



Photo of Leon Dash by Kate McQueen

Scholar Practitioner Q+A . . .

An Interview with Leon Dash

Kate McQueen

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, United States

Leon Dash won a Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Journalism in 1995 for “Rosa Lee: Poverty and Survival in Washington,” an eight-part *Washington Post* series that profiled a grandmother from the capitol’s underclass, caught in a cycle of drug addiction, prostitution, and petty crime. Within a year, Dash developed the series into a well-received book, *Rosa Lee: A Mother and Her Family in Urban America* (1996). And by 1999, Rosa Lee was named one of New York University’s top 100 examples of reporting in the twentieth century.

It’s easy to credit the depth, nuance, and ultimate success of *Rosa Lee* to Dash’s persistent style of immersion journalism. He spent four years with Rosa Lee Cunningham and her family, observing and interviewing them through a careful methodology designed to penetrate what Dash calls a subject’s “public mask.”

Dash spent more than three decades developing this particular brand of reporting. Born in New Bedford, Massachusetts in 1944 and raised in New York City, Dash began working at the *Post* in the mid-1960s while a student at Howard University. He moved up the ranks from copy aide to general assignment reporter, foreign correspondent, and West African Bureau Chief, before landing a position on Bob Woodward’s prestigious Project Unit in 1984.

There Dash was able to focus on long-term projects that explored controversial intersections of race and poverty in America. For his first project—a six-part series on adolescent childbearing—Dash spent a year living in D.C.’s poverty-stricken Washington Heights neighborhood, cultivating relationships with dozens of young parents and their families in order to understand the motivations for childbirth among poor, black inner-city teens. The series was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and later developed into the book, *When*

Children Want Children: The Urban Crisis of Teenage Childbearing (1989). It paved the way for projects on other controversial subjects—drug use by D.C. prison guards, the evolution of young male killers, and intergenerational criminal activity, as reported in *Rosa Lee*.

In 1998, Dash left the *Post* to take a joint faculty position in journalism and Afro-American Studies at the University of Illinois. He also holds affiliations with the Center for Advanced Study, the Center for African Studies, the Institute of Government and Public Affairs, the College of Law, and a Swanlund Chair, the university's highest endowed title.

I interviewed Dash in person in at the University of Illinois on February 27, 2017, about the nature of doing journalism in academia and the development of long-term immersion projects, including his current book. As one of his former students, it was a unique pleasure to turn the audio recorder in his direction. Our conversation has been edited for length.

McQueen: It's been a while since we've had a book from you, but I happen to know that you are currently working on a new project with the working title *Defining Moments in Black and White*, about the American sense of ethnicity. Can you tell me more about it?

Dash: That's the aggravating thing about working in academe. You can only work in spurts. I did a lot of interviewing over the winter break. And then classes began and we need to meet about this, we need to meet about that—can't we just do it on email? I always structure my classes at the end of the week, Thursday and Friday, so I can go out of town Saturday and get some interviewing done, and come back Wednesday. But there's no sense leaving town because Monday you've got a meeting at noon. All these meetings. Academic life is nice, I shouldn't even be complaining about it. I have a chair that allows me to travel and do the research. But I can't get out of town. I'm always squeezing in an interview here and an interview there.

The idea for the book comes from an interview I did with Judith Williams Lyles, a black woman in Charleston, Illinois. She has since retired but at the time she was a professor at Eastern Illinois University. She was born in Mattoon, Illinois, which is just sixteen miles west of Charleston. She talked about being the only black girl in the local Girl Scout troop. She had always been popular growing up, with both black and white people in the town. And she worked at being popular—she was the president of the Girl Scout troop. This would have been around 1951.

They went on a hiking trip in the fall, and needed to collect firewood to cook and keep warm with. And one of the girls jumped up and said, "Last one back is a nigger." And of course the scout mistress was embarrassed

and Judy was embarrassed. The scout mistress said, "You know you just used an epithet that embarrassed the president of the troop." And the girl said, "Why?" And the mistress said, "Well, 'nigger' is an epithet that describes African Americans." And she said, "Oh, I didn't know that." She had always heard people in her family talk about niggers but she didn't know that it applied to black people as a negative term. But, at any rate, Judy said that for her it was a defining moment because she understood that being assimilated fully into American society was not possible. She would always be the Other.

McQueen: How did you pick the other participants?

