of their communication with inmates, the negotiations observers effectively empowered men in the yard, as they attracted well-known journalists, clergy, politicians, and activists to Attica. George “Che” Nieves emphasizes that the “observers, they all were listening to us. I feel that they were supporting us, you see, and that meant a lot to us [...] they were listening” (in Nelson and Curry 2021). Former inmates recall that the observation committee made

8. The term “social death” was coined by sociologist Orlando Patterson in 1982 and is closely associated with his study of slavery. The context of slavery is instructive in understanding social death as the permanent domination of alienated persons who are positioned at the edge of social life, neither included nor expelled. Social death can be interrupted by the state at opportune moments, such as to hold an enslaved person accountable for a loss of profit, or an incarcerated person for a prison assault.

them feel like there were people who believed in them and understood their perspective; they were invited to see themselves among men of respect and stature in politics and activism. The gathering in the yard was thusly composed of various social actors who facilitated the process of personal reform. Inmates embodied new social roles that were made available by observers' belief in them and their mutual recognition as coperformers in the yard.

As individual actors were empowered to perform different social roles, they unsettled and reformed the personhood they imagined was available to them. Their transformation was legitimized through interactions with observers and other outsiders who accepted inmates' self-presentation, reciprocating respect and commitment despite prior impressions of the men "as murderers, rapists, and thieves, so the prison authority said," according to Tom Wicker (in Lichtenstein 2001). Erving Goffman's theory of social performance suggests that "when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society," an explanation that further demonstrates the experimental value of prefigurative organizing at the level of performance (1959:35). Taylor's concept of "presente" is similarly instructive in mapping prefigurative politics as a performative being present, of "commitment to witnessing; a joyous accompaniment [...] an ongoing *becoming* as opposed to a static *being*, as participatory and relational, founded on mutual recognition" (2020:4). This way of organizing is fundamentally performative: as subjects organize a more egalitarian society, they also become more fit to live in that society. As Harsha Walia remarks, prefigurative organization is "healing and empowering precisely because *within it* and *through it* I have found a means to redeem and liberate myself" (2013:156). While prefigurative communities are constructed through social behavior, social behavior is constituted through performance, denoting performance as the foundation of collective life, or the stuff that links knowing and acting. The performative trajectory of prefiguration further clarifies that intersubjective experiences constantly (re)invent the conditions of collective action in the social world.

In one case exemplifying the mutable embodiment of social roles, Frank "Big Black" Smith was enlisted as the head of security and tasked with securing the yard. "I'm a big old gorilla-looking black dude," Big Black recalls, "automatically that's an intimidation. And [the leadership] said, 'We need to have him here. Somebody that can talk to people and that people would listen to'" (in Lichtenstein 2001). Big Black's physical embodiment, once a target for stigmatization and harassment, allowed him to foster cooperation in the yard and protect the inmates' capacity to protest. In the moment that Big Black's interlocutors recognized him as someone who could lead security efforts with seriousness and familiarity, they called his habituated personhood into question. Big Black, who was not politically engaged prior to the uprising, paid close attention to the negotiations that took place:

I was looking at those demands. So, like, I start looking at my being in prison and what I was doing in prison and what needs was being served. Person be in prison for a lot of time, and when they're released, all they get is \$40 and a suit. No education, no training—the average prisoner don't even have no place to say. What is gonna happen with that person? (in Lichtenstein 2001)

As Big Black embodied new social roles, he also developed political consciousness facilitated by the structure of the yard. This process of self-interrogation sparked a lifelong change in Big Black's understanding of the world and his role in society. Speaking to interviewers in 2001, Big Black characterized the uprising as a turning point that awakened his social and political consciousness: Attica was "like a lifesaver to me," he remarked, indicating the importance of prefigurative community in escaping the carceral condition of social death.

This shift in consciousness is best understood as an affective yet strategic facet of prefigurative politics, for to "see oneself as an actor, when historically one has been a silent observer, is a fundamental break from the past" (Sitrin 2012:84). Raekstad and Gradin's survey analysis of prefigurative organizations confirms that participants "repeatedly describe the feelings of love, joy, and community

that arise when you're part of an empowering organisation" (81). These affective qualities are especially important for incarcerated subjects, who necessarily engage with community formation as a project of political liberation. Their radical desires enable them, "through day-to-day organizing, to see how their problems and struggles are connected to those of other oppressed, exploited, and marginalised people" in a broader community—a significant benefit of working toward a common cause (84). In this way, social transformation compels people to acquire new needs, goals, and desires in a cycle that moves prefigurative communities closer to their desired world while disrupting repressive logics in the present (81).

