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The Rhetoric of Mass Incarceration

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“The Rhetoric of Mass Incarceration”

A Conversation with Dr. David Coogan,
Associate Professor of English, VCU Department of English

with
Dr. Kevin Farley,
Humanities Collections Librarian,
Virginia Commonwealth University Libraries

“When I say writing is a sacred thing, I mean that writing is a way of taking yourself seriously, that you have something that nobody else has, and if you keep it to yourself, including the pain you have – especially the pain – if you keep that inside of you, then you’re hiding something that’s potentially healing not only for you but for anybody who might be privileged enough to listen.”

David Coogan

Professor David Coogan teaches rhetorical theory and criticism and composition, as well as service learning, for the VCU Department of English. For the last ten years, he has also taught and collaborated with writers in the Richmond City Jail, in a program called *Open Minds*:

OPEN MINDS is a college program sponsored by the Richmond City Sheriff’s Office and Virginia Commonwealth University offering dual enrollment classes held at the Richmond City Jail. These classes challenge participants to think critically about the social problems embedded in our current criminal justice system. All students learn to dialogue respectfully and imaginatively about their shared humanity; to write creatively and analytically in search of common ground; and to link the liberal arts to personal experience in meaningful ways so that we may work together to build positive change. (<http://www.openminds.vcu.edu>)

In his published and forthcoming work on the importance of writing for social and personal transformation – *Electronic Writing Centers: Computing the Field of Composition*, *The Public Work of Rhetoric: Citizen Scholars and Community Engagement* (co-edited with John Ackerman), *Writing Our Way Out: Memoirs from Jail*, and *Memoirs of Mass Incarceration: The Rhetoric of Revolutionaries, Witnesses and Survivors* (forthcoming in 2017) – Professor Coogan explores ways of finding oneself in the midst of extreme confusion, guilt, social injustice, and searing pain.

From his work with writers in prison, he has gathered profound insights into the writing process for those who are often silenced, and has both taught with writers and learned from them as well. In the following conversation, he expands on his experiences and describes the nature of this important work.

Kevin Farley,
Humanities Collections Librarian,
VCU Libraries

Kevin Farley (KF): Dr. Coogan, thank you for talking with VCU Libraries about your work with prisoners in Richmond. What are your goals for this project?

David Coogan (DC): For the last ten years I've been teaching a writing workshop at the Richmond City Justice Center – a writing workshop in memoir. It started with an idea I had to see if writing could help people change their lives. Then there was a violent crime in my neighborhood, and this question sort of came right up against the edge of the university and the community for me – literally it was at my doorstep, in a park near my house. And that made me wonder if the people who committed crimes – really all of them, every single one of them – intended to do something to violate people. And of course the answer had to be no.

Then the question became: could at least half of them, if given the chance to analyze their actions in a trusting community, come to understand their earlier selves? Could they then change themselves? That was the question I brought into the jail in 2006, and I got close to a group of men who really wanted to answer that question. And they wouldn't stop answering it, even after they left the jail and got sent to prisons all throughout Virginia – so we became pen pals working together on this through writing.

Five years later, they were all released, more or less – some longer, some much quicker; but we stayed together as a writing collective, and we wrote a book together, called *Writing Our Way Out: Memoirs from Jail*. The book explains this journey that we embarked on together, where we set out to answer that question in a writing class that really became more of a class about living. Writing became the vehicle for us to open up the questions about: how and why we live, and how we can make life better for everybody? I thought it would be possible that some people would really welcome this opportunity to write a new chapter in their lives, but I was thankfully, and just amazingly, bowled over by the complexity of it. I had given myself something like six weeks to do it over the summer! And people can change a lot in six weeks on a TV show maybe, but not in reality!

So luckily for me, I found writers who were really committed to the process, and we ended up teaching each other along the way about how to answer those questions, and all the other questions that came up: like, how do you do this work ethically, with high aesthetic standards, in ways that meet everybody's goals and expectations?