Dash: By snowballing. I don't have any survey structure in place. But I've interviewed many people about their defining moment. That moment would tell you something about where you stood in American society in terms of privilege. There are many people in the project but their narratives are not strong. And for this genre, you need strong narratives. So I'm thinking of four or six narratives. I haven't settled on a number yet.

So right now the main people in the study are a white southern couple [from Virginia] and a black woman in Savannah, Georgia who did research that qualified her to be admitted into the United Daughters of the Confederacy. And was admitted. So she's an active member of the Savannah chapter. And Melvin Douglass is a retired professor with a Ph.D. and four Master's degrees. He's doing a fifth Master's degree beginning this fall at Harvard University in anthropology. Much of his drive comes out of the fact that he's black-skinned. The light-skinned members of his family shunned him because they felt that he was too dark, in terms of American colorism. Well, that's a fascinating story. And Lee Ann Bell, a white woman who just recently retired from Barnard College in New York. She's done work in documentary filmmaking, about blacks and whites who went through integration together in small-town Mississippi. Bell is also interesting because she's trained teachers who, some of them, were sent to the elementary school I went to in Harlem. So there's an affinity there.

The couple is important to me. The man is the great-great grandson of Edmund Ruffin, who was a prominent Confederate officer during the Civil War. And reportedly—I don't know if this is true, it may be apocryphal—fired the first cannon shot at Fort Sumter that started the Civil War. At the end of the war, he wrapped himself in a Confederate flag and committed suicide. Ruffin lost everything except the privilege of white skin and access to education. And one can argue that although [his family] lost everything, they were able to recoup because they had education and status in American society. So I'm going to have to broach that with [the great-great grandson] and ask him to grapple with it.

McQueen: It sounds like the structure of the project might look in some ways like *When Children Want Children*.

Dash: I don't know. I don't know if I should write a chapter about each person, and maybe an opening chapter that deals with many of the other people, who had significant developments in their lives but whose moment hadn't generated the same kind of reaction that it did for the others.

McQueen: At what point you do start thinking about structure? Is that something you have in mind from the beginning, or do you wait until you've done the bulk of your interviewing?

Dash: It evolves. When I woke up this morning I was sitting at the breakfast table thinking about the structure. And I said, it's too broad. You know it's too broad. And the other people don't have a strong narrative. And they're a mention, an anecdote that describes their defining moment but in terms of strong narrative, *these* are the people you need. I was also thinking I'm going to be in it, because with each prominent person not only do I have their narrative but I have strong dialogue.

McQueen: So you're going to put yourself in the book. Are you going to talk about your own family history? I know you've done a lot of genealogical research.

Dash: I'm going to tell my defining moment, when I understood where I stood in American society, when I was fifteen years old. Yeah, all of that will go in.

In interacting with them, I have to share that story with them so they're comfortable sharing with me. I'm thinking dialogue with all the principle persons, between me and them, is the best way to go. Not me just describing like some distant reporter, because I'm not. I'm working to establish a relationship with them so they will recognize that I am a journalist who will keep the professional barrier but also someone they feel comfortable with, and will share things that they haven't shared with other people. I'm asking them to be intimate, so I have to be intimate.

McQueen: You have a history degree from Howard. Both *Rosa Lee* and *When Children Want Children*—and it sounds like your latest project—take a long view on the social issues that you investigate. I'm wondering how you think history plays into the work of journalism?

Dash: Often [journalists] don't have time to write about the history. Often we just give people a snapshot of the current situation. I remember I did a two-part series on young male killers. And I went into great depth into the family's history. The young killers came from the same family and I spent a lot of time interviewing their mother—she had three boys and two girls—about the way she had grown up in South Carolina in a sharecropping fam-

ily, always kept in perpetual poverty and so on, and finally breaking free and moving to Washington, D.C. with hope for a better life. She was upset that her three sons, when I met her, were in prison. Both of her daughters were doing fine; they weren't involved in criminal activity. And she didn't understand that was there is a history to that. Much like what you will find in *When Children Want Children* in the family of Lillian Williams, coming from North Carolina, with a history of sexual abuse in the family. And in *Rosa Lee*, where getting an education was secondary to getting a job.