Furthermore, the mechanics of prefigurative organization are collectively determined through communitarian logics. Collective political processes are not "abstract structures detached from the agents who produce and reproduce them" (62). Rather, as is exemplified in Big Black's appropriation of his large stature for security, "people make abolition geographies from what they have; changing awareness can radically revise understanding of what can be done with available materials" (Gilmore 2022:397). Prefigurative organization necessitates that people use what is available to them to forge a new place in the world (333). For instance, Walter "Tiny" Swift's medical expertise saved inmates' lives while Jerry "The Jew" Rosenberg's legal knowledge guided their amnesty negotiations. L.D. Barkley's rhetorical proficiency disseminated the collective's message while Vietnam veterans' crisis management skills kept them sheltered from the elements. The possibility that inmates' pasts were not fixed or settled brought them hope and ambition for the future. "We had a good time," former inmate Lawrence Akil Killebrew recalls, "it was like a big picnic, like a shanty town" (in Nelson and Curry 2021). Killebrew's invocation of a shanty town or picnic suggests that the yard was transformed into a community marked by recreational gathering or economic exchange rather than a locus of carceral punishment. Killebrew's comment also suggests that the people there, once isolated by the condition of social death, were happy. This affective dimension of social transformation was similarly noted by other former inmates: "We was talking, singing songs [...] I loved it, man. I was out in the nighttime, looking at the stars. I was drunk, I was happy [...] I liked it, you know, I was having a good time" (in Nelson and Curry 2021). This air of jubilation and curiosity was facilitated by inmates' sudden discovery of new experiences, having previously exhausted their perceptual limits under social and sensory deprivation. Former inmate Carlos Roche's characterization of the yard as a "new world" signals the total transformation of the space from an architecture of social control to a site of prefiguration, a "public square [functioning] as a democratic laboratory" (in Nelson and Curry 2021; Alvarez, Lauzon, and Zaiontz 2019:42).

If only temporary, the transformation of the prison yard proved the radical potential of social organization to supplant carceral logics. This possibility coincides with what Dan Swain terms the *developmental* justification of prefigurative politics, as participants "try out" alternative social relations "in order both to prepare for an alternative and hasten its arrival" (2019:58). As a condition of their protest, Attica inmates had to "assume that something is possible before it is, in order to help make it so," a "proleptic anticipation" that originates with a shared vision for the future (58). This future-oriented approach demonstrates that prefigurative organizing is not merely a series of tactics "but a process that can and *must* transform us" (Kelley 2002:13; emphasis added). Witnesses of the uprising were surprised by the changes that unfolded across four days in September, as the organized group of protesting inmates "contrasted sharply with the dominant depictions of them as a chaotic mob" (Camp 2016:69). On 17 September, Jonathan Schell wrote in the *New Yorker* that "[m]ost of us were wholly unprepared for what we saw [...] the crowd of prisoners we saw on television was not a mob but a purposeful gathering [...] the men acted with dignity and were not stripped of their pride" (Schell 1971:37).

While their relationships with hostages and observers were certainly strained, the men of the yard demonstrated their commitment to protecting and providing for these groups. Amid mounting anxiety and threats of violence toward hostages and prison administrators by inmates, Al Victory recalled the general attitude that prevailed in keeping their visitors safe: "We're not gonna be like them [the prison authorities]. We're not gonna break our word. And [one would



Figure 2. State and prison personnel observe the remnants of inmates' structures in D Yard during clean-up efforts. September 1971. (Courtesy of New York State Archives, division of State Police; publicity materials relating to the Attica Correctional Facility riot of 1971 [ca. 1971–1976], bulk 1971, 22577-13, photo #13)

think], ‘Oh, inmates wouldn’t be more honorable than them.’ Yes, we were. Because we gave them our word [that] nothing would happen to them” (in Nelson and Curry 2021).⁹ The retaking of the yard by the state only solidified many of the social transformations afforded by the uprising, as inmates reflected on their available social roles in contrast to the prison authority. The unprecedented cruelty of the state in putting down the rebellion occasioned this comparison from the inmates-turned-organizers: “I’ve done bad things,” former inmate Arthur Harrison recalled thinking, “but I never did shit this bad [...] I realized that, ‘You’re not that fuckin’ bad guy no more, man. These motherfuckers is worse than you’” (in Nelson and Curry 2021).