From that writing workshop came the formation of *Open Minds*, which is a program I helped to found and create that now brings arts and humanities classes into the jail. These classes are all different but come from that same spirit of collective inquiry into the large questions that we all have of life. Why is there injustice in the world? What's wrong with prisons? How does structural racism contribute to the crises that we're seeing today, not only in our jails but in these eruptions of violence in cities and communities now everywhere in America? *Open Minds* classes

are really very much welcomed at the Justice Center, just like I was welcomed by like-minded people⁴ who happen to be incarcerated at the old city jail. The faculty and the students from VCU are just like the people incarcerated who really want to grow and help not only themselves but also help the rest of us grow into a deeper understanding of our obligations and opportunities with one another.

From that work that I've been doing – as a teacher, as an organizer, as a writer – I kept the questions going. I started to read literature by prisoners, because before I started this work I didn't know too much about prison literature. And we don't have much incentive to think about this, because prisons hide things away, and out of sight is out of mind.

KF: Did you find it was difficult for the writers to trust the act of writing? Did they feel that their stories might not be perceived as worth putting down on paper, turning their experiences into a real thing that you could see on the page? How do you approach that aspect of things?

DC: That's a great question. Trusting in the process took time. We had to build trust amongst each other. I would like to say it was a very focused thing, with just ten people who decided to do it, but it was completely chaotic, with ten people this week, another fifteen the next. It was the same invitation to trust but over a long, amorphous process, over and over again!

But I think, really, when people decide that they want to change, and they want to stop getting incarcerated, they're open to inquiry. And I keep using that word because that's a really important touchstone for me. I didn't come into this with any answers as to how to fix these problems. I don't know still, really, how to fix all of the interlocking problems, like poverty or structural racism or drug addiction, and so on. But what I do know how to do is help people learn how to write. To be a writer is really a sacred thing, the way I look at writing, anyway. Writing is not about communicating an idea that you already have; writing is not about fulfilling some program of how to write beautiful, aesthetically pleasing work; writing is not even dependent upon research.

When I say writing is a sacred thing, I mean that writing is a way of taking yourself seriously, that you have something that nobody else has, and if you keep it to yourself, including the pain you have, especially the pain, if you keep that inside of you, then you're hiding something that's potentially healing not only for you but for anybody who might be privileged enough to listen to it. And when I say it's a privilege to listen to people in their hour of sorrow and pain, I'm dead serious – I don't take that lightly.

And the second I think I know what people are going through, and who's a good writer and all that stuff, that's the day I have to stop teaching at the jail: because when I ask someone to share how they were physically abused, how they became

drug addicted, how they struggled with having no money in the house when their parents were high, or how they got shot and how they recovered from that, regrets they had for everything from dropping out of school to shooting at somebody – I understand that they're not going to tell me about those things to brag about it, they're not going to tell me so they can tell a war story, and I'm not asking for that, because you don't have to put my hand in the wound for me to know that you're hurt; I don't need to touch the blood, and I don't need to see anything you don't want me to see. I'm really clear with people about that; it's not the drama that motivates me, it's your motivations and what you're learning on the way as you're caught up in drama. And you find that some people have been honing their stories for years, and they just didn't know it. They've been dwelling on these events for years.

KF: So there's a voice inside of them, that's been telling the story all along, but no one has ever asked them to share it?

DC: Yeah – that's the key part, because you're held accountable by society to a version of events that's damaging to you: you deserved it [the punishment]; you were abused because you were a jerk; you're an addict because you're a loser; or whatever the self-talk is that can be harmful. So when somebody asks you to share what happened and where you're going in life, and that person is not going to judge you but is going to help you find a way of discovery, that's a key difference. I can't diagnose anybody; I can't say: well, your problem is that you have an attachment disorder! I have great respect for the people that can do that, but that's not what I mean by telling a story. What I mean is finding the community that can help you discover the agency [to tell your own story] that's been eluding you all your life.

KF: What do you think it is about narrative and structuring a story that can be healing? When you say that they start telling their story and it can be healing for them, is it seeing the trajectory of a story? Or even just that they themselves become *the* speaker, and with that comes the power of self-knowledge – is something like that going on?

DC: I do think something like that's going on. When you become the author of your story, you're taking control of it from the people who would *author* you. So if you've been told that this is what school dropouts are, or this is what rape victims are, or any category – once you put someone into a category, the story comes trotting along behind it; and what you need to do is reach your hand back, and tell that story [from others] to sit back a little bit, go back by the curb, because I'm trying to leave that category.