So the point I wanted to make was that the criticism of that series was for perpetuating stereotypes. That's the type of criticism that I get from the black middle class. And my argument is that the daily stories of young men arrested for murder produce the stereotype, not my series. With my series you understand the arc of history, and you understand how they ended up in that situation. Poverty was the main factor in becoming drug dealers and with drug dealing, particularly post-crack epidemic of 1985, you don't go into dealing crack, you're interested in dealing crack for money but you can't go into the crack trade unless you're willing to kill. People will set you up to be robbed, both your drugs and your money. If they know that you are carrying a gun but are unwilling to use it then you're just a target.

It's the daily reporting. They don't have time for history. They also rely on experts that they can use to report on rather than do the work themselves. But they can do it themselves. I had a lot of luxury to do this. Most reporters at the *Washington Post* were not given that luxury. I was working on a small unit when I was working on those long-form pieces. And so I was fortunate that I had the time and the support of my editors to do it.

McQueen: You made a move from standard reporting to the Project Unit. What was that transition like for you?

Dash: I had already done some long-form reporting, when I lived with guerillas in Angola. I lived with guerillas twice. I was invited to live with UNITA [National Union for the Total Independence of Angola] gorillas in Angola in 1973. I went and lived with them for two or three months, and did a four- or five-part series that ran in the *Post* during the Christmas holidays in 1973.

Then civil war broke out in Angola, when the Portuguese handed the government over to the MPLA [People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola]. Before UNITA were fighting a guerilla war against the Portuguese and now they were fighting to unseat an African government. My editor approached me in the early fall of '76. He said we got a message from the UNITA guerillas and they'd like you to come back and spend time with them. Now they're back to fighting and they've got some captured Cuban soldiers

that were fighting for the government that you can interview. And I said, “Oh, that’s interesting.”

McQueen: How long were you there?

Dash: Seven and a half months. I traveled 2,100 miles on foot in the war zone, along the Bié Plateau. That was where I did multiple interviews with the guerillas. I was trying to get past the rhetoric that they were told to tell me about why they were fighting, down to some of their real reasons. There were long periods when I was traveling on foot up, where we’d come to a guerilla camp, where we’d stay for a week or more. I’d find somebody to interact with and I’d interview them. I used the same methodology I taught you—repeated interviews. It all came down to ethnic fear of being dominated by another ethnic group. Pro-Soviet, Pro-Western, that had nothing to do with it. And that was the point I wanted to bring home when I wrote that series.

So then I covered a political campaign, a three-way race in Washington, D.C. in ’78, and by the end of the campaign the executive editor told me that I was assigned to open a news bureau in Africa. So I selected to open a bureau in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. I was there from ’79 to ’84. When I came back I was supposed to do education on the national desk. Well, I’m not that interested in education. You didn’t catch me on that.

But I’ll tell you what happened. I was in a conversation with a lady friend of mine, and she told me that 53 per cent of all black children born in America were born to single mothers. And over a third of those were adolescent girls growing up in poverty. Well, I was skeptical. I went to Wendy Baldwin, who was a demographer at the National Institute of Health, who followed human populations in the US, and she told me, no, my friend’s figures were right. The numbers, the rates were climbing. When I got that information I went back to the *Post*. Now I was working as the assistant foreign editor. That’s boring. You’re at the copy desk and you’re editing correspondent’s copy. I went to the managing editor and I said I’d really like to do a project of multiple interviews [on adolescent child bearing]. He said, well you can’t do that on the foreign desk, so you need to move to Bob Woodward’s Projects Desk. So that’s how it evolved. So I was seeking to get off the foreign desk but I also was genuinely interested in looking at the phenomenon.

McQueen: And this particular unit let you do the kind of reporting that you excelled at, that people now call immersion journalism. Was it a term used at the time?

Dash: I never used it. It was an anthropological approach. I understood that. But other people gave it that name.

McQueen: Another thing that is associated with this style of journalism is an emphasis on narrative structure, and the use of first person.

Dash: My editors insisted on that. The first time I used first person was in the adolescent childbearing series, where the opening piece is all about why I selected the area I moved into, why I lived there for a year, how I approached families.

McQueen: I remember. I found it quite funny.

Dash: The roach-infested basement apartment.

McQueen: And the conversations you had within the *Post* office.

Dash: With Woodward. Yeah, I stopped speaking to him. I would send messages through his assistant, Barbara Feinman [now Feinman Todd].

McQueen: Right. And with *Rosa Lee* it’s even more pronounced. There’s a persona of Leon Dash in the books. And this character is somehow helpful for the reader, in order to understand the milieu in which you are operating. Was that something you did consciously?