Hundreds of police officers, state troopers, and correctional officers who worked at Attica were armed with rifles, shotguns, and ammunition including unjacketed bullets, buckshot shells, and silver-tipped bullets when they retook the prison. While inmates were quickly incapacitated by a large release of tear gas from a helicopter overhead, scores of police personnel who had anxiously camped in the prison’s parking lot for days were nevertheless unleashed into the yard with no mechanism for halting their fire. Big Black, who was arrested after an armed robbery led to a shoot-out, described wondering “[h]ow could you [police and correctional officers] do that? That’s the thing that bothered me: how low-down and dirty and vicious a person could be” (in Lichtenstein 2001). This reversal of moral judgment demonstrates that inmates could identify themselves with patience, pacificity, and honor, reckoning with the wanton violence of a state that demanded inmates conform to its standards of docile and obedient citizenship.

9. Inmates who interacted with hostages often attempted to reassure them by explaining their plans for their protest. Surviving hostages have acknowledged that they were generally more concerned with what was happening outside of the prison, including the growing police presence, than potential harm by their captors (Thompson 2016:218–47).

The Performance Intervention in Carceral Geographies

The Attica uprising is a significant case study for anyone interested in prefigurative politics due to its exceptional stakes and unique urgency for asserting alternative possibilities; however, it also raises questions about how inmates created conditions for more successful performances of rehabilitation than carceral geographies would typically afford. In the sense that rehabilitation is a performative feat, the Attica uprising cultivated conditions for personal reform that are rarely achieved within normative penal structures. Accordingly, performance practices at Attica exemplify the broader potential of performance as a critical intervention in punitive confinement. Prefiguration itself is a fundamentally performative endeavor: a prefigurative group, community, or society enacts future social relations and political structures *through* its organizing—that is, from the *bottom up*. However, analyses of prefigurative strategy often proceed from identifying a group's goals, purposes, or effects—from the *top down*. The turn to performance encourages scholars of prefigurative politics to examine prefigurative organizing through its constitutive parts, considering its aesthetic and affective character, the development of certain competencies for political organizing, the internal social world of the group, its collective political consciousness, the adoption of counterhegemonic social roles, and more. These developments often outlast specific prefigurative organizations but extend their central project by sustaining *individual* competencies for more successful organizing in the future.

The coercive power of the carceral state extends beyond prisons and jails into communities that are most vulnerable to incarceration. Public housing projects, schools, ghettos,¹⁰ courthouses, jails, and prisons are examples of carceral geographies, but they are also performance spaces that establish and maintain limitations on racialized or otherwise stigmatized subjectivities. The animosity between socioeconomically disadvantaged communities and agents of the state all but guarantees certain dysfunctional performances in these subjects. Coerced performances of deviance are essential for those who would survive highly policed settings, but problematic for anyone interested in leaving them. Thus, “as an implement for social and cultural purging,” the state-surveilled community setting “no longer points beyond itself; it turns into a self-contained contraption which fulfills its function, and thus justifies itself, by its mere existence” (Wacquant 2001:112). Big Black described his habituated reliance on the “code of the street” for safety and economic security, explaining that “I felt more comfortable hustling than working. When I was twelve years old, I was in the street hustling. My father was a hustler too” (in Lichtenstein 2001). While he understood the risks of “hustling” as opposed to traditional employment, Big Black felt more comfortable with the inherited, informal networks of survival that reduced his contact with the state. “The only time it [illicit employment] don’t pay is when you get caught. And that’s what I did, I got caught,” he remarked (2001). Big Black’s nonchalant attitude toward “getting caught” indicates the continuity of his everyday existence with the condition of incarceration, suggesting that Big Black viewed his time in prison as a logical extension of his life on the streets.

