

**Attica!: Representations of the 1971 Prison Riot  
in Local and National Journalism**

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## Introduction

Welcome to the village of Attica, New York. Population: 2,547.

Old brick storefronts dotted with American flags and Pepsi signs line the Main Street, interspersed with protestant churches and rambling old homes that have seen grander days. Step outside the village and you'll find yourself among sparsely populated hills, occupied primarily by thick foliage, sprawling fields, and the occasional barn.

I am not from Attica. My hometown of Elba, New York lies approximately nineteen miles northeast and is nearly identical in landscape and culture, save for one incredibly important detail: Amid the neatly kept ranch houses and cornfields of Attica, in the heart of town, sits one of the most infamous maximum security prisons in America. The fortress-like penitentiary towers above all other neighboring buildings, a turreted gray elephant in the room. At first glance, the looming towers and barbed wire fences of Attica Correctional Facility appear out of sync with their surroundings, as if this ominous castle was suddenly plopped down in the middle of a place it was never supposed to be, but a closer look reveals that it is just the opposite. It is the blood-stained powerhouse of this otherwise quiet town, and the violent goings-on within its seemingly impenetrable walls permeate and define the homes, businesses, and families surrounding it.

The reputation of Attica Correctional Facility extends far outside the town and county limits. In fact, unlike the unassuming village in which it is located, the history, layout, and internal conflicts within the prison are widely known across the country. Mention the word "Attica" to the average person living outside of Western New York and they're likely to respond with

recognition — not of the town, but of the bloody uprising that took place within the prison in 1971, which attracted attention nation-wide and resulted in the deaths of thirty-two inmates and eleven prison employees.

Growing up in such close proximity to Attica, I was exposed only to one perspective: that of the guards and local residents who had lived through the riot. My simplistic understanding of the revolt as a child was as follows: Dangerous criminal inmates decided one day to rebel, taking forty-two prison employees hostage. One corrections officer (C.O.), a young man by the name of William Quinn, was killed almost immediately. After more than four days of being beaten and tormented while the prisoners demanded better living conditions from the state, most of the hostages were rescued by New York State Troopers, but ten never made it out of the prison. The trauma that these guards and their families faced shook the town to its core. Forty-plus years later, Attica has still not recovered from this tragedy.

It was not until I arrived at college and began taking criminal justice courses that I realized much of the country views these events from a very different perspective. Some lyrics from John Lennon's 1972 song "Attica State" demonstrate this disparity:

Free the prisoners, jail the judges  
Free all prisoners everywhere  
All they want is truth and justice  
All they need is love and care

They all live in suffocation  
Let's not watch them die in sorrow  
Now's the time for revolution  
Give them all a chance to grow

“Attica State, Attica State, we’re all mates with Attica State,” sings Lennon in the refrain, displaying a sense of solidarity with the rebellious inmates that is rarely present in local accounts of the uprising. References to Attica in popular culture frequently employ this idea that the cause of the revolt was brave men fighting for their basic rights and dignity against an unjust, oppressive system. One effective albeit slightly obscure example of this is a two-part episode of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* titled “Past Tense,” in which the crew of the *Defiant* is sent back in time to the year 2024 and find themselves in the middle of a riot based on the Attica uprising. The riot takes place at the fictional Sanctuary District in San Francisco, where the poor and homeless are housed, or rather imprisoned, supposedly for their own safety. Conditions inside the Sanctuary District are abysmal: there is a shortage of food, living conditions are poor, and violence abounds. Because they are trapped inside this district, forbidden from leaving, those living within are unable to find work and improve their social standing, leading to a cycle of poverty and abuse. In an effort to close the Sanctuary District and allow the poor to find jobs and break the cycle, the men imprisoned — including Commander Sisko and Dr. Bashir, who have been placed there by accident — start a violent revolt that culminates in dozens of deaths, but is ultimately successful in incurring change.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the most famous example of the Attica uprising in popular culture is the 1975 film *Dog Day Afternoon*, in which Sonny Wortzik (played by Al Pacino) starts an “Attica!” chant in response to perceived excessive police force while holding up a bank.<sup>2</sup> This iconic scene has been referenced and parodied in countless films and television shows in recent years, ranging

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<sup>1</sup> “Past Tense,” *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, UPN (Jan 8, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> *Dog Day Afternoon*, directed by Sidney Lumet (1975, Warner Bros.), DVD.

from *House M.D.* to *Sabrina, The Teenage Witch*. Characters frequently yell “Attica!” when taking a stand against some perceived injustice — for example, Sabrina’s cat, Salem, cries “Cattica!” repeatedly when Sabrina encages him in a metal box.<sup>3</sup> While examples such as this are meant to be humorous, they reinforce the perception that the inmates risked their lives for a cause larger than themselves and evoke sympathy for the oppressed rebels.

Before going any further, I should clarify my use of the words “riot,” “uprising,” “revolt,” and “rebellion” throughout this paper. Many scholars have argued that these words carry different connotations. Sociologist Charles Tilly asserts that labels such “riot,” “disorder,” and “disturbance” “reflect the views of authorities, rivals, and unsympathetic observers... They presume that someone has willfully disrupted the normally peaceful social order by acting violently, and thereby justify repression of the ‘rioters.’”<sup>4</sup> On the opposite end of the spectrum are words like “uprising,” “revolt,” and “rebellion,” which imply that the inmates are victims defending themselves against an oppressive system.<sup>5</sup> Because I include both perspectives in this paper and aim to remain as unbiased as possible, I use all of the above terms when applicable.

Interpretations of the events that took place at Attica Correctional Facility vary greatly, but there are a number of basic, objective facts that are universally accepted.

On August 21, 1971, inmate George Jackson was executed by guards at San Quentin Prison in San Quetin, California. Jackson, a member of the Black Panther Party and outspoken

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<sup>3</sup> “Spellmanian Slip,” *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch*, The WB (Mar 20, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Charles Tilly, “Collective Violence in European Perspective,” *Violence in America: Protest, Rebellion, Reform* (SAGE Publications, 1989): 62-63.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Andrew Featherstone, *Narratives from the 1971 Attica Prison Riot: Towards a New Theory of Correctional Disturbances* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2005): 4.

activist against prison guard brutality, was allegedly shot after attempting to escape. However, inmates across the country doubted this story and believed that Jackson had, in fact, been murdered because of his ability to incite a potential prison riot.<sup>6</sup>

Jackson's death led to inmate protests at multiple prisons. On August 27, prisoners at Attica staged a silent protest over his death: nobody ate or spoke at breakfast that day. This protest demonstrated the inmates' ability to unite for a common cause and was particularly frightening to prison administration given the fact that in July, a group of inmates known as the Attica Liberation Faction had sent a list of 27 demands to New York State Corrections Commissioner Russell G. Oswald. Their manifesto included requests for improved medical care, higher working wages, greater punishment for guard brutality, better food, and an end to political, religious, and racial persecution. The conclusion to the manifesto included the following passage:

We are firm in our resolve and we demand, as human beings, the dignity and justice that is due to us by our right of birth. We do not know how the present system of brutality and dehumanization and injustice has been allowed to be perpetrated in this day of enlightenment, but we are the living proof of its existence and we cannot allow it to continue.<sup>7</sup>

These requests were largely ignored by Oswald, who promised to visit Attica on September 2 but met only with prison staff rather than inmates. One week later, the prisoners' rage and frustration boiled over after a physical altercation between several inmates and guards in the

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<sup>6</sup> Kathleen E. Slade, "Attica State Correctional Facility: The Causes and Fallout of the Riot of 1971." *The Exposition* 1, no. 1 (2012): 8.

<sup>7</sup> The Attica Liberation Faction, "The Attica Liberation Faction Manifesto of Demands and Anti-Depression Platform," *Race & Class* 53, no. 2 (2011): 35, accessed March 30, 2016. <http://rac.sagepub.com/content/53/2/28.full.pdf+html>.



yard, which was believed to have resulted in the private abuse of the prisoners involved. On the morning of September 9, inmates on their way back from breakfast beat and overpowered the guards and took control of the D Block. They set up camp in D Yard while New York State Troopers secured the remainder of the prison. 42 corrections officers and prison employees were taken hostage and held in D Yard. One, William Quinn, died almost immediately after being beaten over the head with a baton.

From their position in D Yard, the inmates composed a revised list of demands for Oswald and Governor Nelson Rockefeller. They also requested that outside observers, who eventually acted as negotiators between the rebels and the government, be brought in as witnesses. The inmates requested full amnesty for their actions, but Rockefeller did not comply for fear that granting amnesty would only encourage more prison riots.

On September 13, Oswald gave the order to send New York State Troopers in to take back the yard. Because the inmates had dressed hostages in prisoner uniforms, ten guards were shot and killed by the Troopers along with inmates. At least 88 more people were injured.<sup>8</sup> The takeover took only six minutes.

While the basic timeline and details of the riot are generally acknowledged by all involved to be true, there are a number of different narratives through which the story has been, and continues to be, told. Criminologist Richard Andrew Featherstone argues that most representations of the riot fall within four different narrative themes: military metaphors, racial friction,

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<sup>8</sup> New York State Special Commission on Attica, *Attica: The Official Report* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972).

the underdog, and the attribution of responsibility. The way these narrative themes are employed is dependent on the social position of the narrator in relation to the uprising.

The military metaphors theme frames the uprising as a battle between two forces, such as prisoners versus guards, or prisoners versus the larger criminal justice system. The aggressor in the story changes depending on the source of the narrative; sometimes it is the violent inmates who are the opponents, other times it is the oppressive and ignorant state officials. The theme of racial friction, which plays a major role in this thesis, presents different players in the story as racist: individual guards, the structure of Attica Correctional Facility, the American criminal justice system, or society in general. The underdog theme presents different groups as underdogs who are simply defending themselves: the inmates, law enforcement officers, the outside observers brought in to negotiate, or state officials such as Russell G. Oswald. Finally, the attribution of responsibility theme explores how different narratives have placed the blame on a variety of sources, from the dangerous inmates to the abusive corrections officers to state officials to an inevitable fate.<sup>9</sup>

It may seem obvious why local perceptions of the riot differ so greatly from national perceptions. After all, when eleven residents of a small town are killed, it is natural that local people would be more sympathetic to their slain neighbors than to the inmates, who were seen as the instigators of the violence and most of whom had no personal connection to the town of Attica. It is also understandable how liberal-leaning Americans who have never lived in, or met anybody from, Attica would be naturally inclined to side with the inmates and view them as part of the larger Black Power and Prisoners Rights movements without giving extensive consideration to

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<sup>9</sup> Featherstone, *Narratives*, 79-104.

the corrections officers who were killed as a result of this revolutionary effort. But people who were not directly involved in the riot, particularly those who were not from the area, did not simply formulate these opinions out of the blue. All of the information they received came from media coverage of the event and its aftermath, and the nature of this coverage differed depending on the location, size, and audience of the news organization.

In this thesis, I explore the ways these narrative themes are present in journalistic coverage of the riot from 1971 until today, and how these differing narratives perpetuated by the media have influenced the relationship between the town of Attica and the prison contained within it. Although there are countless news sources that I could draw from, I decided to simplify things by presenting the two extreme opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of local and national coverage. I focus primarily on the local newspaper, the *Daily News* based out of Batavia, New York, approximately eleven miles northeast of Attica, as well as the local radio station, 1490 WBTA, also based out of Batavia. Both covered the riot at the time it occurred and continue to cover the aftermath today. For national coverage, I focus primarily on the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, two of the largest and oldest news organizations in the country. Both of these publications aim to be objective in their reporting, and both devoted considerable coverage to the riot and its aftermath.

My research is divided into three chapters. In the first, titled “Before the Riot,” I provide a background of the relationship between the inmates and townspeople of Attica, beginning in 1931, when the prison was built, and ending just prior to the uprising in 1971. I argue that this relationship grew increasingly hostile in the years leading up to the revolt due to changing racial

demographics within the prison, the growth of radical, militant organizations, and the structure of the prison itself.

The second chapter, “The Riot,” focuses on the media’s role in the uprising and compares the ways in which various news organizations covered the events while they were happening. I argue that the local and national media’s coverage of the uprising differed due to cultural and political disparities between rural Attica and urban areas such as New York City and Washington D.C., as well as different perceived journalistic responsibilities. Both national and local coverage reflected and exacerbated racial and cultural dichotomies within the uprising, creating an overly-simplified narrative of insiders vs. outsiders.

In the third chapter, “The Aftermath,” I explore the ways in which the media have perpetuated disparate local and national narratives of the uprising in the years since, from 1972 to 2015. I argue that by framing the Attica uprising in larger contexts of racial unrest and mass incarceration in recent years, the national media have assigned a new significance to Attica; meanwhile, the local narrative of the uprising has remained largely the same due to community-centric journalism and the town of Attica’s continued reliance on Attica Correctional Facility for employment.

The uprising may have ended nearly forty-five years ago, but its memory and impact are still very much alive today, in Attica and all across America. The national media’s coverage of the riot and its aftermath provided a turning point for the prisoners’ rights movement, and continues to play an integral role in the current discourse surrounding our country’s criminal justice system. However, the media’s coverage of the riot had an arguably stronger impact on the small town that houses Attica Correctional Facility: the town that relies on the prison to support nearly

half of its population; the town made up of families for whom spending eight hours a day inside the prison is simply an inherited reality. For the majority of Americans, Attica Correctional Facility is a symbol of a greater cause, but for the residents of Attica, New York, the prison is a way of life.