It comes down to questions like: Why are you incarcerated? Or, how did you get here? And then people would tell a *literal* story about the process. But I'm wondering more how did you get to this part of your life, where this has become a part of your life to be incarcerated? Do you see what I mean? The facts are not the same

thing as the story. Or I would ask, did you do anything wrong? Because how do I know the circumstances? And again, I don't have an answer key; it doesn't matter what I think, really; what matters is how the person determines what's right and wrong. The ethics of the story matter.

And so telling stories is a liberating way of doing this work, because in a story you have to have an agent that seems to know what he or she is doing, and is trustworthy; and basically when we read stories, we want to be able to trust the person telling the story, and if we don't then we wonder, why? And sometimes that disconnect has to do with the values that either side attaches to what makes a good story, and other times it's just an effect of the way the story is told.

I should say that I value stories that are told for healing as opposed to revenge. If you're telling your story because you feel betrayed, and you can't work through your betrayal, and all you want to do is tell the story to rub somebody else's nose in it – I'm not your guy. Not because I don't think you have a right to feel the way you do, but because at some point that's an unproductive emotion, to be stuck there, forever angry. Related to this is that you have to try your best to make it a compelling story. I do try to teach people how to pay attention to the words they choose, to the way they characterize themselves and others, to the type of plot details they reveal. If the person you are angry with becomes pure two dimensional, there's a good chance your emotions are preventing you from seeing clearly. It may not be time to write. In other words, the aesthetic is important for me because that's like a third space [after time and place] that we can all visit; and to be in that third space is to be free. I want the writers to learn how to create a free and liberating space, in narrative, where they can author their own story. But I recognize that this is difficult and time consuming.

When I started to read memoirs by prisoners throughout the twentieth century, I was finding pretty much the same thing – that although people would be writing at different historical time periods, they all seemed to have the same goal in mind: they wanted to be free, but the real bulwark between them and freedom was not these prison walls, it was these internal prisons, these ideological prisons, these cultural prisons. In the writing they shaped the art of liberation. And those aesthetics and politics have changed since the 1960s: the way we think of prison has changed. And, of course, the real prisons have changed; they've gotten bigger and worse.

KF: There's a strong strand of prison literature in the last century – even a vein of the literature about the fear of imprisonment, the dread expressed in novels that one could end up there, the looming threat of that. But I'm not sure in the twenty-first century that we're still seeing that, seeing memoirs like that as part of our cultural dialogue – do you see it that way as well?

DC: Yes, it's changed in several ways. I think you're referring to the long 1960s, the revolutionary era, when we first started to openly contend with the aftermath of the Civil Rights Era; and then the growth of our prisons, which all started with the war on crime in the 1970s under President Nixon. The memoirs of that time period had a different goal in mind than the prison memoirs today. Because they really believed that they could change the world, right? They could change society, and start that by changing prisons, start by liberating oppressed people everywhere, and that ends with a new world. And so, for them, to write from prison with a vision of revolution was to really challenge readers who, again, to go back to the trust issue – if you're going to follow along with that story, then you've got to be willing to consider that capitalism oppresses; that patriarchy oppresses; that racism oppresses.

That was both the compelling part of those memoirs – Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*, George Jackson's *Soledad Brother* – that's what made those books really motivating and compelling to people, because we lived in a far more liberal time period where people on the outside really did think that way, because the anti-prison movement was a part of the anti-war movement and the free speech movement and black power movement.

So there were all these forces working together, and the prison memoirs of that time period were critical of rehabilitation programs that would really just outfit you better to “pass,” or to tolerate an unjust society. Why would I want to be rehabilitated [the thinking went] and learn how to work and accept capitalism? Those were the kinds of questions those writers asked. And what these writers discovered at the end of this period in the 1970s was that, unfortunately, not only would the world not change, but it would double-down on the very idea of change by quadrupling the size of prisons to contain the problems that these writers had articulated as worthy of our shared attention. That's how we went from incarcerating about 300,000 people in the early 1970s to 2.3 million in about thirty years. Prison memoir changed because of these new warehouses that we created, these places that are ever-expanding and ever-increasing in their scope of problems that they contain. Prison became the place where anything that really didn't make sense anymore in our public life could go to live.