The racial discrimination that characterizes these various carceral geographies also persisted at Attica. Penal control systematically produces inflexibility, docility, and deviance in subjects who encounter the carceral apparatus. The carceral logic of the control prison, in particular, coerces certain kinds of performances while limiting others, ultimately aiming at “incapacitation—which means, quite simply, holding convicts for the term of their sentences in such a manner that they

10. I employ the term “ghetto” here in keeping with the historical specificity of the Attica uprising. The formation of the ghetto as a geohistorical site in deindustrialized urban centers is linked with several contemporaneous developments in mass incarceration, with distinct impacts on social organization in prisons. Wacquant (2001) directly ties these developments in prison culture to the economic downturn that was essential to the state’s cultivation of ghettos as one in a series of “peculiar institutions.” The current expressions of this process can be identified as segregated housing and underresourced, hyper-policed neighborhoods, for example.

cannot commit other crimes” (Gilmore 2022:294). To the state, prisoners are risks to manage, resistances to eliminate, and products to maintain (Guenther 2013:xvi).¹¹ Former inmate Daniel Sheppard recalls a white correctional officer who threatened him during the retaking of the prison, yelling, “If you look up, n[...], I’ll blow your motherfucking brains out.’ What the fuck they care about calling you a n[...].r?” Sheppard remarked, “That was your name that day” (in Nelson and Curry 2021). Sheppard’s sentiment, “that was your name that day,” indicates the extent to which incarcerated people are coerced to perform racialized deviance, corresponding to the state’s views of them, or risk severe punishment. Big Black confirms this fundamental condition of prison life, remarking that “[t]hat’s the punishment. You just got to take it. You ain’t got nothing to say about it. All you supposed to do is act as if you okay. Even though you not” (in Lichtenstein 2001). Big Black testifies that this “act” compels inmates to normalize their abuse, complying with an imposed framework of social deviance and racialized criminality according to the logics of the state.

Former inmate Joseph Hayden understood the violent retaking as a caution against stepping outside of one’s permitted role: “You rebel, you don’t comply, you disagree with us, we’ll kill you” (in Reynolds and Segura 2011). The widespread criminalization of Blackness comprises an additional layer of coercive performance for African American prisoners, as crime is stigmatized as a *naturally* “Black” phenomenon while crime among whites is masked as *individual* failure (Muhammad 2011:3). State reports on “Black crime” staged the excessive criminality of African Americans, while the “statistical rhetoric of the ‘Negro criminal’ became a proxy for national discourse on black inferiority” that shielded whites from the charge of racism (8). The state’s narrative of Black criminality is implicated in the performance of racialized subjecthood, as racist assumptions are projected onto Black subjects and, in turn, inform their strategies of survival. Performances of racialized deviance are coerced, conditioned, and rehearsed through carceral geographies, much like, as performance theorist Harvey Young argues, the phenomenal Black body is constructed through “an experience of the body that informs black critical memory, shapes social behavior or everyday social performances (black habitus), and determines the ways in which black folk view the society in which they live” (2010:5). This social alienation extends to the level of the bodily schema, which becomes an “unlivable structure of racialized embodiment [...with] no avenue of escape” (Guenther 2013:56).

To be sure, inmates are not the only subjects whose social performances are strictly regulated across carceral geographies. Carceral logics produce dehumanizing conditions for inmates as well as state agents, including prison administrators, correctional officers, and support staff. Correctional officers are forced into dichotomous yet unequal relationships with incarcerated subjects because their social connections are constrained by legal status, institutional rules, social norms, and economic conditions (see Varner 2018). Violence is a dysfunctional aspect of social life in prisons that results from harmful socialization under the constraints of isolation and carcerality. It is notable that inmates at Attica initially rebelled because they anticipated violence at the hands of correctional officers during a safety failure in the prison tunnels. The first person killed during the uprising was officer William Quinn, who was beaten to death by inmates during the initial takeover of the prison.¹² On 13 September, law enforcement killed 29 inmates and 10 hostages in

11. Incarcerated people have also been used as resources for production, both as pliable sources of underpaid labor and as raw material, themselves. Their excrement and dead bodies were sometimes sold by prisons to companies that also leased incarcerated laborers during the era of convict leasing (Guenther 2013:44–50). Current-day private prisons reflect the sustained profitability of the logics of warehousing, as the state hands off prisons to corporations that increasingly restructure conditions of incarceration around profit.

12. Quinn’s death can also be attributed to faulty security mechanisms within Attica Prison itself. The steel door that separated Quinn from the rioting inmates was welded improperly and covered up with paint to save costs on a necessary repair. The negligence of prison officials regarding their own workers’ safety is further proof of their dehumanization within carceral geographies (Thompson 2016:81). In addition, 3 fellow inmates were killed and 49 prison staff taken hostage. Eleven of these hostages, including both correctional officers and civilians, were released by the time Oswald entered the yard for negotiations on the second day, either so they could obtain medical attention or as a show of good faith in negotiations.