## Chapter One Before the Riot

In the summer of 1931, five hundred outcasts embarked on a journey together to the small, rural town of Attica, New York. Their origins ranged from New York City to upstate; their destination was a brand new, state-of-the-art, maximum-security prison. They were unsure exactly what they would find there, but they knew one thing to be certain: many of them would call Attica home for a very long time.

“The first convict arrivals at the temporary camp on the prison site were accepted as fellow-citizens,” writes Wilbur G. Lewis in a *New York Times* article dated August 2, 1931 and titled “Attica Prison to be Convicts’ Paradise.” “The entire community contributed books and magazines for their library, an amateur projectionist brought free-motion pictures to the mess hall and others contributed delicacies. Wyoming prison almost overnight became a major part of the Attica community.”<sup>1</sup>

Forty years later, on September 9, 1971, increasing tensions within Attica’s prison — renamed Attica Correctional Facility in 1970— erupted into the bloodiest prison revolt in American history. The same newspapers that had once advertised the village of Attica as a “Convict’s Paradise” for “fellow citizens” now labeled it a “City of Hate.”<sup>2</sup> Gone was the allegedly peaceful, if not friendly, co-habitation of Attica residents and prison inmates.

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<sup>1</sup> Wilbur G. Lewis, "Attica Prison to Be Convicts' Paradise," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Aug 2, 1931.

<sup>2</sup> Joel N. Shurkin, "Outside Attica Walls, a City of Hate," *The Washington Post* (Washington, DC), Sep 14, 1971.

Somewhere along the line, that warm welcome had transformed into a distrustful fear and hostility. What happened over the course of those forty years to alter the relationship between prisoners and townspeople? I argue that interactions and perceptions between the two populations in the years leading up to the riot were influenced by changing racial demographics within the prison, the growth of radical, militant organizations, and the structure of the prison itself.

Although there is virtually unlimited literature on the economic, racial, and ideological role of prisons within American society, there has been surprisingly little research done on the relationship between individual facilities and the rural communities that they are located in. Eric Williams explores this topic by immersing himself in two small prison towns in *The Big House in a Small Town: Prisons, Communities, and Economics in Rural America*.<sup>3</sup> However, much of Williams' study is focused on towns which have acquired prisons within the past couple of decades, and the economic, political, and sociological impacts of prison siting in recent years. Attica Correctional Facility, which opened nearly eighty-five years ago, was constructed in a different era that came with its own unique challenges and implications.

A more timely individual case study can be found in Charles Bright's *The Powers that Punish: Prison and Politics in the Era of the "Big House," 1920-1955*, which focuses on Michigan's Jackson State Penitentiary between the years of 1920 and 1955 and the ways that the prison interacted with outside society.<sup>4</sup> While this research provides valuable insight into

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<sup>3</sup> Eric Williams, *The Big House in a Small Town: Prisons, Communities, and Economics in Rural America* (Praeger, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Charles Bright, *The Powers that Punish: Prison and Politics in the Era of the "Big House," 1920-1955* (University of Michigan Regional, 1996).

the dominant politics, theories of punishment, and practices of incarceration during that era, the “big house” model employed by Jackson State Penitentiary differed from the structure of Attica Correctional Facility.

The state of New York began construction of Attica Correctional Facility in 1929, in response to a series of recent prison uprisings across the state over inhumane conditions.<sup>5</sup> New York recognized the need for a new maximum security prison, one that had all the necessary modern amenities for inmates — electricity, running water, shared cells — and whose 30-foot wall, machine gun-armed guards, and high-powered searchlights would be able to quell any potential riots. “Within, the prison will be as comfortable as the State can make it,” wrote Lewis for the *Times*, “but it will nevertheless be a prison.”<sup>6</sup> These amenities, along with the layout of the prison, would make uprisings not only impossible, but unwarranted. Spacious cells meant that overcrowding, suspected to be the number one cause of rioting at Auburn and other facilities, would not be an issue. Furthermore, even if inmates were unsatisfied with their living conditions, their segregation into four housing corridors, arranged in a square and separated by recreation yards and guard posts, would make unity among all prisoners virtually impossible. Little did the state know that forty years in the future, the 30-foot wall, machine guns, searchlights, and guard watch towers would be no match for the social forces that would seep inside the prison walls and ignite a revolution.

The facility was originally intended for the town of Batavia, New York, roughly eleven miles northeast of where the prison was actually constructed. However, much to the

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<sup>5</sup> New York State Special Commission on Attica, *Attica: The Official Report* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972).

<sup>6</sup> Lewis, “Convicts’ Paradise.”



satisfaction of Attica residents who desired the economic benefits of hosting a prison, their town was ultimately chosen as the prison site due to its abundance of land to build upon and close proximity to both fresh water and railroad lines.<sup>7</sup> Williams posits that as a general rule, “the community’s expectations of what the prison will bring and the reality of what it does bring are a vital part of the perception of success and the eventual relationship that is worked out. The most important of these expectations has to do with jobs.”<sup>8</sup> According to historian Barb Durfee, curator of the Attica Prison Museum, the welcoming actions of the Atticans described in Lewis’s 1931 article were fueled by excitement over anticipated job security for their families. Some employees at the newly built prison obtained these positions because of their prior experience working in law enforcement; others “were just hired because they walked in and they knew somebody.”<sup>9</sup> By the time the riot occurred in 1971, approximately half of the town of Attica was employed by the correctional facility.

The prison in Attica, which had the capacity to house 2,000 inmates by the time it officially opened on June 14, 1931, was considered revolutionary at the time because it was one of the first New York State prisons to stray from the Auburn-style penitentiary model. The Auburn model was, in theory, as described by Foucault, “the microcosm of a perfect society in which individuals are isolated in their moral existence, but in which they come together in a strict hierarchical framework, with no lateral relation, communication being possible only in a

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<sup>7</sup> "Attica Prison," *The Big House*, directed by Scott Paddor, A&E, Jan 10, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Williams, *The Big House*.

<sup>9</sup> Barb Durfee, interview by author, Nov 21, 2015. I quote Ms. Durfee several times throughout this paper. While she is a professional historian, she conducted these interviews not as the official voice of the Attica Prison Museum, but as a lifelong resident of the town of Varysburg, adjacent to Attica, and wife of a current corrections officer at Attica. The personal opinions expressed by Ms. Durfee are hers only and are not representative of any larger organization.

vertical direction.”<sup>10</sup> This was implemented through individual cells but communal meals and work times, during which inmates were allowed to talk in low tones, but only to wardens, guards, or other figures of authority. In contrast, a majority of Attica inmates shared their living space with a cellmate and inmates within the general population (excluding those in solitary confinement) were permitted to communicate with their fellow prisoners.

This open communication among inmates extended beyond the prison and into the relationship between convicts and local residents of the Attica community, as evidenced by media coverage prior to and during the riot of 1971. Former Attica guard John Stockholm, who would later go on to be held hostage during the riot, recalls playing basketball with well-behaved inmates, known as “trusties,” on the prison farm as a teenager growing up in Attica. “We never had a problem with any of them,” Stockholm says. “There was always respect both ways, and they were just people.”<sup>11</sup> A *New York Times* article published on day two of the riot titled “Attica Has No Fear, but Anger Aplenty” featured the following quote from Mrs. Jean Stillinger, whose husband worked as a prison guard at Attica: “I remember the days when the trusties used to be out gardening — some really gentle men and one would give my little daughter a bouquet of flowers every day and she would call him ‘Angel Man.’ That’s over with.”<sup>12</sup> In another *New York Times* article titled “Resentment Rife in Attica Homes,” published one day later, the same reporter, Francis X. Clines, noted that “Residents tell of no

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<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 238.

<sup>11</sup> John Stockholm, telephone interview with the author, Feb 9, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Francis X. Clines, “Attica Has No Fear, But Anger Aplenty,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Sep 11, 1971.

longer trusting the gangs of prisoners designated for outside work as trustees.”<sup>13</sup> Despite living in close proximity to some of the most dangerous criminals in the state, Mrs. Stillinger told Clines that she had “never felt endangered here” and “a few years ago, I would have said this could never happen.”<sup>14</sup> So, when and why did she and her fellow Attica residents begin to feel uncomfortable with living in such close proximity to a maximum security prison?

It could be argued that despite good intentions, the basic nature and structure of the prison made hostility and misunderstanding between inmates and townspeople inevitable. While residents of Attica may have welcomed the first inmates as “fellow citizens” due to their appreciation for the presence of the facility itself, the inmates were never truly integrated into the town. It is true that prisoners may have resided within the same geographic space as non-felonious Atticans, but very few inmates actually came from the local area.<sup>15</sup> Architectural historian Dell Upton suggests that “an individual’s perception of a landscape changes with the experience of moving through it.”<sup>16</sup> Although roughly half of the town of Attica’s population inhabited the same physical spaces inside the prison as the inmates did for eight hours each day, the two groups’ centers for socialization, living, and working were vastly different depending on one’s status as inmate or prison employee. Guards and other civilian townspeople resided in houses and had the freedom to move around the community as they

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<sup>13</sup> Francis X. Clines, “Resentment Rife in Attica Homes,” *The New York Times*, Sep 10, 1971.

<sup>14</sup> Clines, “Attica Has No Fear.”

<sup>15</sup> The exact origins of the first batch of inmates are unknown, but Ms. Durfee is able to say with relative certainty that many were transferred from Auburn Correctional Facility, about 100 miles east of Attica.

<sup>16</sup> Dell Upton, “White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia,” *Places* 2, no. 2 (1984): 59.

wished, whereas prisoners were confined to small, isolated spaces and rarely ventured outside. To those who had lived there their entire lives, Attica represented a community of neighbors; a small town with hardworking people and traditional values. (As one Wyoming County sheriff's deputy put it, "honor America country."<sup>17</sup>) To those incarcerated there, Attica was the worst punishment in Western society. As a result of this difference in social status, two vastly different cultures existed within the same geographic space.

Geographer D.W. Meinig's ten ways to view a landscape helps explain how inmates and Attica residents perceived the prison so differently.<sup>18</sup> For incarcerated men, the facility was a habitat. This meant that an inmate constantly needed to adapt his own lifestyle, mannerisms, and views to adjust to the culture within the prison. Because corrections officers did not consider the prison their habitat, they were more likely to retain the values and cultural norms of rural western New Yorkers, leading to a drastic contrast in lifestyle and mindset between inmates and guards. Many inmates also perceived the prison as a problem: the very fact that they were imprisoned inside was problematic for them, let alone the poor conditions and treatment they were subjected to. In contrast, many Attica residents, particularly prison guards, viewed the prison as a source of wealth, a carefully controlled system, and an ideological symbol of justice.

The primary points of intersection between the two social worlds occurred through the corrections officers, who resided and engaged socially in the Attica region yet spent much of

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<sup>17</sup> Fred Ferretti, "Men from Harlem and Bed-Stuy Guarded by 'Farmers,'" *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Sep 12, 1971.

<sup>18</sup> D.W. Meinig, "The Beholding Eye: Ten Versions of the Same Scene," *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays* (Oxford University Press, 1979).

their day inside the prison interacting with inmates. Sociologist Erving Goffman posits that the relationship between guards and the prisoners they supervise is often hostile as a result of the different spaces they occupy within the outside community and the varying levels of freedom they experience. The vast difference in social status leads to “antagonistic stereotypes” which are only made worse by the fact that “social mobility between the two strata is grossly restricted; social distance is typically great and often formally prescribed; even talk across the boundaries may be conducted in a special tone of voice...In any case, two different social and cultural worlds develop, tending to jog along beside each other, with points of official contact but little mutual penetration.”<sup>19</sup> The tense power dynamics between inmates and corrections officers were perpetuated further through the use of watch towers and other surveillance tools built into the landscape of the prison in an effort to assert a perpetual sense of control over the inmate population.

Because the average community resident was unable to see inside the thick thirty-foot wall surrounding the prison and the inmates were unable to see outside, prisoners and citizens alike had no choice but to obtain their knowledge of the goings-on in the other world from the only point of intersection: the guards. The inmates’ only exposure to Atticans was the men who stood between them and freedom; the residents’ only exposure to the inmates was through stories told to them by friends or relatives who worked inside the prison. As a consequence, both groups were often represented to the other through the lens of Goffman’s antagonistic stereotypes, leading to a greater social and cultural divide and lack of understanding between

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<sup>19</sup> Erving Goffman, "The Characteristics of Total Institutions," Lecture, Symposium on Preventive and Social Psychiatry, Washington, D.C., April 15-17, 1957: 315. [https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/podzim2009/SOC139/um/soc139\\_16\\_Goffman.pdf](https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/podzim2009/SOC139/um/soc139_16_Goffman.pdf).

inmates and townspeople. This wall, both physical and ideological, also shaped media coverage of the prison in the years prior to the riot, as the media had no interactions with inmates, rendering the inmates even more invisible in the outside world and their voices even more nonexistent.

