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Writing the Prison: Early National Prisoner Literacy in *The Narrative of the Imprisonment of John Maroney* (1832)  
Congregate Literacy

John Maroney, now forgotten, was one of the first inmates to publish a narrative based on his experience of incarceration in an American penitentiary. Sentenced to ten years' hard labor in 1821 for what he confesses was a drunken assault, Maroney spent a decade in two influential sites of early prison reform: the New York State Prison at Greenwich and Auburn Penitentiary in upstate New York. Published a year after his release, *The Narrative of the Imprisonment of John Maroney* (Newburgh, 1832) innovatively blends the conversion genre—an established genre of life writing that traced a convert's religious awakening—with the prison exposé, a genre barely legible in 1820s that would more fully emerge by the 1850s to expose the horrors inside the nation's supposedly benevolent penitentiary system. Maroney likens his literacy endeavor to Shakespearean tragedy on the title page inscription, casting himself as Hamlet's ghost, revealer of forbidden truths ("To tell the secrets of my prison-house, / I could a tale unfold, whose lightest word / Would harrow up thy soul.")<sup>1</sup> As such, the text demonstrates how both religious conversion and incarceration could occasion a radical kind of literacy project, one that gave prisoners an opportunity for self-making. By penning his story, Maroney imagined a way to reshape his identity from someone "so unworthy, in a civil point of view" (3) to a prophetic voice of authority.

This is not a literacy acquisition narrative, but literacy is its recurring theme: Maroney, a farmer turned businessman by trade, could read and write before he was imprisoned. But

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<sup>1</sup> From *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (1.v.13-16).

Maroney takes a keen interest in prisoners' illicit communication networks, contrasts prison schools in two influential early national penitentiaries, and increasingly documents his own reading practices. With its detailed focus on prison discipline and prisoners' efforts to circumvent authority, Maroney's *Narrative* usefully demonstrates how prison reform practices, especially those that restricted inmate writing and reading, generated creative literacy responses by inmates, from reading smuggled texts to composing poems and committing verse to memory to circumvent writing bans. And by emphasizing the impact of a former inmate's published exposé upon his own fate, Maroney's *Narrative* usefully demonstrates a practice I name "congregate literacy"—the process by which one inmate's literacy acts inspire other prisoners' literacy acts. Ultimately, my reading cautions us not to draw too fine a line between hidden literacy and public print culture.

### Early Prison Reform

Maroney's decade-long incarceration occurred as early national reformers furiously debated best practices in prison discipline and management. After 1790, a new theory of punishment—the "penitentiary"—began replacing stockades, brands, whips, and public execution, and widespread penitentiary construction began in earnest in the 1820s. Influenced by emerging scientific theories, penitentiaries were designed to remove prisoners from corrupting influences, to restrict an inmate's interactions to select keepers and inspectors chosen for their benevolence and humanity, and to transform the supposedly unregulated body of the criminal through steady labor and regular habits. The first prison where Maroney served time, the State Prison at Greenwich (nicknamed "Newgate" after the infamous British prison), had been erected in 1796 under the vision of famed reformer Thomas Eddy, who dreamed of eliminating the barbarity of public punishment and the disorder of European prisons. But the prison Maroney

experienced was a far cry from the institution heralded by reformers, and the narrative turns a sharp eye to Newgate's corruption, waste, and mismanagement, all of which made inmates "ripe for rebellion, massacre, and plunder" (9).

After public scrutiny of Newgate's overcrowding and corruption, the prison was marked for closure, and Maroney was transferred in 1825 to the recently erected penitentiary at Auburn, New York. Here, Maroney experienced the famed "congregate system" of punishment (also known as the "Auburn model"): male inmates were kept in enforced silence at all times, marched in strict lockstep, labored in communal prison workhouses making goods for private contractors, and confined to small solitary cells at night. Under the "congregate" model of prison labor, the state sought to further reduce costs by having older inmates train new inmates in the factory-style workhouses. Auburn was, in Foucault's words, a "complete and austere institution," purpose-built to completely transform occupants through moderation, obedience, silence, and above all, incessant daily labor. Maroney emphasizes the profound isolation of Auburn's regime as well as the emotional impact of the penitentiary's restrictive policies against speaking, reading, and writing: "no talking; no making motions or signals of any kind; no laughing . . . [Inmates] are not allowed to write or receive communications from any of their friends, or articles of any kind not even chalk, pencils . . . without permission from the keeper. I often thought that we were in worse bondage than the children of Israel, when under their Egyptian task-master. They cut off all intercourse, and made us solitary beings, in the midst of more than five hundred prisoners" (17). Facing the judgment of his community after emerging from ten years' incarceration, Maroney wrote to recast his life, tip the scales of justice, and offset years of isolation. By depositing his narrative for copyright and publication, Maroney's literacy act asserted the place

of prisoners' voices in public discourse, weighing in on national print debates on prison discipline.