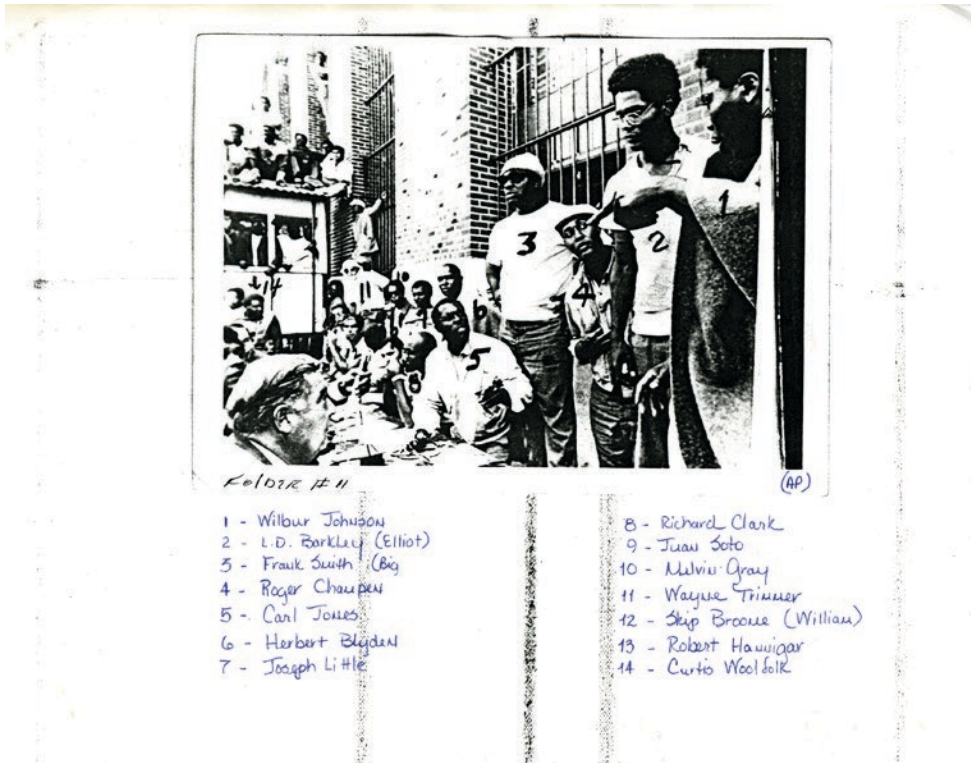


Figure 3. The state attempts to identify suspected leaders of the September 1971 Attica uprising through a photograph. (Courtesy of New York State Archives, Division of State Police; publicity materials relating to the Attica Correctional Facility riot of 1971 [ca. 1971–1976], bulk 1971, 22577-13, photo #18)

both indiscriminate gunfire and targeted killings. Despite evidence that many inmates were shot in their backs after the hostages were already secured, admissions by police that they planted weapons near their bodies, and the systematic destruction of huge amounts of evidence in the immediate aftermath of the retaking, the state of New York never investigated any of the 39 deaths on the final day of the rebellion.

Given the individualizing logics, forced separation, and social division of carceral structures, “[i]t matters that bodies assemble [...] In other words, forms of assembly already signify prior to, and apart from, any particular demands they make” (Butler 2015:8). Judith Butler’s performative theory of assembly is especially pertinent in the context of the control prison:¹³

[T]he power that people have to gather together is itself an important political prerogative, quite distinct from the right to say whatever they have to say once people have gathered. The gathering signifies in excess of what is said, and that mode of signification is a concerted bodily enactment, a plural form of performativity. (8)

In other words, it is significant that the men of Attica drafted demands, delivered speeches to television crews, and negotiated with prominent political figures; however, it also matters that they began their political action by asserting “a plural and performative right to appear” (11). They rejected the habituated vulnerability of their bodies to violence and asserted their safety in

13. The control prison refers to a specific iteration of carceral development wherein “the immobilization of inmates has become an end in itself rather than a way of breaking through to the inwardness of criminals’ souls or even the outwardness of their abnormal behavior” (Guenther 2013:xvi).