The wall surrounding Attica's prison was estimated to cost upwards of one million dollars at the time of its construction; an impressive amount of money for the era. The purpose of the prison wall in general, as explained by architect Alfred Hopkins in his 1930 book *Prisons and Prison Building*, was first and foremost to detain prisoners. However, Hopkins suggested that a prison wall performed more of an ideological function than a physical one, conceding that inmates could usually find some way to overcome any sort of physical barriers they are presented with. He posited that the wall posed primarily a moral challenge to prisoners, not a physical one, and notes that penologists of the time viewed prison walls as "bad psychology" due to the implied message that inmates cannot be trusted out of sight. On the contrary, Hopkins argued, the bigger the wall, the more likely inmates were to attempt to escape.<sup>20</sup> If this is the case, it stands to reason that Attica, with its towering, million-dollar wall, was fated for a revolt from the moment of its inception.

"Like a fortress...the prison is designed to as much to keep outsiders out as to keep inmates in," wrote Tom Wicker, a *New York Times* journalist brought in to act as an observer during the revolt, describing his first impressions of Attica.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the thirty-foot solid wall surrounding the facility rendered any goings-on within the prison virtually invisible. However,

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<sup>20</sup> Alfred Hopkins, *Prisons and Prison Building* (Architectural Book Publishing Co., Inc., 1930), 65-72.

<sup>21</sup> Tom Wicker, *A Time to Die* (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1975), 33.

this invisibility came not only from the architecture of the prison, but from the common ideological assumption among Attica residents that prisons were a source of justice and a necessary part of society. While the prison itself was very much a presence in the community, primarily as a source of employment, the inmates themselves were less frequently considered, rendering them all but invisible in the eyes of the townspeople. “As the prison exaggerates invisibility, it invites exaggerated visibility” as an opposition strategy, claims historian Dan Berger.<sup>22</sup> The exaggerated visibility of prisons, which came in the form of protests, published writings, and an increase in popular culture representation, began to surface as a nationwide prisoners’ rights movement in the 1960s. “Before the 1960s, prisoners were a legal caste whose status was poignantly captured in the expression ‘slaves of the state’ . . .,” writes constitutional law scholar James B. Jacobs. “Like slaves, The Prisoners' Rights Movement prisoners had no constitutional rights and no forum for presenting their grievances. But unlike slaves, prisoners were invisible, except perhaps for occasional riots, when they captured public attention.”<sup>23</sup> This movement was a natural result of the spirit of rebellion and progress that characterized the sixties, fueled by resistance to the Vietnam War and growing voices of groups that felt marginalized or “invisible,” such as African-Americans and prisoners. These two populations and causes were heavily intertwined, as the majority of inmates at Attica and other prisons across the country were black men from urban areas. The overlap between these

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<sup>22</sup> Dan Berger, *"We Are the Revolutionaries": Visibility, Protest, and Racial Formation in 1970s Prison Radicalism* (UMI Dissertation Publishing, 2010), xiv.

<sup>23</sup> James B. Jacobs, “The Prisoners' Rights Movement and Its Impacts, 1960-80,” *Crime and Justice* (vol. 2, 1980): 432-433.

groups served to make the prisoners' rights movement strong at a time when civil rights and the oppression of African-Americans was a hot topic across the country.

Naturally, nowhere was the topic of prison reform more discussed than inside the prisons themselves. "I can't tell you what a change has come over t[he] brothers in Attica," wrote Sam Melville, an inmate who helped orchestrate the Attica uprising, to a former fellow inmate in August 1971. "So much more awareness & growing, consciousness of themselves as potential revolutionaries, reading, questioning, rapping all t[he] time. Still bigotry and racism, black, white & brown, but one can feel it beginning to crumble in t[he] knowledge so many are gaining that we must build solidarity against our common oppressor — t[he] system of exploitation of each other & alienation from each other."<sup>24</sup>

Melville, known to most by his nickname, "Mad Bomber," was serving time in Attica not as the result of a racist system. Melville was white. He had come to Attica earlier that year after setting off bombs in eight government buildings through his involvement in the radical Weather Underground Organization, or "the Weathermen." The organization was born out of opposition toward the Vietnam War and U.S. imperialist and capitalist values. It was the extreme end of a much larger social movement of rebellion against the government that developed throughout the sixties.

Melville brought his anti-establishment attitude to Attica, and encouraged his fellow inmates to revolt against an oppressive criminal justice system. While in Attica, he started an underground publication called *Iced Pig*, which urged inmates to remain politically involved while behind bars by contacting their local congressmen and hometown newspapers about the

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<sup>24</sup> Sam Melville, *Letters from Attica* (William Morrow, 1972), 168-169.



conditions inside the prison. He also encouraged the other prisoners to read Marxist literature, which was frequently confiscated by the corrections officers and technically banned from the prison. But although Melville was a key player in uniting the men of Attica against a common oppressor, the uprising was not his doing alone. The desire to revolt, fueled by racial inequality, poor living conditions, and a general animosity toward the government, already existed in Attica and other prisons across the country long before Melville arrived at Attica in 1970.

A *Washington Post* article titled “‘New Breed’ Sparked Attica Uprising” noted not only a shift in the racial demographics of prisoners during the sixties, but a shift in the nature of the inmates as well. “Most of the guards realized that this was a different kind of prisoner— younger, better educated, a more formed person,” reads a quote from a guard named Lynn Johnson. “You could sense the difference between the older inmates and the younger ones.”<sup>25</sup>

By 1971, the majority of inmates at Attica Correctional Facility were young, non-white men. Fifty-four percent were black and nine percent Puerto Rican, and the majority came from cities. Sixty-two percent were there for violent crimes, and nearly 70 had been incarcerated before at some point in their lives. They provided a stark contrast to the corrections officers,

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<sup>25</sup> Philip Carter and Stephen Isaacs, “‘New Breed’ Sparked Attica Uprising,” *The Washington Post* (Washington, DC), Sep 14, 1971.

who were all white excluding one Puerto Rican man.<sup>26</sup> “We’ve actively tried to find black guards, but where can you find them in a rural farming area like this?” lamented one prison official to a *Washington Post* journalist.<sup>27</sup>

Many of the young men incarcerated at Attica, journalist and observer Wicker explains, were “urban street kids, virtual foreigners to the men of placid upstate villages like Attica or Batavia or Warsaw...the Attica Correctional Facility was filled with youthful, violent men of criminal experience, men whose political and social backgrounds and points of view were alien to those of their keepers.”<sup>28</sup>

One *New York Times* headline published at the time of the uprising, perhaps intended to be shocking, reads: “Men from Harlem and Bed-Stuy Guarded by ‘Farmers.’” This revelation should have come as a surprise to no one; this same statement could be applied to virtually any prison across New York State. An anonymous observer in the article supplies the following quote: “You have Harlem and the South Bronx and Bed-Stuy inside the walls, and they’re

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<sup>26</sup> Note: There are several factors that have gone into my analysis of race relations within the Attica community leading up to the revolt. I quote newspaper articles extensively throughout this section to support my argument, all of which are from national publications (i.e. The New York Times, The Washington Post, etc.) and all of which were published around the time of the 1971 uprising. Of course, I would have liked to include quotations on race relations from local publications, but I could not find a single local newspaper article that discussed race as a factor in the riot. While this is interesting in itself, it does not contribute to my overall argument for this section: that the inmate population underwent a change in racial and cultural demographics between 1931 and 1971, and that this shift was a source of tension in the Attica community in the years leading up to the riot.

A source of animosity among Attica residents during and following the uprising was a perceived bias against them by national reporters. I do not want to perpetuate any sort of perceived bias in this paper, and I am a firm believer that there is no such thing as truly objective journalism. Therefore, in an effort to maintain the most unbiased tone possible, I only use direct quotations from Attica residents or inmates rather than statements made by the journalists themselves.

<sup>27</sup> Carter and Isaacs, “New Breed.”

<sup>28</sup> Wicker, *A Time to Die*, 7.

being guarded by farmers who are scared as hell of them.”<sup>29</sup> In his studies of racial formation in the 1970s, Berger takes this a step further and suggests that Attica prison was not only made up of men from the city, but that it was itself an extension of the city. He posits that prisons and cities were “mutually constitutive sites of black and Latino racial formation.”<sup>30</sup> Just as radical black and Hispanic militancy grew in cities, it also began to grow within prisons.

According to local accounts, the cultural and racial disparity between inmates and Attica residents was not always so vast. One anonymous *New York Times* interviewee estimates that the prison population became overwhelmingly black approximately five years before the riot, in the mid-sixties. It was at that point, the reporter asserts, that “Attica began getting disturbed...People who made neat livings taking in as boarders those who came to visit inmates, closed their doors when the visitors turned out to be black.”<sup>31</sup> In another article, a nineteen-year-old son of a prison guard tells the journalist that working in corrections has made his father “racially prejudiced” in recent years: “‘I came home with a black friend once and that’s how I found out,’ the youth said. In a way, he added, he understood this as one of the abuses of the prison system.”<sup>32</sup> This guard, having been exposed to people of color almost solely through his job at the prison, had come to associate young black and Latino men with criminal behavior — a pattern that was not uncommon. Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Racial prejudice or an unjust prison system?

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<sup>29</sup> Fred Ferretti, “Men from Harlem and Bed-Stuy Guarded by ‘Farmers,’” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Sep 12, 1971.

<sup>30</sup> Berger, “*We Are the Revolutionaries*,” 4.

<sup>31</sup> Ferretti, “Men from Harlem.”

<sup>32</sup> Francis X. Clines, “Resentment Rife in Attica Homes,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Sep 10, 1971.

In the 1960s, attitudes regarding the mass incarceration of young black and Latino men began to change, particularly within urban areas. These years, which were characterized by racialized themes of “law and order” within cities and neighborhoods with high concentrations of young men of color, were also characterized by a spirit of rebellion and growing protest. Activism against oppressive prison conditions had for the most part not reached the residents of Attica, New York, largely because as employees of the prison, nearly half of the population was on the other side of the inmates vs. prisons conflict and viewed the inmates through a negative lens colored by the hierarchy of the prison structure. The invisibility of the men incarcerated at Attica, both physical and ideological, created a situation where the inmates felt that the only way they could make their voices heard was through violent protest. This desire to revolt against the system, backed and enforced by racialized groups such as the Black Panthers, heightened tensions and deepened misunderstandings between prisoners of color and the overwhelmingly white community guarding them, setting the stage for a large-scale uprising.

## Chapter Two The Riot

The media's involvement in the Attica uprising began, one might argue, long before the uprising even began. Criminologist Ray Surette has suggested that America's incarceration culture, and our belief that strict control is the best way to take care of criminals, is the result of sensationalistic media coverage of violent crimes.<sup>1</sup> When we hear or read about one particularly horrific instance of personal violence, our natural instinct is to want the perpetrator locked up in a place where we will never have to deal with him. And because the criminals on the front page of our newspapers are murderers, kidnappers, and rapists — not small-time drug dealers or shoplifters — we tend to associate prison with the most dangerous members of society. As a result, we demand the strictest conditions for our institutions and don't give much consideration to any hardships the men inside might experience, thus creating a situation where inmates feel they must resort to extreme measures to have their voices heard by the public.

Prior to the uprising on September 9, the voices of Attica inmates were seldom, if ever, represented in the mainstream press. Richard X. Clark, an inmate leader who served as head of the inmates' internal security and as a liaison between the inmates of D-yard and the authorities, wrote that whenever members of the press visited Attica, "the prison authorities made sure no inmates were around unless they were locked in their cells, so no one would be able to talk to reporters."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, revolting was not merely a way in which to gain the attention of prison

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<sup>1</sup> Ray Surette, *Media, Crime & Criminal Justice* (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Richard X. Clark, *The Brothers at Attica* (New York: Links, 1973), 12.

administration; it was also a way in which to gain the attention of the entire country and carve out a place for inmates in national prison-related dialogue. The inmates understood that in order to make their voices heard by prison and state officials, they must have the attention of the media, and in order to get the attention of the media, they would need to do something drastic.

The Attica revolt was indeed drastic, to say the least. On September 9, tensions between inmates, guards, and the state corrections department erupted into the most extreme possible statement of disjuncture between inmates and their living conditions. Despite the fact that many of the inmates' demands were not fulfilled and 33 inmates were dead by the end of the retaking of the prison four days later, the riot was, in a sense, successful. By September 13, Attica was present at every dinner table in America. Inmates screamed at people from the front pages of newspapers and forced them to listen to their message through nightly news coverage on television. Americans watched, listened, and held their breath as they waited to see how the conflict would play out. By the time state police retook the prison, the small town of Attica was a household name and had caused millions of people to rethink everything they knew about the U.S. prison system. However, while the uprising earned the inmates the attention they had desired, they could not always control the way the media chose to portray them and their motivations. This led to a variety of narratives forming around the riot — some true, some false, and some totally subjective, depending on the positionality of the journalists and readership of the publications.