### Maroney's Conversion Trajectory

The text did not circulate widely in its day: no other editions or extant copies beyond the edition in Harvard-Andover Theological Library are yet known. Despite its limited circulation, Maroney's choice of publisher was a good fit for the narrative's blend of religious discourse and prison exposé. Charles Cushman began his career working for the New York Tract society, which pioneered the distribution of cheap evangelical tracts; he later moved to Newburgh and ran the local newspaper. Given Cushman's background, it's no surprise he took an interest in Maroney's tale: prison discipline was a newsworthy topic in the early national era, and inmates could recast the conventional conversion plot from sin to redemption in compelling ways. By 1800, the conversion narrative was one of the most recognizable forms of life writing. Conversion narratives enabled authors from diverse backgrounds to shape the vicissitudes of their lives into a recognizable and marketable form: a journey from doubt, sin and hardship, through tests and trials, to faith and redemption. And while Maroney's loosely structures his account on his religious conversion behind bars, ultimately, the text seems more interested in exposing the "sins" of early national penitentiaries—corruption, mismanagement, inhumanity, violence—than in documenting Maroney's crisis of faith or lamenting the dangers of dissipated living. Instead, Maroney uses the conversion plot to explore more modern concerns fueled by scientific theories of the day: how environments shape or influence behavior, how the self, in a different environment, may become something different, better or worse.

Each period of Maroney's conversion trajectory is shaped by reading, from the dangerous reading that serves as evidence of his alleged dissipation in the early part of the narrative, to the

clandestine reading that occupied his time at Newgate, to the attentive Bible reading that demonstrates his change of heart in the last section of the narrative. Maroney states at numerous times that wayward reading practices led him astray, citing his fondness for “popular sceptical” publications (6).<sup>2</sup> This shoddy foundation, Maroney implies, inclined his heart to resist Newgate’s efforts to reform him. But, as his account makes clear, youthful reading practice was hardly the main reason for Newgate’s ineffective influence. Rev. John Stanford, the tireless Baptist crusader, promoter of cheap religious tracts, and chaplain of New York’s state prisons, is in Maroney’s text transformed into “Daddy Sanford,” a distant, ineffective (and somewhat creepy) moral instructor. The pioneering school that Stanford supervised in Newgate, whereby older convicts instructed the younger convicts in reading and writing, was, by Maroney’s account, too rudimentary to have any meaningful impact. By contrast, a single letter from Maroney’s wife informing him that one of his children has died prompts Maroney’s desire to reform far more than all of Newgate’s efforts to discipline and reform him (11). Despite the motivating influence of family letters, such correspondence would soon be banned altogether, fueled by belief that inmates families were part of the corrupting influence that led inmates to lives of crime in the first place.

#### Clandestine Literary Acts

Maroney’s text further documents the prisons’ networks of clandestine literacy acts by explaining how illicit reading material made its way inside the state penitentiary. He describes how newspapers were smuggled in by convict clerks and even swiped from the hats of unobservant keepers (10). Historically, prisoners have resisted communications restrictions

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<sup>2</sup> A reference to pamphlets such as Thomas Paine’s 1791 *Rights of Man*, which defended the French Revolution, and Paine’s 1794 Deist tract, *Age of Reason*.

through numerous gestures: banging on water pipes, tapping alphabetical codes on cell walls, developing elaborate hand signals, passing each other notes (called “kites”) out windows and cell bars, or down ventilation pipes via string. In Newgate, Maroney and his fellow inmates subvert one of the core tenets of prison reform—controlling inmates’ relationship to the outside world—consuming a steady trove of smuggled newspapers, which enabled them access to the latest news of the world. With access to press coverage of the latest scandals and controversies, inmates could even be kept informed as to how the penitentiary itself was being discussed and debated in news of the day.

Maroney’s elevation of one specific text, *Inside Out*, helpfully complicates the distinction between hidden and public literacy. Maroney describes at length how inmates smuggled in and shared a copy of *Inside Out*, an early prison exposé published in 1823 by a former prisoner in Newgate, William Coffey. Maroney confirms the presence of the prohibited book behind Newgate’s walls: “one Coffey, a man of talents. . . , published a book which he entitled, *State Prison turned inside out*, which was read in my room.”<sup>3</sup> But Maroney equally emphasizes the smuggled text’s wider impact: he credits the book for closing Newgate prison and for changing the trajectory of his life: “This book was, I am told, a principal cause of that prison being broken up. . . This book, many of my readers will recollect, after a considerable opposition of some days, was allowed to be read in the House of Assembly, after which about 100 convicts, of whom I was one, were transported to Auburn, and the rest to the new prison at Sing Sing, in the Spring of 1825” (10). Even his sentences emphasize the book’s agency through repetition: (“This

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<sup>3</sup> Coffey, W. A. *Inside Out; or, An Interior View of the New-York State Prison*. New York: James Costigan, 1823. On Coffey and early convict writing, see Schorb, *Reading Prisoners: Literature, Literacy, and the Transformation of American Punishment, 1700-1845* (Rutgers UP, 2014).

book,” . . . “This book,” . . . “This book,” . . . ). Not only did Coffey’s *Inside Out* lead to the demise of Newgate prison, according to Maroney, it catalyzed Maroney’s own transfer to Auburn, and hence (by the logic of the conversion narrative), made possible his religious conversion and personal reformation, inspiring his own decision to pen and publish his own narrative. In *Reading Prisoners*, I name this a “congregate literacy effect,” a play on the congregate model of prison discipline, to describe a process in which one inmate catalyzes another inmate’s literacy acts. Depositing his narrative for copyright and publication, Maroney asserted the place of prisoners’ voices in public debates about prison discipline and management, likely hoping that own account might impact other’s lives as did Coffey’s narrative. Might his pamphlet get smuggled into another prison and topple its bricks, inspiring other inmates in return?