Dash: No. Initially it was not something I wanted to do. My editors insisted on it in the series. When I did the adolescent childbearing series I was nervous. It was risky. I wasn’t sure it was going to be successful. Once I did it in the series, I did it more so in the books. By that time I was comfortable with it.

McQueen: Were there other people in Woodward’s unit doing similar projects?

Dash: There were nine investigative reporters and two editors. It was top-heavy. That was a lot of resources for nine reporters. Sometimes we’d drop down to six, but always two editors. That’s a lot of investment.

McQueen: Besides having Woodward pushing you in one particular direction, were you drawing on any books, or other printed works, for inspiration?

Dash: No. I went in cold. I did not know what we were going to do. Let me repeat some of the process. When I met the adolescents I always went immediately to meet their adults. I was a forty-year-old man hanging out with boys and girls. I knew immediately people were going to think I was some sort of pedophile pretending to be journalist. So I immediately would go meet the parents, or parent, and I would explain what the project was about. It was based on their decisions. So, out of twenty-two families I approached, nine said no. That left me with thirteen families. And I saw it as too much. In two of the families there were eleven children each. So I kept one family, Lillian Williams’s, and dropped the other. And with the other families, I made the decision based on their receptiveness to me. And the six that were the most receptive to what I was doing wound up being the six families I profiled.

McQueen: The sort of heightened authorial presence in your books is one of the hallmarks of what people now call literary journalism.

Dash: Oh, really?

McQueen: I was wondering if you ever thought about your writing as a specifically literary practice.

Dash: I see it as literary journalism. I didn't know that the emphasis on the author's presence was part of it. Is it seen as a positive or a negative quality, or just a quality?

McQueen: It's a quality that has pros and cons.

Dash: Okay, well, I've not studied literary journalism. Authorial presence can be overindulgent, so you have to be careful. I taught last semester a class that Walter Harrington had been teaching, *Great Books of Journalism*. One book was James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and I thought he was so indulgent with his own anguish. I sort of liked his detail, long descriptions of the poverty of the white sharecroppers that he was interviewing. But all that material about himself really annoyed me. I thought, *Oh this guy is really telling us too much about himself*.

McQueen: Did you keep much of Harrington's reading list?

Dash: I didn't. I changed it significantly. My list came from NYU's 1999 100 best works of journalism of the twentieth century.

McQueen: Which you are also on.

Dash: My book was one of them. Okay, so I did *Hiroshima*, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, *In Cold Blood*, *The Fire Next Time*, *All the President's Men*, and *Rosa Lee*. And I let the students pick one book off the list. They picked Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. When they told me I said, "Oh Lord, what is wrong with you?!" So I was forced to read it too. I had to push myself but I got into it.

McQueen: One last question. What do you think the future holds for immersion journalism?

Dash: The possibilities for immersion journalism are open for all venues. I don't think long form is going away. I'm not sure many newspapers will invest in immersion journalism. When I did the adolescent childbearing series, the *Post* invested in an apartment, because I moved to that community. That's the best way to do it. That was Woodward's argument: You can't go in and out, you have to move there and be a part of the community. And that was the right choice. But I didn't do that with *Rosa Lee*. I just followed her around the city, wherever she was.

McQueen: Do you think those kinds of long pieces that require so much time and money are more likely to be done outside of newspapers in the future, like in the academy or in institutions that provide fellowships? I guess that's a question about funding.

Dash: That's hard to say. I don't know. Newspapers are doing a bit better

financially now, so I don't know.

McQueen: Even back then, in order to write your books you still had to find external funding.

Dash: Sure, particularly when I went on leave. I went on leave without pay. I didn't have the resources to support myself and my family without extra support. I had applied to twenty-five different foundations—that's the nature of it. I don't know whether many people will be able to do this—maybe people who have already done a book and been successful.

Kate McQueen is a literature and writing instructor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. She holds a Master's in journalism from the University of Illinois, and a Ph.D. in German Studies from Stanford University, where she completed a dissertation on Modernism and the Viennese press. Her research interests include Central European literary and press history, literary journalism, and narratives of crime and justice.



Bibliography

Leon Dash, *Rose Lee: A Mother and Her Family in Urban America* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

Leon Dash, *When Children Want Children: The Urban Crisis of Teenage Childbearing* (New York: William Morrow, 1989).

Ben Bagdikian and Leon Dash, *The Shame of the Prisons* (New York: Pocket Books, 1972).