The role of the media during the riot was a controversial matter, as it called into question the very purpose of journalism. Ideally, the goal of the journalist is to tell the truth, let all voices be heard, and keep the public in the know. However, according to criminologists Sue Mahan and

Richard Lawrence, in the case of a prison riot, these practices can interfere with the ability of prison administrators to quell the uprising and minimize injuries. During the uprising, Attica inmates watched themselves on the news and listened to radio coverage through a speaker system set up in the yard. The media's primary source of information was prison officials who initially fed journalists lies about the inmates — for example, that one officer had died after being thrown from a window. Knowing this to be untrue, the inmates came to the conclusion that the state was painting them in an overly negative light and fabricating other facts as well. This contributed to the hostility inmates felt toward prison officials and only motivated them further to continue the rebellion.<sup>3</sup> Another motivation not to surrender was the mere presence of journalists in and around the prison. According to the official 1972 *New York State Special Commission on Attica*, inmates came to the realization that once the uprising ended, they “would return to the status of forgotten men, subject to all the humiliations of prison life. That feeling, coupled with their fear of reprisals and mistrust of the State, made it almost impossible to persuade them to give up the limelight and return to anonymity.”<sup>4</sup>

While inmates may have felt that the media was favoring the state, some state officials believed the opposite to be true. Corrections Commissioner Russell G. Oswald complained that questions asked of him by reporters were “from the prisoners’ point of view.”<sup>5</sup> His concerns were echoed by an anonymous Attica resident, who described visiting out-of-town journalists as

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<sup>3</sup> Sue Mahan and Richard Lawrence, “Media and Mayhem in Corrections: The Role of the Media in Prison Riots,” *The Prison Journal* 76, no. 4 (1996).

<sup>4</sup> New York State Special Commission on Attica, *Attica: The Official Report of the New York State Special Commission on Attica* (New York: Bantam, 1972), 211.

<sup>5</sup> Russell G. Oswald, *Attica — My Story* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 80.

“bleeding-heart liberals” to a reporter from the *Los Angeles Times*.<sup>6</sup> This complaint that members of the national media were biased towards the inmates is documented in several newspaper articles published at the time of the riot, and it is this tension between differing narratives and the way they were represented in journalistic coverage of the uprising that is at the crux of my research.

In this chapter, I compare the ways in which the national media covered the uprising while it was happening and in the days and weeks that followed, and the ways in which local media organizations portrayed the same events. I argue that national news outlets acknowledged and often emphasized racial differences between inmates and local guards in a way that hyper-local news outlets did not, thus fueling dichotomies of black vs. white and urban vs. rural and increasing tensions between inmates and Attica residents.

In examining national news outlets, I primarily focus on the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. These are two of the largest national newspapers in the country, with a target demographic of educated, middle to upper class Americans, and both are based in iconic American cities far removed from the fields and prisons of rural western New York. The *New York Times* was especially significant to the rebellious inmates, as one of the outside observers they requested be brought inside the prison to witness negotiations was Tom Wicker, a political reporter and columnist for the *Times*. Inmate Clark justifies this choice by explaining that “the person who reads the *Times* is not like a working person.... We wanted to reach influential people, not just the people on the subway...and we wanted a whole cross-section of coverage.”<sup>7</sup> Wicker

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<sup>6</sup> Jim Stingley, “Attica, Faith in Fortress Gone, Lives in Fear,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Sep. 17, 1971.

<sup>7</sup> Clark, *The Brothers at Attica*, 65.



did not actively report on the uprising while inside the prison, but he did pen several columns about the experience afterward and authored a book in 1975 titled *A Time to Die*. Nevertheless, this choice signified that in the eyes of the inmates, the blue-collar townspeople of Attica were not the target audience of the rebellion. Instead, Clark and his fellow inmates intended to use the “working people” of Attica for leverage in their negotiations with “influential people.”

There were naturally instances of national press coverage of the uprising far more radical than anything published in the *New York Times* or *Washington Post*. Take, for example, a publication released in 1972 titled *Attica: Why the prisoners are rebelling*. The publication, which is printed in booklet format, contains two articles by Derek Morrison and Mary-Alice Waters, both of whom were staff members for the *US Militant*, a newspaper affiliated with the American Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party. “So the realization is growing, especially in the Black community, that prisoners are the real victims of this society,” writes Waters in her article, titled “Why Attica Exploded.” “One must look outside the prisons for the criminals.” Both she and Morrison cite the racial imbalance between guards and inmates — eighty-five percent of rebelling inmates were black or Puerto Rican, whereas all but one of the correctional officers were white — and incidents of racism among these guards, as well as civilians residing in Attica, as reported by the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. Morrison and Waters describe the rebellious inmates as “courageous” and “heroes of the masses,” noting that they will go down in history as heroic figures in “the coming American revolution.” The publication concludes with a list of names: all the inmates who died during the uprising. Nowhere in either article is any mention of the correctional officer or three uncooperative inmates who were killed by the

rebellious inmates during the uprising.<sup>8</sup> To Derek Morrison and Mary Alice Waters, Attica symbolized something much greater than the tragedy of individual deaths.

This is, of course, a rather radical and obscure example of riot coverage. Unlike the *US Militant*, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* were not openly affiliated with any political party. Their reporters did not explicitly state a bias for one interest group over the other, or advocate for change within their articles. They did, however, incorporate racial tension and discrepancies into their coverage, thus framing the uprising in a way that pitted the largely white community of Attica against the largely black and Puerto Rican community of inmates.

The heavy presence of race in national journalism is especially notable when one considers the fact that there is virtually no mention of race in riot coverage by *The Daily News*, the paper serving Wyoming County and nearby Genesee, Orleans, and Livingston Counties. Rather than discuss the racial politics or broader context behind the inmates' revolt, articles published in *The Daily News* between September 9 and September 13, as well as in the days that followed, focused primarily on the prison employees who had been taken hostage and how their families were coping with the situation. One front-page article bearing the headline "Long Day and Night of Waiting In Many Attica Area Homes," published on the second day of the riot, adopts the point of view of the wives, siblings, and cousins of correctional officers: "It's so hard, the children don't understand,' wives and mothers cried. 'If only we knew.' They didn't understand themselves, as they waited. 'What do the prisoners want? What do they expect to gain by maiming?' Unanswered questions from tear stained faces." Another sibling of a hostage

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<sup>8</sup> Derrick Morrison and Mary-Alice Waters, *Attica: Why Prisoners Are Rebelling* (New York: Pathfinder Press, Inc., 1972).

guard laments, “He’s my brother, my baby brother, he didn’t like being a correction officer, it was just a job.”<sup>9</sup> For many correction officers, such as the speaker’s brother, Attica was a place of employment, not a symbol of injustice or an indicator of a larger social problem. As the largest employer by far in a small, working-class town, the prison was a sensible and responsible choice for young men and fathers in the community of Attica. It was a source of income, a place to clock in and clock back out eight hours later in order to support themselves and their families. As Don Almeter, a former corrections officer at Attica who was held hostage during the uprising, put it: “If you’re not a farm boy or you don’t work in a garage, there ain’t no employment in Attica other than the prisons. It’s the reality.”<sup>10</sup>

Local news coverage emphasized precisely how detached the townspeople of Attica were from the political and racial implications of the inmate revolt. Most were confused. Many, especially those who didn’t work at the prison or have close friends or relatives who did, didn’t understand why the inmates were rebelling. Another front page article published September 10, titled “No Reprisal Guarantee Given Attica Inmates,” does not attempt to make sense of the uprising or convey the inmates’ perspective at all; rather, it offers only one sentence in explanation: “The reasons for the riot were unclear and there seemed to be no particular leaders of the revolt.”<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that some members of the community, and even corrections officers themselves, did not recognize that conditions inside the prison were poor. “There were

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<sup>9</sup> “Long Day and Night of Waiting in Many Attica Area Homes,” *The Daily News* (Batavia, NY), Sep. 10, 1971.

<sup>10</sup> Don Almeter, phone interview with the author, Feb 9, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Al McWilliams, “No Reprisal Guarantee Given Attica Inmates,” *The Daily News* (Batavia, NY), Sep. 10, 1971.

some [demands] that were common sense that they should have gotten,”<sup>12</sup> says John Stockholm, a former guard who was held hostage during the uprising. Almeter echoes this opinion, noting that “they needed better clothes and they needed more showers. But it wasn’t up to me. It was politics.” The sense of powerlessness expressed by the prison employees and their families, as well as the humanization of guards in the *Daily News*, worked together to create a narrative in local media that painted the corrections officers as helpless pawns in a corrupt system rather than a cause of the uprising, as the national media suggested.

This idea of corrections officers as passive figures in the uprising was also evident in *Daily News* coverage focusing on the families rather than the C.O.s themselves. On the front page of the September 11 newspaper, alongside an update of state officials’ negotiation progress, is a close-up photo of the twenty-three year old wife of one of the hostage guards, her head tilted downward, avoiding eye contact with the camera as she waits in anxious vigil outside of the prison. The photo is accompanied by a brief biography of the woman, her husband, and their three year old daughter.<sup>13</sup> The paper’s focus on corrections officers’ roles in the home and community rather than their role in the prison presented entirely different stakes than the ones presented by national media. Rather than holding their collective breath to see whether the state would give in to the inmate demands, marking a turning point in the prisoners’ rights movement, local readers held their breath to see whether the pretty young woman pictured would be forced to raise her child as a single mother.

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<sup>12</sup> John Stockholm, telephone interview with author, Feb 9, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> “Wife Maintains Vigil,” *The Daily News* (Batavia, NY), Sep. 11, 1971.

The townspeople-centric content and level of informality found in *Daily News* articles signifies that the *Daily* is, first and foremost, a community newspaper. There is a familiarity to many of the articles not found in “outsider” coverage. One front-page September 14 article with the headline “Curley Watkins Came Through Ordeal Safely” recounts an interview with wounded hostage Philip Watkins, “‘Curley’ to his friends and many of the inmates at Attica.”<sup>14</sup> This headline is one that would only be possible in a small town where people were familiar enough to know Philip Watkins primarily by his nickname, and where enough people knew Watkins to make his stable condition front page news. Another short feature describes how Attica Lions Club volunteers manned a hamburger “chow line” for police and firemen stationed outside the prison.<sup>15</sup> Articles such as this one told the story not of a politically charged, nationally significant uprising, but of a small community coming together to cope with a potentially tragic event.

At first glance, coverage of the uprising by the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* may not appear too terribly different from *The Daily News*. Articles documenting the negotiation process and safety of the hostages were prominent and similar in factual content to local coverage. However, mixed in among these pieces were articles that introduced an entirely new factor into the conversation: the racial disparities between guards and inmates, and the tension that those disparities produced. Even many articles that were not explicitly centered around race included within the first few paragraphs the fact that out of approximately 400 guards, all but one were white, whereas the vast majority of inmates imprisoned at Attica were either black or

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<sup>14</sup> Marilyn Pfalzer, “Curley Watkins Came Through Ordeal Safely,” *The Daily News* (Batavia, NY), Sep. 14, 1971.

<sup>15</sup> “Volunteers Man Prison Chow Line,” *The Daily News* (Batavia, NY), Sep. 11, 1971.

Puerto Rican. “About 70 per cent of the 2,237 inmates are black and perhaps half the remainder are Puerto Ricans,” estimates one *Washington Post* staff writer,<sup>16</sup> and several others echo these same numbers. This racial imbalance was not necessarily the result of a conscious effort on the part of the prison to hire primarily white guards, but was instead a natural reflection of the racial demographics and small size of the town of Attica and the surrounding area. Stockholm attributes the lack of black corrections officers in 1971 not to a culture of racism but rather to a lack of blacks and Latinos living in the area. “When I went to work at Attica, I knew most of the people there...Everybody locally worked there,” Stockholm says. “It was family. You didn’t have people driving fifty or sixty miles back then to work. And there wasn’t any blacks around.” According to Stockholm, the African-American population of Western New York was mostly concentrated in cities such as Buffalo and Rochester, which offered “plenty of jobs” with better pay than Attica Correctional Facility.<sup>17</sup>

Statistics on race were used by national journalists not to convey a point about the systemic racism that caused such a racial imbalance in the first place but rather as evidence of racist attitudes among Attica townspeople. This racism, wrote Joel N. Shurkin of the *Post*, “was obvious these past five days during the bloodiest prison insurrection in American history. It may even have been one of the many causes of what happened in Attica state prison.”<sup>18</sup> Shurkin goes on to claim that “to many people in the town of Attica the word ‘nigger’ was interchangeable with ‘inmate.’” He notes as evidence that on the first morning of the rebellion, the nearby

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<sup>16</sup> Philip D. Carter and Stephen Isaacs, “‘New Breed’ Sparked Attica Uprising,” *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), Sep. 15, 1971.

<sup>17</sup> Stockholm, interview.

<sup>18</sup> Joel N. Shurkin, “Outside Attica Walls, a City of Hate,” *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), Sep. 14, 1971.