the micro-society of the yard in a move that is at once performative and prefigurative.¹⁴ Thus, we can understand the assembly at Attica as both a community and a demand for social change, an engagement with a utopian ideal “not only for instrumental reasons, not primarily to accomplish a specific end [...] but to be together in a more basic experiment than ‘organization’ imp[li]e[s]” (Breines [1982] 1989:59). This organizing capacity engendered “life-affirming social change,” as subjects who were habitually criminalized, racialized, and invisibilized through carceral geographies answered the call for resistance (Gilmore 2022:327). As Walia writes, it behooves us to build “movements where we are emancipated rather than alienated, where we are more resilient and have more capacity to be present for movement projects because we feel supported as we move through our own traumas” (2013:154). These guiding logics subvert the very basis of carcerality, the social world of prisons, and the subjective experience of incarcerated subjects under state surveillance. Community prefiguration asks us to “organize against authoritarian governance [...] while also shedding our internalized prejudices and suspicious ways of relating to one another” to supplant the very logics of the state itself (156).

This view also begins to challenge dichotomies of reform/revolution (the question of *efficacy*), means/ends (the question of *focus*), and strategy/sociality (the question of *social life*), which are unsettled through a rigorous consideration of performance. This analysis similarly reframes one major challenge for prefigurative politics, which is the problem of utopia. Muñoz characterizes utopia not as a prescriptive schema, but as a horizon where “the here and the now is transcended by a *then* and a *there* that could be and indeed should be” (2009:97). The productive power of utopia is as an ideal, where the act of imagining utopia brings about positive change without a definitive “end” for social or political action. Significantly, even after a given action is completed, the potentiality of utopia “never completely disappears but, instead, lingers and serves as a conduit for knowing and feeling other people” (113). In this way, utopia brings together new communities, performatively enacted and identified as a “we” [that] does not speak to a merely identitarian logic but instead to a logic of futurity [...], a ‘we’ that is ‘not yet conscious,’ [or] the future society that is being invoked and addressed at the same moment” (20). In this sense, prefiguration is both a performative and a utopian affair. The utopian ideal forges a crucial connection between subjects in prefigurative societies, motivating their performative strategy of organizing beyond its concrete political usefulness. Their performance necessarily hastens the arrival of a utopian ideal, not in trivial gestures but through perceptible social change.

A performative view of prefiguration undermines common critiques that proceed from an incomplete understanding of prefigurative politics or that discount its effects on individual subjects. Jonathan Smucker, for example, cites Occupy Wall Street as an unsuccessful experiment in prefiguration because of its preoccupation with utopian futurity. He argues that “dreaming about how the world might possibly someday be is not the same as political struggle” (2017:69). My examination of the Attica Prison uprising troubles this assessment, as inmates’ experiments in imagining alternative conditions were undoubtedly political in the context of the prison, where self-determination is systematically prevented and criminalized. Smucker’s analysis, like many critical evaluations of prefigurativism, neglects the necessity of “hope as a critical methodology,” which Muñoz describes as “a backward glance that enacts a future vision” (2009:4). Lacking the understanding of performance as generating social formations, these analyses discount the utopian as apolitical idealism. However, performance scholarship instructs that prefiguration is essentially generative in that it insists on the “potentiality or *concrete possibility* for another world” (1; emphasis added). The process

14. The process of building community also engenders certain social and political consciousness. Communities are performative affairs in that the “‘being’ of a social structure is only a certain kind of becoming, namely the sufficiently stable social reproduction of certain patterns of social interaction over time” (Rackstad and Gradin 2020:62). The maintenance of community structures necessitates a host of smaller changes, as each person in the community contributes to a desired social world. The individual is transformed through their contribution to this project, developing new competencies for social relations and ways of regarding oneself in a shared social world.

of experimentation is sufficiently productive *precisely because* an alternative world is not predetermined but developed through this practice. Regardless of whether or not utopian desires are fulfilled, “[t]hey are nonetheless indispensable to the act of imagining transformation” (9). This engagement with futurity works to propel prefigurative organizations forward, not to satisfy them with visions of utopia while confined to the present. This view similarly troubles the common dismissal of utopian desires as “wills which are incapable of relating means to end, and hence are not even wills, but idle whims, dreams, longings, etc.” in the context of political organization (Gramsci 1971:175). We must reject the impulse to defend prefigurative politics from accusations of what Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams term “folk politics”: “the fetishisation of local spaces, immediate actions, transient gestures, and particularisms of all kinds” (2015:11). Instead, we should ask what folk politics might do.