Writers from the revolutionary time would say: “All right, well, I stole because I don't want to be a part of the capitalist system; and I don't even consider it stealing because the system is unfair.” So those guys like George Jackson could be in prison for any amount of time based not so much on their “crime” but on their politics. But what happened in the 80s and the 90s, under Presidents Reagan and Clinton, with the war on drugs and “Three Strikes You're Out,” is we increased the amount of time each person was incarcerated, and the range of offenses [that could lead to incarceration]. Writers like Nathan McCall, Evans Hopkins, and others in this time period were faced with a new challenge: the movements were dying out, and there's a whole bunch of reasons for that that I'm not going to get into; part

of it was self-inflicted wounds, and a lot of it was forces from without. But in any event, the movements that some writers would have wanted to develop, were gone. Where do you go now?

By and large what I find with prison memoirists in the 80s and 90s is that they were not seeking social justice through collective action. What they end up doing, is looking around at the horror of this system, and witnessing to the loss of human rights from that deprivation, for themselves and for their people, but without recourse to any straightforward or collectivist identity that the revolutionary movements provided. So that's what makes the 80s and 90s really most compelling to me is that, from these cavernous warehouses, these cold and echoing places, you're writing not to join an existing movement that can liberate you, but to discover your own path to your self-determination. And, you know, a lot of times it's kind of shaky: you don't know if it could exist. Because the prison terms are getting much longer, and the war on drugs is surrounding you on all sides, with people suffering through addiction and getting little help, who are incarcerated for trivial reasons and they're angry about that.

KF: I'm wondering in your work, through the memoir-writing project, how do the writers get to that healing place, that safe place where you can go and explore things? How do they recover their voices?

DC: I think that, if we're talking about the people I teach now, for the writers I know it's more a matter of constructing the *right* voice – not recovering it, necessarily.

KF: That's interesting – how would you describe that?

DC: To recover a voice would imply that you've lost it, or that it was covered over, like it's a thing; or like it had an essence, or like a flower that is always in bloom but just happened to be covered over by a dark pot – and nobody could really see the beauty of the flower, but somehow it survived for decades and never crumbled. But I come at this from the point of view of rhetoric, and in rhetoric you're constructing a character that's more or less persuasive. And there's ways to do that, whether it's story or argument. But the rhetorical process is about addressing somebody, or some group, or some world – it's about finding your persuasiveness in community with others: *there's never not others*. Even if you don't directly address them, you're still surrounded by voices. So I like to think of the healing moment as having the opportunity to construct the voice you need *now* to become more fully yourself moving forward. Voice is a tricky concept!

KF: It sometimes seems that the message is: These people have nothing to tell us, we don't need to wonder about what they have to say. I'm not sure if "redeeming" is the right word, but how do projects like yours allow for the development of that future self, for healing?

DC: *Redeeming* is one of those words, like rehabilitating, that can have a lot of fraught associations that may or may not be productive. “Redeeming” could be psychological, it could be spiritual, it could be social and political – and it could be all those things at the same time. So the people that are incarcerated, who don’t have an opportunity to construct a voice or share their story; or the ones who don’t even know that they have something to share – what all of them have in common – and also with the people on the outside, who assume they can’t learn anything from those in prison – what both sides share is this incuriosity about what they could make together. And to be incurious is to ultimately be ignorant – because you don’t know what could happen, you don’t know what you could create! And when we allow other people to construct our stories for us, I fear that the result is, too often, exactly that – this incuriosity that can lead to ignorance, or at least it can perpetuate the wounds; or perpetuate the violence that creates the prisons. And that may be a strong word, but I think it’s in the ballpark when we think of what it’s taken to incarcerate over 2.3 million people.

When you say to yourself, no matter which party you vote for, that it’s all right to send those people away, well you’ve already made a mistake – or I’ll put it this way, you’ve already lost an opportunity. Because as soon as you say “they,” *that’s the lost opportunity* – you’ve already put large groups of people into a category of the unredeemable, the un-healable. And that’s how rhetoric can be used, by characterizing people in ways that control the storyline.