Tipperary Bar remained open until 2 a.m. to serve newsmen and guards. “The next day when several black reporters and black members of the citizens mediation committee went in to get a drink,” however, “the owner announced he had just run out of liquor and closed for the week.” Francis X. Clines, a reporter for the *New York Times*, notes the same phenomenon, adding that the Tipperary put a “closed” sign on the door when a bus of thirty black people from the Buffalo anti-poverty program, all sympathetic to the inmates, arrived in Attica.<sup>19</sup> (This same Tipperary Bar appears on the front page of the *Daily* on September 9 in an article colloquially titled “Nearby Folks Say the Scene is Grim - Real Bad,” which recounts a Tipperary Bar employee’s take on the events of that morning.<sup>20</sup>)

Anecdotes such as this created a narrative of insiders versus outsiders that was present in both local and national coverage, but explicitly emphasized in national coverage. The insiders were Attica natives; the outsiders were everybody else involved in the uprising, such as inmates, reporters, and outside observers. The insider and outsider groups were not only characterized by geographic origin, but were also racialized by both the local and national media. The implicit message was that insiders were white; outsiders, black. Regardless of the reason for the lack of diversity among guards and in the larger community of Attica, the national media suggested that the majority white prison staff and the majority black and hispanic inmate population created a racialized “us versus them” mentality within the prison that carried over into race relations within the town. In the same article which mentions the Tipperary Bar, Clines quoted a nineteen-

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<sup>19</sup> Francis X. Clines, “Attica Has No Fear, But Anger Aplenty,” *The New York Times* (New York NY), Sep. 11, 1971.

<sup>20</sup> “Nearby Folks Say the Scene Is Grim - Real Bad,” *The Daily News* (Batavia, NY), Sep. 9, 1971.

year-old Attica boy whose father had been a prison guard for twenty-seven years. The young man states that his father had become racially prejudiced through his line of work, explaining that “I came home with a black friend once and that’s how I found out.”

Any sort of racial friction between inmates and Attica natives is largely left out of local coverage, but is a primary theme in national coverage. Coverage by publications such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* created a national narrative of racial friction between the primarily white prison staff and primarily black and Latino inmate population, as outlined by sociologist Richard Featherstone. The national emphasis on the race-based tensions between Attica natives and inmates was a result of the fact that nearly all of the information being fed to reporters during the uprising came directly from state officials. This could explain why articles in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* most closely resemble the perspective of New York State Corrections Commissioner Russell G. Oswald. In his book titled *Attica — My Story*, Oswald presents as racist not the criminal justice and prison system itself, but rather the actions of individual guards at Attica. He defends state corrections officials and the structure of the prison system, claiming that he “would not have changed my decisions at Attica by one iota if the rebel inmates had been predominantly white rather than black,” and dispels accusations of Attica Correctional Facility as a “black concentration camp,” attributing the high number of men of color incarcerated at Attica to “the larger economic, education, and social challenges all of us must face.”<sup>21</sup> He does not, however, defend the accusations of individual racism perpetuated by corrections officers at Attica, and even provides several anecdotes to support the idea that the undeniable racism that existed within the prison was the result of a few bad corrections officers

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<sup>21</sup> Oswald, 17-18.



rather than an indication of a systemic problem with the prison system. While the narrative of the New York state prison system and the nationwide criminal justice system as racist was very much present in coverage after the uprising, the national media's focus during the uprising was primarily on racial friction between Attica inmates and individual corrections officers due to their primary source of information being the state.

The differences in national and local representations of the uprising demonstrate how, as Featherstone argues, “prison riots are protean in nature.” In other words, “they are often defined and interpreted differently depending on each participant’s social location, occupational position, and cultural notions.”<sup>22</sup> Reporters for the *Daily News* and the *New York Times* or *Washington Post* certainly differed in all three. A journalist for *The Daily News* and a journalist for the *New York Times* may have had the same job title, but the two held entirely different social positions. Differences in location — New York City versus Batavia, New York — account for some of the cultural disparity. Three years prior, more than fifty percent of residents of the traditionally conservative Wyoming and Genesee counties had voted Republican Richard Nixon into office; over fifty percent of New York City residents cast their vote for Democrat Hubert Humphrey. These election results reflected a pattern that persists to this day: a tendency for upstate and western New York areas to be overwhelmingly conservative compared to liberal New York City. There is also a vast difference in levels of prestige associated with the two publications. The *New York Times*, as one of the most widely read publications in the country, employed some of the most well-known and elitely educated journalists in the nation, whereas the *Daily News*, a small

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<sup>22</sup> Richard Andrew Featherstone, *Narratives from the 1971 Attica Prison Riot* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2005), 3.

newspaper with a three-county circulation and likely considerably smaller salaries to offer its employees, was more likely to attract working-class reporters from nearby areas.

The role of the journalist also differed within the two organizations. In sociologist Christina Smith's study of small-town newspapers in Iowa, she found that small-town newspaper reporters perceive several identities for themselves, ranging from news worker to parent, community member, organization member, and volunteer. These identities often require complex negotiation on the part of the journalist in order to successfully perform his or her job while still maintaining their position as a functioning member of the community. This balance between the roles of objective journalist and engaged community member are further complicated by the expectations of community members, as Smith found that small town residents view their newspaper not only as a source of information, but as a community advocate, community builder, and constructor of the community's collective memory.<sup>23</sup> As a large publication with a national circulation, *New York Times* and *Washington Post* reporters had no attachment to the town of Attica or surrounding communities. They were "outsiders" who therefore felt no personal obligation to benefit the local community through their reporting.

Indeed, the local community did not benefit from the national press's depiction of Attica as a town of racist "insiders." Instead, this portrayal further promoted an "us vs. them" attitude within the community — but this time, the "them" was not simply inmates or visiting reporters; it was the rest of the country. Immediately following the uprising, there was a stigma attached to the Attica name. John Stockholm recalls an Attica High School football game that ended early

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<sup>23</sup> Christina Carolyn Smith, "Weekly newspapering: Iowa's small-town newspapers, their news workers, and their community roles," (University of Iowa ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2015), 144.

after the third quarter because members of the other team harrassed the Attica players about the riot. Attica residents removed Attica Ford Garage decals from their cars when they drove to Buffalo, he also remembered, for fear of their cars getting keyed or spray painted. Many high school students stopped wearing their letterman jackets outside of Attica due to “some nasty stuff.” “It changed the community,” Stockholm says. “I think it got to be tighter-knit, and basically I think there was a lot of hostility.” By emphasizing the racial and cultural divisions and tensions within Attica, national journalists exacerbated the insider vs. outsider mindset that had already existed.

Media expert Susan Dente Ross posits that the media “create a ‘public identity and definition’ of social movements because media stories do not reflect an abstract, objective reality but rather selectively transmit messages from and about the movements.”<sup>24</sup> Both local and national media have immense power to not only report on individual events, but to define these events and present them in the context of the publication’s choosing. By framing the Attica prison riot within the narrative of racial tension or choosing to present the event as an isolated tragedy, journalists for the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *The Daily News* had a profound influence in shaping the collective memory of their readerships regarding the uprising. Through both the articles themselves and the journalists’ methods of collecting information and navigating their place within the Attica community, local and national news coverage of the event framed the uprising as a conflict between insiders vs. outsiders, urban vs. rural, and white vs. black,

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<sup>24</sup> Susan Dente Ross, “Their rising voices”: A study of civil rights, social movements, and advertising in the New York Times,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (1998): 520.

fueling tensions between these perceived groups and creating a set of narratives that still live on today.

### Chapter Three After the Riot

On February 28, 2015, Attica Correctional Facility was thrust into the national spotlight once again with a *New York Times* cover story whose headline read: “A Brutal Beating Wakes Attica’s Ghosts: A Prison, Infamous for Bloodshed, Faces a Reckoning as Guards Go on Trial.”<sup>1</sup> The article exposed the beating of a black inmate, 29-year-old George Williams from New Jersey, by three white corrections officers, which resulted in a broken shoulder, several cracked ribs and two broken legs for Williams.

The article was published in conjunction with *The Marshall Project*, a nonprofit criminal justice news organization launched in November 2014 and staffed by the likes of former *New York Times* Executive Editor Bill Keller. The George Williams case was a novelty in the fact that the guards were held accountable in court; according to state officials, it was the first time criminal charges had been brought against corrections officers for nonsexual assault. However, the article made it clear that the beating itself was by no means an isolated or newsworthy incident. Instead, this high-profile trial served as a gateway to an investigation by *The Marshall Project* into a culture of ongoing guard brutality at Attica. The article cited a twenty-five percent increase in recorded incidences of New York State corrections officers using force to control inmates between 2009 and 2013, as well as a rise in inmate assaults on staff. These numbers, according to the state corrections officer union, are due to recent closings which led to overcrowding in pris-

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Robbins, “A Brutal Beating Wakes Attica’s Ghosts: A Prison, Infamous for Bloodshed, Faces a Reckoning as Guards Go on Trial,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Feb. 28, 2015.

ons such as Attica and understaffing of guards. The authors of the article, however, imply that the high rate of guard-on-inmate violence at Attica in particular is not merely a consequence of overcrowding, but rather a symptom of a culture of violence and racism within the prison that originated pre-1970s and was exacerbated by the uprising and its aftermath. “Looming over everything at Attica is the riot,” writes Tom Robbins, the article’s author, who outlines the death toll of the uprising and states that “to those who work at the prison, the history of the riot is an everyday reminder of the danger that inmates, who greatly outnumber guards, could take over at any time.”

The article concludes with a quote from one anonymous inmate, frustrated with the lack of attention given to the current conditions inside Attica by the state: “No one on the outside is going to change anything. Guys say: ‘We need a riot. It’s the only way to stop it.’” (This quote, along with the names of some inmates and guards and an aerial photo of the prison that accompanied the piece, were blacked out by prison officials in copies of the article distributed to Attica inmates.<sup>2</sup>) The article includes quotes from inmates and guards alike; however, it ultimately suggests that the cultural tensions inside Attica prison are instigated and perpetuated by racist, hostile attitudes and discriminatory practices among correctional officers. The article describes the beating as part of a greater systemic problem with the New York State prison system, including state-wide statistics of guard-on-inmate violence and attributing it in part to the state recently closing prisons, which has led to overcrowding. However, it also frames Attica as unique, and suggests that the beating was not only the result of administrative decisions made by the state but

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Robbins, “Attica Reads About Attica: A story of brutality clears the prison censors,” *The Marshall Project*, Mar. 19, 2015.

also something that could only happen at Attica due to a culture of hostility that has arisen from its bloody history. Attica is presented as both the exception and the rule; simultaneously a symbol of a larger problem and a historical anomaly. But regardless of the origin of the problem, the article makes one point very clear: there is a culture of racism and corruption inside Attica Correctional Facility, and it manifests itself in the attitudes and behavior of the rural guards working there.

When compared to some of the local coverage of the uprising's 40th anniversary published four years prior, one might not think the two journalists were talking about the same prison. One of the more radical opinion pieces, an on-air editorial by Bill Brown, the former manager of local radio station WBTA, expresses "revulsion at the bleeding hearts and do-gooders who defended the inmates as persecuted victims in an unfair prison system," and asks whether we have "any blame left for the hardened criminals who started and fueled the riot." This piece is not representative of the attitudes of all Attica residents, of course. It may not even represent the majority of local people. However, it is significant in that it goes against the national narrative of Attica that has been constructed in recent years, a narrative in which a racist, corrupt prison system is to blame for the uprising, not the inherent criminality of inmates or even the actions of individual guards.

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Media coverage during the uprising and immediately after created a series of dichotomies — primarily black vs. white and urban vs. rural — that pitted inmates against Attica natives. False stories created by the state, which largely controlled the information released to the press during the riot, exacerbated these tensions. One of the most significant lies told by state officials

and spread by the media was that the hostages had had their throats slit by inmates, not that they had been shot by state police during the retaking of the prison. Such stories fueled the “us vs. them” mentality that had already existed among many Attica residents, and relieved state officials of any responsibility for the deaths of prison employees.

However, as the truth began to emerge in the weeks, months and years following the uprising, a third player was introduced in the narrative of inmates vs. guards: the state. After a local medical examiner determined that the cause of death for all hostages had been bullet wounds rather than knife wounds, an investigation by the New York State Special Commission on Attica determined that the state had failed to quickly correct the false rumors. The full extent of the state’s effort to cover up its own responsibility in the uprising was revealed in 1975 by Malcolm Bell, the man who served as chief assistant to special state prosecutor Anthony Simonetti for the Attica prosecution in the years following the uprising. Bell’s book, *The Turkey Shoot*, details the state’s cover-up of crimes committed by State Police officers and Attica correction officers in the retaking of the prison and the torture and brutalization of inmates after the retaking. Despite Bell’s best efforts to prosecute these officers and hold state officials accountable for the deaths incurred during the retaking, no police officer or state official was ever found guilty of crimes committed on September 11, 1971. Bell and other investigators and prosecutors were never even permitted to present their findings to a grand jury, despite ample evidence and witnesses who were willing to testify. This cover-up was exposed in a *New York Times* article on April 8, 1975, after Bell resigned and shared his story with the *Times*.

In his book, Bell marvels at the carefully orchestrated way the *Times* chose to reveal the cover-up slowly rather than all at once, noting that “they let it out more slowly, fanning public



interest, and goading an increasingly apt response from the unwilling state. They did not manufacture news, they elicited news.”<sup>3</sup> Just as the media had both reflected and shaped the riot as it was happening, it also both reflected and shaped the public reveal of the state’s responsibility in the uprising. Once the state’s involvement and attempts to protect itself were made public, inmates and guards were to an extent united over the fact that they both felt cheated and betrayed by the state. This does not mean, of course, that the correctional officers and their families stopped resenting the inmates for inciting the riot or vice versa. However, the introduction of a common enemy into the us vs. them narrative alleviated some of the tension by redirecting both parties’ anger at each other to the state. Inmates and guards recognized that they had both had been the victims of political corruption in an unfair system much larger than themselves.