Newspaper accounts substantiate some of Maroney’s anecdote about Coffey’s text, with multiple sources reporting that in March 1824, a tense debate broke out in the New York legislature when an assemblyman sought read Coffey’s testimony during hearings on potential mismanagement in the prison. But, according to the 1824 newspaper accounts, other legislators cut his attempt short, observing that a former convict’s words had no bearing, and that a former prisoner’s civil rights did not extend to offering testimony before a state legislature.<sup>4</sup> Maroney’s *Narrative* deserves credited for bringing this lost episode back to public memory, insisting (correctly) that debates over Coffey’s *Inside Out* made it to the floor of the New York legislature. But no sources support his claim that Coffey’s text was the prime catalyst for closing

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<sup>4</sup> “Legislature of New York (Reported for the Albany Daily Advertiser),” *Statesman* (New York, NY), March 16, 1824; “Legislature of New York, Reported for the New-York American,” *American* (New York, NY), March 11, 1824.

Newgate. Skeptics might therefore dismiss Maroney's account of Coffey's influence as fictive, but this downplays the selective nature of the newspapers themselves as conveyers of unbiased history. (For example, the *New-York American* recapped the Coffey debate with the opening assessment, "Very little business of public importance was transacted in the Assembly to-day.") Maroney asserts that *Inside-Out* had impactful influence on the trajectory of his life, a claim that no newspaper account can meaningfully disprove. Rather than read the anecdote as fictive, we might instead see it as radical practice: by asserting the power of *Inside Out* to abolish Newgate prison, Maroney is deploying what José Muñoz and others describe as the process of utopian imagining, a practice deployed by minority communities to anticipate liberatory futures that are not yet here, not yet possible.<sup>5</sup>

### The Literacy Narrative

The literacy narrative dominates the later portions of the narrative, evident in Maroney's return to the subject of moral instruction, prison education, religious conversion, and his forays into poetic verse-writing. Here, Maroney compares his Auburn prison education favorably to that at Newgate, documenting the more meaningful instruction he received under the tutelage of Rev. Jared Curtis and his Sunday school, led by theology students from a nearby seminar. [Maroney's is the only extant prison memoir that describes firsthand the prison schools at Newgate and Auburn.] Under the tutelage of Auburn's instructors, Maroney begins to read his Bible more deliberately and attentively. This increased Biblical literacy leaves a mark on the structure of the narrative itself, evidenced by Maroney's frequent insertions of close reading, quotations, and scriptural exegesis. Significantly, a pattern emerges, whereby Maroney inserts lines from poems

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<sup>5</sup> Jose Munoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009).



composed after episodes of attentive close reading, linking Biblical literacy to fueling other literacy acts: “A short time after this I composed the following verses while lying on my bed at night,” (29) or later, “I composed at several times, some verses, two of which I here insert” (32), or later, “[t]hat night I composed the following verses, which I cannot forbear inserting” (34).

More subversively, Maroney’s *Narrative* suggests that the prison’s ban on writing and on correspondence catalyzes his literacy efforts. “As in the latter Prison no paper was allowed,” Maroney writes, “I could not make notes or memorandums of my thoughts and feelings, let alone the keeping of a journal of my experience” (32). Strictly speaking, Maroney did not write poetry while in prison: he generated verse and committed lines and experiences to memory because he needed a way around Auburn’s prohibitions against writing, and needed a way to record his thoughts and feelings. Thus, while the sentiment of the poetry is mostly conventional, his foray into verse (and later, memoir) must also be recognized as a strategic resistance to Auburn’s writing ban.

Thus, the text challenges us not to rest on a too-simple contrast between “hidden” literacy and “public” literacy. In *Maroney’s Meditations*, clandestine literacy practices mobilize the inmate’s public voice as prison reformist as well as his poetic efforts as exemplary convert. Hidden copies of former inmate William Coffey’s *Inside Out* and smuggled newspapers are not “opposed” to the public voice of authority that Maroney seeks to claim: they authorize this voice, serve as evidence for his claims, and even inspire his acts of writing. Prohibitions against writing prompt Maroney to commit experiences to verse in order to recollect them later, and to publicize these experiences and poems in his public *Narrative*. Disallowed behind bars, Maroney’s literacy, both orthodox and clandestine, gives him explanatory power over the trials, monotony,

pain, and struggles of his life, and a path to transform his own shame into a fantasy of public citizenship.