Escape from the Carceral: Writing by American Prisoners, 1895-1916.

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Abstract
In Discipline and Punish Foucault argued that the carceral state is inescapable. But is this true? One answer can be found within the ultimate carceral institution: the American prison at the turn of the 20th century. This paper examines writing by American prisoners from between 1890 and 1915, and argues that prisoners' self-representations fit uneasily into the parameters of Foucault's carceral state: prisoners 'escaped' through religion, generic writing that defied progressive individuality, and the 'mirroring' of their audiences values, fears, and identity. In this way they blurred the distinction between 'self' and 'other,' 'delinquent' and 'normal' that Foucault believed arose inevitably in the modern carceral state.
Liberty's Prisoners examines how changing attitudes about work, freedom, property, and family shaped the creation of the penitentiary system in the United States. The first penitentiary was founded in Philadelphia in 1790, a period of great optimism and turmoil in the Revolution's wake. Those who were previously dependents with no legal standing—women, enslaved people, and indentured servants—increasingly claimed their own right to life, liberty, and happiness. A diverse cast of women and men, including immigrants, African Americans, and the Irish and Anglo-American poor, struggled.

There are over two million prisoners in America—men, women, and children who are confined to prisons, jails, or detention facilities. And despite the fact that they cannot walk to a GameStop or load up Steam, many of them play games. This week, Waypoint is devoting a substantial portion of our publishing schedule to exploring this part of games culture. We're calling it At Play in the Carceral State. Why not something simpler? Instead, we're interested in the wider American culture of discipline which includes surveillance, private security, prisons, and the larger criminal justice system. This is the "carceral state," a living array of infrastructure, institution, and policy that transforms the world into one of rules, borders, and confinement.