In January of 2000, 25 years after a class-action civil suit was filed on behalf of 1,281 inmates over the retaking of Attica by New York State Troopers, the state offered the inmates \$8 million to settle. It was less than the \$2.8 billion the inmates had originally sought, but, as a *New York Times* reporter put it in an article announcing the settlement, “for the lawyers, former inmates and supporters who never abandoned the fight, the issue was never money: it was holding the government accountable for its actions.”<sup>4</sup> The reporter mused that decades in the future, the Attica uprising would likely be remembered as “a symbol of brute force,” the “brute force” being the force exerted by the state during the retaking of the prison.

As a reaction to the millions awarded to the inmates, a group of former hostages and their families came together that year to form an organization called The Forgotten Victims of Attica,

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<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Bell, *The Turkey Shoot* (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1985), 324.

<sup>4</sup> David W. Chen, “\$8 Million Offered to End Attica Inmates' Suit,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Jan 5, 2000.

which aimed to hold the state responsible for the conditions that caused the uprising and the deaths and injuries sustained by prison employees during the retaking. The guards and their families were bothered by the fact that the inmates, who had started the riot, were compensated by the state before they were. It was more personal for some than others; Deanne Quinn Miller, daughter of Billy Quinn, the only guard killed by inmates, says she “probably would not have been so angry if I hadn’t known that the two men who killed my father were included in the class action.”<sup>5</sup> The Forgotten Victims demanded financial compensation, counseling for those wanting it, access to sealed records of the uprising, an annual ceremony at the prison, and an apology from the state. In 2000, the same year the group officially formed, the state offered the slain hostage’s families a total of \$550,000 — or \$50,000 for each family — which they rejected. In 2002, after the Forgotten Victims had begun to receive attention from Western New York and Albany-based media organizations, a task force was created and three hearings were held, at which anyone affected by the riot was allowed to speak. The hostages’ families finally accepted a \$12 million settlement in 2005, 34 years after the uprising.

The Forgotten Victims of Attica were represented by Gary Horton, a public defender in Genesee County who decided to help after hearing interviews on WBTA, Batavia’s news radio station, with some of the hostages and their families prior to the group’s formal inception. Horton, a Batavia native who was between college and law school at the time of the uprising, says he followed the inmate trials but, like so many Americans, “had no idea that the state’s employees were so screwed over by the state...People didn’t know. People didn’t care.”<sup>6</sup> Miller, who was

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<sup>5</sup> Deanne Quinn Miller, telephone interview with author, Jan 14, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Gary Horton, telephone interview with author, Jan 14, 2016.

five at the time of the uprising, attributes the 34-year delay in compensation to the false information spread by state officials during and immediately following the uprising. “What people from Attica and around the country chose to believe was what the media said to them, especially right in the aftermath of the riot and during the riot,” she explains. “Certainly coming from the state police, it was considered to be credible and truthful, but really, much of it wasn’t.”<sup>7</sup> Horton adds that the state was legally able to control the amount of information released to the public over the course of the 34 years afterward due to the pending litigation between the inmates and the state. However, he believes “there were elements of the press that were there at the time who felt guilt about [spreading false information] and were really trying to get the story, but it was really difficult to root out.” He recalls getting calls from reporters each year who wanted to cover the riot’s anniversary, but rarely from the same reporter twice, “and you’d have to educate [each new] reporter right from the beginning. They didn’t know anything. They might have still seen the clips where the Department of Corrections spokesperson was out there saying, ‘All our people were killed by inmates.’”<sup>8</sup>

While it is perhaps not surprising that people from other parts of the country may not have closely followed coverage of the uprising long enough to learn about the truth, one might assume that a majority of Attica locals have kept up with the story — if not through the media, then at least through word of mouth — and are familiar with the state’s role in the deaths of the hostages and their attempts to cover it up afterward. However, Miller says during her time working with the Forgotten Victims of Attica, she found the opposite to be true. “I think that over

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<sup>7</sup> Miller, interview.

<sup>8</sup> Horton, interview.

time, some people were willing to accept the new information...but I definitely think that in a small town community, it was easier to survive and believe those inaccuracies of what was reported to them. Because I think it's easier to believe, when you grow up in a town like I did, that the inmates killed everybody. It's easier to understand and get through your head than that the state police went in...and everybody was killed by friendly fire."<sup>9</sup> The new information revealed by Malcolm Bell and the Special Commission on Attica was a turning point for the national narrative of the Attica uprising, as well as a turning point for prison reform in America. Whereas during the riot the media had attributed much of the tension within Attica to the differences in race and culture between inmates and Attica residents, in the years after the uprising the focus shifted from problems within Attica specifically to problems within the New York State criminal justice system and the American prison system in general. Attica was no longer seen as an exceptionally violent or oppressive prison; it became a symbol for a violent, oppressive prison system nationwide. In this narrative, the structure of the prison system was to blame for the riot, not the actions of individual inmates or corrections officers. However, as Miller suggests, this narrative did not become the mainstream one in the Attica region.

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The Attica portrayed in the *New York Times*'s coverage of George Williams is vastly different than the Attica presented in local fortieth anniversary coverage published a little over three years prior. *Daily News* headlines such as ““Their Only Child Was Dead at the Age of 26...”” and “Marking a Difficult Anniversary — Widow Recalls Husband Who Lost His Life in 1971 Prison Uprising” recall the losses felt by corrections officers and their families, not the political and so-

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<sup>9</sup> Miller, interview.

cial implications of the riot and its aftermath. In one brief article lamenting the coinciding anniversaries of the uprising and 9/11, the reporter writes: “Local residents watched the media coverage, their hearts in their throats as they prayed for the safety of friends, relatives, and neighbors. Most everyone knew someone who worked at the Attica Correctional Facility, or knew of someone who knew someone.”<sup>10</sup> The disparate local and national narratives present in breaking news coverage of the Attica uprising still exist today in media coverage as well as local and national memory. The gap between the two has, in fact, widened since the 1970s due to growth of anti-incarceration activism and the adoption of the once-radical pro-inmate narrative by the mainstream national media.

In recent years, however, the local media has begun to include the political and racial implications of the uprising alongside personal stories of how the riot affected the community. A reporter for the *Daily News*, in covering a 2011 symposium at the University of Buffalo, mentioned that “Inmates protested and rioted against poor treatment in Attica, including little education, few programs, poor health care and discrimination in prison jobs given to black inmates...”<sup>11</sup> In a series of short profiles of local people with ties to the riot published for the fortieth anniversary, the reporter notes that one interviewee “put the riot in historical perspective.” Gary Horton, the attorney for the Forgotten Victims of Attica, lived approximately an hour and a half away from Attica at the time of the riot. Horton cites the protest movement against the Vietnam War and demonstrations in favor of women’s rights, civil rights, and rights for other minority groups, as well as the Black Power movement and violent race riots, as evidence that Attica

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<sup>10</sup> “Tragic Milestones Evoke Pain, Unity,” *The Daily News* (Batavia, NY), Sep. 8, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Mrozek, *The Daily News* (Batavia, NY), Sep. 13, 2011.

and the prisoners' rights movement were simply reflections of the times. "It was all part of that era," he said.<sup>12</sup> Horton's interview also mentions the fact that there were nearly no minorities on the prison staff, hinting at the racial tensions between local guards and inmates of color, but not elaborating further than simply acknowledging the racial differences. The author of the aforementioned opinion piece on Attica and 9/11 connects the uprising to prison reform occurring today, but demonstrates a greater sympathy for present-day guards at Attica than inmates, writing: "The uprising focused attention on problems within the prison system that had been festering for years. That attention has led to efforts to reform — efforts that must be ongoing as society struggles to deal with crime. Prisons remain tense, often violent places. The jobs of corrections officers have not become easier. Reforms must focus not only on treatment of inmates, but also the way corrections officers are treated."<sup>13</sup> This article, while placing the riot in the context of prison reform and acknowledging that it was a necessary turning point in drawing attention to problems with the criminal justice system, characterizes corrections officers as pawns within the system rather than individuals with agency who have the ability to improve or worsen a prison environment.

It would be inaccurate to say that the *Daily News* has never included an inmate's perspective. For example, the paper once published an interview with the son of Sam Melville, one of the leaders of the revolt, and the coverage of the University of Buffalo symposium focused heavily on an "emotional" speech given by Melvin Marshall, an inmate in the D-Yard when it was retaken by the state police who the reporter describes as an "elegant speaker." The article notes

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Mrozek, "Painful Memories Linger 40 Years Later," *The Daily News* (Batavia, NY), Sep. 9, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Tragic Milestones Evoke Pain, Unity," *The Daily News* (Batavia, NY), Sep. 8, 2011.

that Marshall's friend, Elliot "L.D." Barkley, encouraged the other inmates "to not act like savages, and protect the hostages, and "saved a lot of hostages from being hurt" when he chased and tackled another inmate who was trying to stab them with a makeshift knife. The author describes the way Marshall "broke down" when talking about how he and Barkley were kicked and spit on by police officers after the retaking, and how he watched a trooper shoot Barkley in the back of the head. While this representation of Marshall and Barkley is certainly sympathetic and humanizing, they are presented as exceptional inmates. Marshall and Barkley are simply a few good inmates doing their best in a chaotic situation. Their individual heroic actions are lauded, but the inmate perspective as a whole, and the historical and sociopolitical legitimacy of the prisoners' rights movement, are not represented.

Local 40th anniversary coverage of the Attica uprising has a collaborative nature that blurs the line between reporter and everyday citizen. The *Daily News* asked readers for submissions of the memories of the uprising, a selection of which were published in the paper on September 9, 2011.<sup>14</sup> The authors of these excerpts ranged from corrections officers to their families to paramedics on the scene to Attica natives who were in elementary school when the uprising occurred. All accounts recalled fear, anxiety, and confusion while waiting to hear about their friends, neighbors, and loved ones held hostage inside the prison. They are all highly personal stories, nearly none of which contain any mention of the causes of the uprising or its broader historical significance.

A similar approach was taken by WBTA 1490, the local news radio station, also based in Batavia, New York. To commemorate the 40th anniversary, WBTA aired a short series of inter-

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<sup>14</sup> "A Tense, Palpable Pall Fell Over the Village...", *The Daily News* (Batavia, NY), Sep. 9, 2011.

views with, and editorials by, former WBTA reporters who had covered the uprising. Jim Lanigan, Assistant News Director at the time of the riot, recalled the stressful chaos of breaking the story on September 9 amidst conflicting rumors and reports, a day when he happened to be the only one in the newsroom. “It was a time when nothing was set in stone, so to speak, and it was a confusing time,” he told the interviewer. “But you were trying to get the best information out, because you were impacting the families of those that were in the prison, either as hostages or just other correction officers. So it weighed on a big responsibility to get the proper information out, and it wasn't an easy thing to do.” Lanigan also discussed the challenge of trying to balance sources from the state corrections department, the prison administration, and reactions from local people while stationed outside the prison during the uprising. When asked how he managed to stay calm and collected during the chaotic retaking of the prison, he responded: “The people in our area needed to know what was going on, and it wasn't just, to us, a news story. It was happening to family and friends. And that gives you a different perspective. That gives you a different angle, you might say, on it. And this is one of the things, because if you didn't know a correction officer, you knew the family member of a correction officer. And the thing I took away from that, that I'll probably have always with me, is correction officers are unsung heroes.”<sup>15</sup>

The WBTA interviewer then broadened the topic to the prison system in general, asking Lanigan what he thought of it, to which Lanigan replied that underfunding was the cause of many problems within prisons: “Most prisons are kind of tucked away, and people don't realize the money that's needed for those until it becomes too late and you have an Attica. And at that

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<sup>15</sup> Geoff Reddick and Jim Lanigan, “Attica at 40: In Our Own Words — Pt. 2,” WBTA 1490, Sep. 7, 2011.



time, there were several other prisons that developed riots or disturbances...so it became kind of chronic...and I think that's something that people have to realize.”

Also interviewed was former WBTA employee Frank Mangefrida, who held the position of Program Director at the time of the uprising. He recalled how he was able to utilize his friendship with a doctor at St. Jerome Hospital, where the hostage guards were treated after the riot, to get inside the hospital to interview the guards despite the fact that members of the press were not allowed inside at the time. He was also able to gain an insider's advantage by speaking with friends who were state and city police officers shortly after the riot began. “People were pretty upset,” Mangefrida chuckled. “How could this guy from a little local radio station end up talking to the hostages as they're being treated, and we can't even get to talk to anybody?” Because nobody was talking.”<sup>16</sup> Like Lanigan, Mangefrida acknowledged his own positionality and the effect that being a native of the area had on his reporting. Unlike Lanigan, Mangefrida did not reveal any personal bias or opinions on the cause of the uprising, firmly stating, “I'm not taking sides.” While Mangefrida and Lanigan had a similar positionality in relation to the uprising, the two defined their role as community journalists in different ways.