The Attica Prison uprising is a loose thread that, once pulled, begins to trouble the common sense of crime and punishment. Most importantly, it was a struggle. Speaking to a room of Attica survivors and their families after they reached a settlement with the state of New York in 2001, Elizabeth Fink answered the question on many minds: “If there’s no justice, why do we do this?” [...T]he answer to that is, because there’s a struggle for justice. And the struggle for justice is what makes this meaningful, and what makes life meaningful” (in Lichtenstein 2001). The struggle for recognition, the struggle for freedom, the struggle to be more than a carceral state told them they could be—these are the aspects of prefiguration that make the legacy of Attica meaningful. They suggest that performance is a critical intervention in carceral geographies, overcoming social death, engendering social transformation, and raising consciousness for a different world.

Collective Action and Performative Politics

Remembering Attica as a radical political protest inviting positive social change, with special attention to the uprising as a site of prefigurative politics, social performance, and embodied engagement with liberation illuminates a particularly compelling situation of personal transformation inside of community formation that merits further study in disciplines including prefiguration and performance. This orientation toward social transformation reveals the affective and aesthetic dimensions of prefigurative organizing, calling for renewed devotion to understanding *why* people take part in radical political projects in the first place.

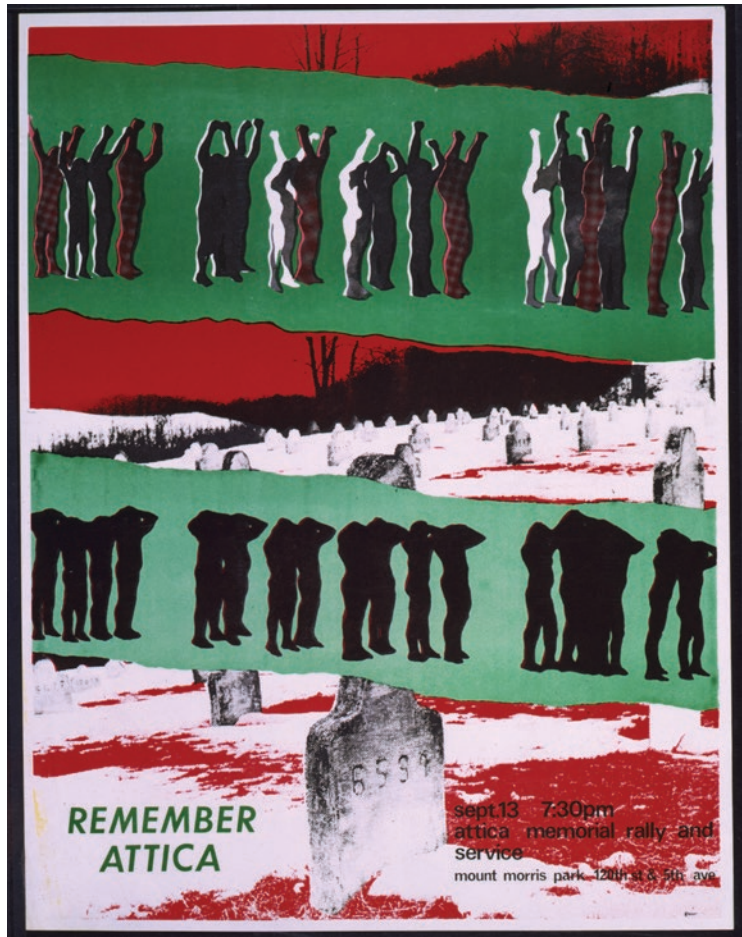


Figure 4. “Remember Attica” poster. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC)

Similarly, Attica complicates the pervasive issue of reform in critical carceral studies and abolitionist political discourse. Understanding radical social organization at Attica as an achievement of liberatory social transformation—not simply a means within broader political action—troubles the bifurcation of revolution and reform in carceral contexts. An attention to performance muddles the distinction between process and product, enabling political theoretical analysis of the former beyond the overarching framework of the latter. Performance theorists must also embrace prefigurative political action as a form of collective social expression that engenders future conditions as part of its self-definition. The short-term effects of prefiguration and the micro-societies it produces must not be overlooked when performance theorists address political strategy. Scholars of both performance and politics have much to gain from engaging with prefigurativism, unsettling the separation between political action and affect or aesthetics. Furthermore, prefiguration provides a useful lens through which to challenge a hegemonic obsession with efficacy in both political theory and performance studies, creating new discourses based on social-political traditions of radical change. By remembering Attica as a site of radical political performance, we may yet uncover new opportunities for social transformation and collective liberation.

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