Shaka Senghor’s book, *Writing my Wrongs*, is an inspiring read, because he faces himself, in the worst moment, in prison, in isolation, and he gets a letter from his son – who’s ten years old, or maybe younger. And his son says, “Dad, I get angry too sometimes, but mom says I have to learn to control my anger so I don’t end up in prison like you.” And Shaka realizes in that moment that murder could be his legacy. And he faces himself: how did he get here?

It’s a mistake to think you know somebody’s story just by the situation they’re in, because you’re robbing them of the chance to be the author of their story – and you’re robbing yourself of the chance to learn. And don’t you want to learn? Don’t you want to know how Shaka Senghor became not only a victim of the War on Drugs but someone who victimized, who killed, another man?

You have to be patient, and look at the details, and not just think you know the situation. When you’re not given the chance to construct the voice you need, to name that pain: wow, that’s going to kill you. I think we all need to heal. And until we confront what we’ve done, in constructing a prison system designed to silence people, and incarcerate their problems, which are ultimately our problems, we won’t heal. Shaka Senghor’s problems with drugs, racism, poverty, family instability, street violence, and the criminal justice system do not belong to him. They belong to us.

We all make mistakes, we all need chances to grow, and I don't think any of us wants to be locked into one story about our lives, whether in prison or not. We want the freedom to be able to grow.

KF: I have a question about these memoirs and how literature is taught and defined. There's been so much growth in the last few decades to open the literary canon, and how literature is taught in English departments, to be more representative of voices that were silenced. And I think that's very true of VCU, which has a very open approach to the literary arts. How do you see projects like yours to foster openness in studying literature?

DC: If literature isn't helping you in living, it's probably doing something wrong – in the way it's either being taught, or curated. Literature has always had a connection to living, and ethical issues, and spiritual concerns, and so on; and also social and political issues. I think the mistake that people make is assuming that any one group of books is locked into one thing. The other problem, that's sort of related to this, is when so many people spend so much time defining what aesthetic merit is – and too little time testing the merits of their claim in the mettle of communities that actually need help – then the disconnect between academia and the community is harmful. Outside of university communities, I find people want literature for living. So if you're a critic spending too much time working on literature not for living, not for building community, not for bringing hope, not for inspiring, not for bridging gaps, not for social justice, then at some point you've probably lost what I would consider the true nature of how the literature originally came about. Take Charles Dickens – solidly in the canon! But Dickens had a great connection to the social issues of his time, including poverty and capitalist excess. Or Oscar Wilde who was persecuted for his sexuality, who later went to prison. Or Walt Whitman whose vision of a diverse and inclusive America is still radical. No matter which era, or country, you go to – we see literary artists who could help us with our lives, because the problems that they addressed are still the problems we address.

The real question is not, who's the better writer – who has more aesthetic merit, who deserves to be in the canon. I find that debate unproductive. The real question is: how are we using literature to increase empathy and create a more just society? Those are the reasons that the people at the jail that I know want to study literature. Often those are the same reasons why students at our university want to study literature. And when I look back at my education in literature, when I was a college student, those were the moments – whether I was reading Frank Norris or Upton Sinclair – when I was the most excited about what I was proposing to do with my life. The categorizing of literary time periods or the curating of literary works without regard to these vital questions risks making English departments like those wings in encyclopedic museums that no one bothers to visit. Literature that's taught by people who care about the full human experience, the lived

experience of this life of ours – if the people who are teaching this material have that in mind, then we would get past a lot of these debates.

But I take your point that for too long we have been inattentive to the voices outside the dominant, typically white, male, middle or upper class experience. And you are right. Prison literature, which has so many African-American voices in it, does correct that. I hope this new book I'm working on, *The Rhetoric of Mass Incarceration: The Rhetoric of Revolutionaries, Witnesses, and Survivors*, can be a conduit for that struggle and offer ways readers can get involved in joining it. These memoirs have for generations been trying to help people understand how our shared public life could be better. Nothing will get better by building more prisons.