Arguably the most blatantly pro-guard piece of journalism featured in local 40th anniversary coverage was the on-air editorial by Bill Brown, former WBTA Station President at the time of the uprising, featured in the same “Attica at 40” package as Lanigan and Mangefrida's interviews. Brown expresses “revulsion at the bleeding hearts and do-gooders who defended the inmates as persecuted victims in an unfair prison system,” and questions why the revolting inmates — “vicious men – killers, rapists, drug dealers” — who started the riot were rewarded financially

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<sup>16</sup> Geoff Reddick and Frank Mangefrida, “Attica at 40 — Pt. 3,” WBTA 1490, Sep. 8, 2011.

by the state years later. It is clear which narrative Brown ascribes to: the one in which the inmates are entirely to blame for the riot and its aftermath. “The State Police were blamed... The Department of Corrections was blamed. The staff at Attica was blamed. Do we have any blame left for the hardened criminals who started and fueled the riot? How should society deal with menacing thugs, who have recklessly and without remorse or respect, viciously assaulted the law and order that rules behavior?” Brown wondered aloud on air.<sup>17</sup> While it would be unfair to use one editorial — a biased piece of journalism by nature — as an indicator of the political leanings of a news organization, this particular editorial is especially noteworthy as it came from the former president of the news organization. It also stands out as the only on-air editorial WBTA aired as part of the 40th anniversary series and thus the only perspective expressed outside of reporter interviews. Brown’s editorial reinforces the local notion that corrections officers played only a passive role in the riot and were at the mercy of the other players. It also displays a frustration toward the idea that in recent years, inmate voices have become more frequently heard in the media and included in the national dialogue on mass incarceration, whereas the voices of corrections officers have remained largely silenced.

Brown concludes by urging local listeners to remember Attica as “an insurrection of evil men who were not punished as they should have been,” noting that “some still blame the state for this unprovoked and deadly assault on society.” His parting words — either inspirational or foreboding depending on perspective — express hope that one day the “law officers who are doing a dangerous job; a job they were sworn to do” will find justice: “God in His mercy will bless the

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<sup>17</sup> Bill Brown, “Commentary on the 40th Anniversary of the Attica Prison Riot,” WBTA 1490, Sep. 9, 2011.

innocent victims, who to this day remember and mourn,” he declares. “In His righteous justice, He will condemn the killers to an eternal punishment much worse than Attica’s forbidding walls.”

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Nearly four years after the 40th anniversary of the uprising, Barack Obama made history by visiting a place no sitting president before him had gone before: a federal prison. During his July 16, 2015 visit to El Reno Correctional Institution in El Reno, Oklahoma, the president toured the facility and met with inmates and law enforcement officers. "I think we have a tendency sometimes to almost take for granted or think it's normal that so many young people end up in our criminal justice system," said Obama in a press conference at the end of the day. "It's not normal. It's not what happens in other countries."<sup>18</sup> The visit to El Reno was part of a larger effort by President Obama during his second term to reform the criminal justice system; as of December 2015, he had granted nearly two hundred pardons and commutations: more than the previous four presidents combined.<sup>19</sup> Weeks after visiting El Reno, the president’s administration announced that it would reinstate Pell Grants for nonviolent prisoners.<sup>20</sup> These newsworthy events were indicative of a larger social movement occurring across the United States: Americans were starting to pay serious attention to the mass incarceration of people of color.

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<sup>18</sup> Tom LoBianco, “President Barack Obama makes historic trip to prison, pushes reform,” *CNN*, Jul. 17, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Gregory Korte, “Obama grants 95 Christmastime pardons and commutations,” *USA Today*, Dec. 19, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Beth Schwartzapfel, “Obama Is Reinstating Pell Grants for Prisoners,” *The Marshall Project*, Jul. 30, 2015.

Barack Obama was not the only politician for whom criminal justice reform was a priority in 2015. Over the course of the past few years, those from both ends of the political spectrum have come to an unlikely agreement on one issue: that the U.S. prison system must be reformed. Republican Sen. Rand Paul made criminal justice reform a central point of his presidential campaign, bringing the issue up frequently during televised debates in 2015 and 2016. In separate speeches and press releases, both Paul and Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton cited the statistic that the United States has 5 percent of the world's population but 25 percent of the world's incarcerated population. This was far from the first time that two politicians from opposite parties had made the same argument against mass incarceration; the issue had been drawing attention in recent years from both Democratic and Republican senators proposing acts that would shorten the mandatory minimum sentences introduced as a result of the crack epidemic of the 1980s.<sup>21</sup>

While the high cost of having the largest imprisoned population in the world was undeniably a motivator for many politicians, the fiscal downsides of mass incarceration went hand in hand with the growing Black Lives Matter movement, which was born after the death of unarmed black teen Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of his shooter, George Zimmerman. The movement, which is still going strong today, has been fueled by police brutality toward people of color and manifests itself through social media and protests across the country. The movement, which self-describes as “an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives

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<sup>21</sup> Michelle Ye Hee Lee, “Does the United States really have 5 percent of the world’s population and one quarter of the world’s prisoners?,” *The Washington Post*, Apr. 30, 2015.; Hillary Clinton, “Remarks at Columbia University” (keynote address, David N. Dinkins Leadership and Public Policy Forum, New York, NY, Apr. 29, 2015); “Sens. Paul and Booker Re-introduce the RE-DEEM Act,” *Rand Paul: United States Senator for Kentucky* official website, Mar. 9, 2015.; “An unlikely alliance of left and right,” *The Economist*, Aug. 17, 2013.

are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise,” aims to fight the criminalization and mass incarceration of minorities, particularly young African-American men, in a country where approximately 60 percent of incarcerated males are either black or Latino.<sup>22</sup>

In her popular book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, civil rights advocate Michelle Alexander argues that the oppression of African-Americans did not end with the civil rights movement, and that the blatant discrimination against people of color demonstrated during the Jim Crow era has simply evolved into a more nuanced and subtle form of discrimination: the disproportionate imprisonment of blacks today.<sup>23</sup> Far from being considered radical, the book is assigned reading for many college courses, and was required reading for all incoming freshmen at Brown University in the fall of 2015.

"In too many places, black boys and black men, and Latino boys and Latino men, experience being treated different under the law," President Obama told the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People at the group's annual conference in 2015. "Mass incarceration makes our country worse off and we need to do something about it."<sup>24</sup> The phrase "mass incarceration," virtually nonexistent before appearing first in 2010, has since become a household term, and has appeared in the headlines of dozens of major news outlets and speeches by politicians and activists alike. Usage of the phrases "mass incarceration," "mass imprisonment," and

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<sup>22</sup> Alicia Garza, "A HerStory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement," *BlackLivesMatter.com.*; E. Ann Carson, "Prisoners in 2013," *Bureau of Justice Statistics*, Sep. 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press), 2010.

<sup>24</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at the NAACP Conference," (speech, NAACP 106th National Convention, Philadelphia, PA, Jul. 14, 2015)

“prison industrial complex” have more than tripled in books since the late 90s and early 2000s.<sup>25</sup> The disproportionate incarceration of millions of people of color has become a part of the mainstream national dialogue in a way that it was not when the Attica uprising took place in 1971, thus framing the uprising within a narrative of racialized incarceration which was existent but considered radical in 1971. The normalization of this narrative, particularly by large-scale, mainstream news organizations, has affected the national memory of the riot in a way that distances itself even further from local memory.

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George Williams, the inmate whose story brought the ghosts of Attica back to life in national discourse in a 2015 *New York Times* article, was serving two to four years for robbing a jewelery store when the beating occurred. He was a small man, only five foot eight and 170 pounds, and he dreamed of someday owning a barbershop upon his release from prison. Little information is provided about the three guards — Sgt. Sean Warner, Officer Keith Swack, and Officer Matthew Rademacher — beyond their ages (ranging from late twenties to late thirties), physical size (all at least five foot eleven and weighing above 240 pounds), and the fact that “all three men are white and had goatees at the time.”<sup>26</sup>

After a thorough description and timeline of the 2011 beating, the *Times* article segues into a description of the town of Attica itself, noting that in Wyoming County, “the heaviest concentration of humanity is the 2,240 inmates packed behind the great gray prison walls that measure more than a mile around.” These inmates are eighty percent black and Hispanic men, and

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<sup>25</sup> Oliver Roeder, “A Million People Were In Prison Before We Called It Mass Incarceration,” *FiveThirtyEight*, Sep. 18, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Robbins, “A Brutal Beating.”

nearly half of them hail from New York City and its suburbs. As of February 2015, there were 600 correctional officers working inside Attica, and “all but a handful of them” were white. Clearly, not much had changed since 1971 in terms of the demographics of Attica Correctional Facility.

Robbins’ assertion that the uprising has colored the culture of Attica for the worse is backed up by quotes from two employees. The first is Mark Cunningham, a sergeant at Attica whose father was taken hostage and killed in the retaking. He ensures that all new recruits are told what happened in 1971, and explains that “You do certain things a certain way because it wasn’t done one time and the inmates took control.” The second interviewee is Brian Fischer, former New York State corrections commissioner who worked in the field for thirty-five years. He tells Robbins that “Attica has a unique personality, in part because of the riot... There’s an historical negativity, if you will, that doesn’t go away.”<sup>27</sup> By including these quotes, Robbins frames the recent events within a long-term narrative of the uprising, placing it in a context of racial tension and the oppression of inmates.

George William’s beating also made the front page of the *Batavia Daily News*, but while the facts were the same, the story was framed in an entirely different way. The article, titled “Attica guards plead guilty in beating,” does not place the beating within a racial narrative of mass incarceration or draw any connections to the 1971 uprising. Rather, it presents the beating as an isolated incident, without historical or cultural context. Additionally, whereas the *New York Times* interviewed Williams and other inmates, the *Daily* article contains quotes only from Dis-

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<sup>27</sup> Robbins, “A Brutal Beating.”

trict Attorney Donald O’Geen, who mostly discusses the technicalities of the case.<sup>28</sup> For local readers, historical context was perhaps considered unnecessary; most had grown up with knowledge of the uprising. Or perhaps the local journalist was considering his audience. Because the guards were undeniably the perpetrators of this violence and it was not violence condoned by the prison system or the prison itself, to suggest that this incident stems from a historical pattern would frame Attica corrections officers themselves as bad individuals responsible for their actions rather than helpless pawns who are forced to participate in an oppressive system in order to support themselves and their families. By presenting the incident as isolated, the journalist is not making a statement about local prison guards in general, but rather pointing out a few bad apples.

This was not the only article about the beating that appeared on the front page of the *Daily News* that day. Another, titled “Three defendants: ‘They want - to put an end to this nightmare,’” explains why the three guards pled guilty, according to Norman Effman, Rademacher’s defense lawyer. The article contains quotes nearly exclusively from Effman, who claimed that the emotional trauma of waiting for a trial led to all three men taking a plea deal. The article also includes a statement from Mike Didine, Western Region vice president for NYSCOPBA, the corrections officers union, which included the following sentence: “This has been a very trying period for these three officers, their families and our membership, who have stood behind their fellow brothers throughout this ordeal.”<sup>29</sup> No perspective from Williams or other inmates are included in either article.

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<sup>28</sup> Matt Surtel, “Attica guards plead guilty in beating,” *The Daily News* (Batavia, NY), Mar. 3, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Mrozek, “Three defendants: ‘They want - to put an end to this nightmare,’” *The Daily News* (Batavia, NY), Mar. 3, 2015.



Any number of journalistic practicalities could have accounted for these differences between the *Daily News* and *New York Times* articles: a tight deadline, the convenience of knowing the local District Attorney, an inability to obtain interviews on the inside of the prison, a desire to tell an untold side of the story. But whatever the reason, the fact remains that the *New York Times* article included George William's voice whereas the *Daily News* did not, and the *Daily News* included the three corrections officers' perspective whereas the *New York Times* did not. Both fed into the increasingly disparate local and national narratives surrounding Attica Correctional Facility and the role of prison guards.

The site where differences between local and national perceptions of Attica Correctional Facility are perhaps most noticeable is not in journalist-produced media, which tends to brand itself as being as relatively objective as possible, but in anonymous online conversation. A glance at the online comment sections for the *New York Times* and *Daily News* articles on George Williams reveals starkly divided perspectives and patterns of thought. "Gaining employment at Attica seems to require the lowest common denominator of physical or mental skill, let alone strength of character, hence why they become a magnet for insecure bigots who now get paid to bully prisoners around while fancying themselves as the kings of the iron-bar castle," writes Solaris, a *New York Times* commenter who names his or her location as New York City. Other *Times* readers question the prison's decision to employ Mark Cunningham, the sergeant whose father was taken hostage and killed during the uprising. "Why on earth is any close relative of a guard who died in the 1971 uprising allowed to work as a guard now at Attica, and inculcate

newcomers into his mantra of grief and rage against inmates? Talk about a recipe for revenge and retaliation ...” writes another reader with the username Dean.<sup>30</sup>

Some, like Elizmm of Rochester, New York and campskunk of Tallahassee, Florida, made speculations about the relationship between the prison and the town of Attica. “Can’t help but wonder the impact on the Attica town community and locations where guards live. Does the violence continue in homes and towns? An interesting topic for investigative reporting,” muses Elizmm. Campskunk, who reports being from Tallahassee, Florida, blames guard brutality on the nature of small towns, writing: “all these prisons are placed in small, rural areas. the prison is the largest, and sometimes only decent wage employer in the area.mthe indictments and trials are held locally. the jury is usually made up of the relatives and friends of the prison guards, and you wonder why no one is held accountable?”

Two themes recur throughout many of the comments: a lack of understanding of why so many Attica locals take jobs as prison guards, and the conviction that Attica Correctional Facility must be shut down immediately. Online readers responding to the *Daily News* coverage of the trial express, for the most part, a similar disgust over the beating of George Williams, although some also acknowledge the difficulties of working as a guard at Attica. One anonymous commenter, who goes by dapnylv, offers his own personal connection to Attica, perhaps aiming to add a higher degree of credibility to his comment: “I was a street cop for 35 years and my father was a CO at Attica for 40 years and never once did either of us have any reason to beat down any ‘bad guy’ this much...Maybe the inmate got a little of what he deserved but the COs went too far and the only ones who really had to pay for it was the taxpayers...” Another reader, going by the

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<sup>30</sup> No location specified.

name of kbarniak, is more sympathetic to the guards than the rest, writing: “The Wyoming County district attorney should spend a few days doing the job these guards had working with that animal (inmate George) Williams... These guards should have just been given a reprimand and sent back to work...”<sup>31</sup>

In the remaining comments, which condemn the guards as “crooked” and “thugs,” one of the primary concerns of readers appears to be the cost of the whole ordeal on local taxpayers, an aspect of the story not mentioned by most *New York Times* readers. “These men should have to pay for all of this out of their own pockets not mine!” writes jvanepps. “These guys basically wrote a check for this prisoner that now the county will have to settle,” laments another reader with the username Seeker. Once again, we see Attica residents concerned primarily about the effect this will have on the Attica community and the individuals who live within it. These commenters view the incident as an isolated incident that will negatively affect them financially rather than a significant first step towards changing our prison system nationwide.

The two worlds of national and local journalism collided in a *Daily News* article published nearly a week later, which announced a Kickstarter campaign by an Attica native to raise enough money to send George Williams to barber school. Donald Huber, (“Don” to *Daily News* readers), a 2006 graduate of Attica High School and U.S. Army specialist stationed in Kansas at the time, described to the paper how he was inspired to raise money for Williams after reading the *New York Times* cover story. Huber was “disturbed” by the *Times* article, not merely because of the beating Williams suffered but also due to the negative portrayal of his hometown. “It comes at a time when the prison’s brutal reputation has been brought to the forefront, and — at

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<sup>31</sup> “Listening In,” *The Daily News* (Batavia, NY), Mar 7, 2015.

least to some outside the region — there’s a sense of residents as hulking, racist rednecks,” writes *Daily* reporter Matt Surtel. Surtel then provides a quote from Huber: “Those sentiments, they definitely exist in our community, but I would say they don’t even come close to the majority opinion...My thought, when I decided to pursue this, is it would almost be poetic justice if the community that was tarnished by that, would be one of the first to step forward to help Mr. Williams personally.”<sup>32</sup> The question of monetarial justice — who deserves to pay for what — came up once again, appearing several times in the *Daily News* online comment section for the article. Whereas very few people could argue that the guards had been justified in their actions, reactions to Huber’s charitable efforts were mixed — George Williams certainly did not deserve to be beaten, but did he deserve even more money out of law-abiding local taxpayers’ pockets? “Where are the fundraisers for the victims of these convicted criminals?” writes one user named Dakota. “The murdered, beaten, raped, and assaulted. Where is money for their medical bills and pain caused by tenants of the prisons?”<sup>33</sup> Other users suggested donating money to local people in need rather than Williams: “This inmate has gotten a free ride off us taxpayers since being put in there. Food, lodging, cable, etc.,” wrote Wow. “If people have extra money to give there are several others in our community that need help paying medical bills for an unforeseen illness that they have now. Give there, not here.” A reader named Unreal adds: “Young man, if you want to have a fundrasier, there are plenty of war veterans going through hard times living on the street; people dying of diseases and cancers; elderly people who can barely afford to live and of course there are the victims of brutal crimes committed by scum like George Williams.”

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<sup>32</sup> Matt Surtel, “Attica native helping former inmate,” *The Daily News* (Batavia, NY), Mar. 9, 2015.

<sup>33</sup> “Listening In,” *The Daily News* (Batavia, NY), Mar 14, 2015.

These comments, which clearly distinguish “our community” from those incarcerated inside the prison, demonstrate the same us vs. them, insiders and outsiders mentality between townspeople and inmates that has existed since the prison’s inception and which was exacerbated by the 1971 uprising. George Williams, despite residing within the same town lines and spending 24 hours a day in the same building with hundreds of Attica natives, was never a part of the Attica community. He was merely an invisible outsider who took from the community without giving anything in return, a relationship which appeared to frustrate some residents of the majority Republican area on a moral level. In a sense, George Williams was a human embodiment of New York City, a city resented by many in upstate New York: an entity geographically and financially lumped together with Attica, despite the two areas having very little in common culturally.

Huber’s Kickstarter campaign, which raised \$5,800 for Williams, was later featured in the *New York Times* as the story came full circle and provided yet another example of the power of media. The article, published in December of 2015, included an update on George Williams, who is waiting to hear about the status of his barber’s license and hopes to open a shop in Harlem or Brooklyn where he can employ other ex-convicts. The article’s primary focus is Williams, but also includes the following quote from Huber, who currently lives in Batavia: “I wanted to show that the Attica community stood for more than what happened in that story...Not only to help George but to show there are many of us who care and wish nothing but the best for people who are unfortunate enough to end up in prison and want to change their lives.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Tom Robbins, “A Former Inmate, Beaten but Not Broken, Gets a Chance at Renewal,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Dec 11, 2015.

By reading an article published in a national newspaper and written from the perspective of an outsider, Huber was able to recognize where the town of Attica fits into the national narrative of race and mass incarceration. However, his statements about the *Times*' negative representation of Attica received some backlash in the *Daily News* online comments section from commenters who didn't believe the town had come across badly. Unreal, the same user who suggested giving money locally, attributed Huber's misreading to his being "a very misguided liberal-minded young man": "Why else would he believe that bad light was brought to his hometown of Attica because of what happened at Attica prison?" Unreal asks. "Because of the name? That would be like comparing Attica, N.Y., to Attica, Greece. Or saying that America is the worst country in the world because Obama is president." Unreal separates the prison from the town, defining them as two separate entities despite their geographic locations. He does not account for the fact that the majority of Attica residents are either employed at the prison, know somebody who is employed at the prison, or were affected by the uprising in some way. Perhaps the two entities are separate on paper, but in reality they are very much intertwined and impossible to compartmentalize. The discord between Huber's perception of Attica's image and Unreal's perception raises the question: How do we define Attica? Is it an ideological symbol? A place of employment? A site defined by a white identity, or a site defined by a black identity? It is urban or rural; local or national? Or, as *Daily News* reader Interested Observer suggests when he states that "maybe the guards don't represent Attica, but these comments do," is it a concrete historical manifestation of a tension that extends far beyond the walls and village limits of Attica itself?<sup>35</sup>

In fact, it is all of the above.

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<sup>35</sup> "Listening In," Mar 14, 2015.

## Conclusion

Nearly forty-five years have passed since Corrections Sergeant Edward Cunningham was shot to death by state police in the retaking of Attica, but another Sergeant Cunningham has since taken his place patrolling the very same cell block: his son, Mark. Every day at work, the younger Sergeant Cunningham passes bullet holes in the catwalk railings, a physical reminder of the tragedy that took place there on September 13, 1971 and claimed his father's life. Though the years have passed and many of the faces have been replaced by younger generations — both inmates and employees — not much else has changed inside Attica Correctional Facility. Even some of the faces are the same; older inmates have told Mark that they knew the first Sergeant Cunningham nearly 50 years prior.

Mark is not the only Cunningham to pick up where his father left off inside of Attica. Two of his brothers have also been employed at the prison, as well as the first Sergeant Cunningham's grandson. For many Attica men and women, Attica Correctional Facility still offers the promise of a career that will be, if not enjoyable, at least convenient and financially stable. An increase in pay for corrections officers, combined with the allure of a job requiring little education, has drawn a slightly more diverse workforce from Buffalo and Rochester in recent years. But although there are now black and Latino guards working alongside the white ones, an insider vs. outsider mentality still exists within the prison. "I always say, 'There's two teams in Attica, us and them,'" Don Almeter says. "Us being the civilians and the guards, and them being the inmates." While the racial disparities may not be quite as obvious as they were in

1971, the majority of inmates still hail from the state's largest cities, and the majority of guards from the rural areas surrounding Attica. Attica Correctional Facility is still a small pocket of urban America set in the middle of rural New York, and differences between the perspectives of Attica natives and the perspectives of Attica inmates still fuel cultural tensions between the two populations.

While the chances of another large-scale uprising are logistically slimmer now than they were in 1971 due to physical updates to the prison and a new team specifically assembled to quell any potential revolts, attitudes and interactions among inmates and guards have not become more peaceful or harmonious in the years since. Inmates and guards affected by the uprising were able to temporarily come together to unite against a common enemy as more information about the state's true role in the retaking and cover-up became public. However, the "state as the enemy" narrative did not spread far beyond those immediately affected, because readers read and retained only the information and perspectives that best aligned with their pre-existing opinions and biases. They fit what they learned into familiar narratives of inmates vs. townspeople; insiders vs. outsiders.

The dichotomies portrayed at the crux of these narratives — white vs. black, urban vs. rural, right vs. left — have been perpetuated by both local and national media coverage. Local coverage has interpreted the prison, and the men and women who work there, first and foremost in the context of the town. Any events that take place within Attica Correctional Facility, particularly incidents of violence, are considered through the smaller-scale lens of the community: how will this affect us directly? In contrast, national coverage of Attica over the years has placed the uprising in larger contexts such as racial unrest, the prisoners' rights



movement, and most recently, the problem of mass incarceration. For those people living in other areas of the country who may not be directly affected by incidents of violence or change within the prison, Attica has been a symbol of larger, nationwide social problems. While the local press still primarily focuses on how developments at Attica affect individuals, some recent articles have begun to include national context as well. However, the local media's coverage of Attica in a larger social context frames the prison guards who work there as pawns in a corrupt system rather than instigators of the corruption, as the national media suggests.

Attica has an undeniably unique and dramatic history that looms over the town and affects, to an extent, the structure and culture within the prison. It is a distinctive case study, but it is also representative of issues within the larger prison system and within the rural towns where prisons are housed. Rarely do prison case studies examine the effect of mass incarceration on these towns; the majority of scholarship focuses on the effect of mass incarceration on urban areas that supply the majority of the inmates. However, understanding the community surrounding a prison is integral to understanding how and why that prison functions. These relationships are more complicated and nuanced than you might think, and it is important to include both inmate and prison town resident perspectives when attempting to make sense of our prison system. Portraying this complicated relationship is more challenging for a journalist than simply fitting the story into a cut and dried, one-sided narrative, but more attempts to do so could be beneficial for everybody involved. Attica is not simply a local or national story; it is both a local and a national story. It is a story of blackness and whiteness, urban culture and rural culture. All aspects and perspectives must be included in journalistic coverage to truly tell the story in the most accurate way. The simplified dichotomies and tensions that exist within Attica today were

not solely caused by the events of the uprising itself; they were also caused by the ways the media covered the uprising. Polarizing coverage on both sides of the spectrum left Attica natives bitter and largely excluded from the national conversation about prison studies. It is crucial that their voices be heard, as they are the ones who experienced the riot firsthand and live the realities of the aftermath every day. It is equally as important that the voices of inmates be heard, as a feeling of invisibility and lack of a voice in the outside world is what led them to resort to such extreme measures in the first place.

Above all, Attica is a testament to the power of the media, as Malcolm Bell puts it, not only to shape news, but to elicit it as well. Journalism is not merely a reflection of contemporary attitudes and perspectives, it is a producer of contemporary attitudes and perspectives. The choices a journalist makes when assembling a news story can shape the way readers view that event and solidify that narrative as the dominant one. However, ultimately it is the readers who take their own meaning from the information presented to them. Therefore, Attica is not only been defined by interactions between the guards, inmates, and state officials. It is defined by the interaction of guards, inmates, state officials, journalists, and local and national readers, all of whom make their own meaning of the events that took place. The journalistic coverage surrounding Attica may be becoming more nuanced, as evidenced by recent local coverage, but this nuance is easily overridden by a human tendency to generalize and simplify stories for our own comfort and benefit. While journalistic coverage of the riot and its aftermath drew attention to important problems with our prison system that needed to be addressed, the trauma of the uprising likely could have been avoided altogether if the media had provided a voice for Attica inmates and guards prior to September 9, 1971.

Despite the fact that the Attica uprising occurred decades ago and that the majority of guards and inmates involved are either retired, released, or dead from old age, the riot is still relevant. Americans remain fascinated by the story of Attica because it reminds them of current social justice issues and rebellions happening today. Prison reform in recent years has become a part of larger movements, such as Black Lives Matter, which addresses police violence toward blacks, issues of racially imbalanced mass incarceration, and racial violence in general. But perhaps the most effective way to learn from the tragedy of Attica is not to frame it as a symbol within a broader narrative, which only perpetuates the very us vs. them mindset that led to the Attica uprising in the first place, but rather to take a closer look at the individuals and communities that were involved and have been affected by it and to listen to what they have to say.

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