Literary Journalism on the Air:
What David Isay's Travels in the Footsteps of Joseph Mitchell Can Tell Us about the Nature of Multimedia

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ABSTRACT: Multimedia is an aspect of contemporary journalistic practice that, like literary journalism, gains power in its borrowing of conventions from distinctive traditions. Using the "borderlands" construct that has often been applied to literary journalism, this article sets out to explore the functioning of multimedia. Specifically, it takes a radio documentary that was in some ways consciously modeled on the work of Joseph Mitchell and explores how the journalism in it changed as it crossed media borders to become a newspaper article and later a chapter in a book that made extensive use of photography. The findings, particularly about the instability of a story as it moves through different formats, may help to explain a theme that has emerged in recent scholarship about multimedia, namely a disappointment that its potential has gone largely unfulfilled.

A sturdy and serviceable metaphor for understanding literary journalism is that of a borderland, a place where traditions, identities, and expectations come from different directions to intersect and intermingle. It is an apt description as works in this genre draw their force by combining both literary and journalistic techniques, and critics have usefully employed this construct.[1] The border framework helps to define and delineate the qualities of literary journalism by creating a pair of contrasting backgrounds that help to highlight the key characteristics of the genre and the contributions derived from its respective sources. The literary aspects of a work stand out when we consider it in relation to a piece of traditionally constructed objective

journalism, and the facticity may stand in greater relief when we compare it to an example of invented literature. In a field where definitional issues have resisted resolution, an added advantage of the borderlands figure is that it allows for a certain ambiguity to linger while inviting further exploration of the phenomenon it describes.

An aspect of contemporary journalistic practice that, like literary journalism, gains power in its borrowing of conventions from distinctive traditions is multimedia. Like literary journalism, multimedia is a term that is widely applied without clear consensus about what it encompasses and often without acknowledgment of its antecedents. Just as it represents a chance for traditional journalism to explore new techniques and formats, multimedia allows literary journalism to move beyond its roots as a genre that relies primarily on the printed word. Given the overlaps between literary journalism and multimedia journalism, and their shared prospects for evolution and development, it may be fruitful to borrow a borderlands framework for studying multimedia, considering how it crosses boundaries as a way of trying to locate the distinctive contributions of its elementary forms. An opportunity to do so arises with the journalism of David Isay, who is best known as a radio documentarian but who has also published in print, both in newspaper and book formats, and who has consciously modeled some his work on that of *New Yorker* writer Joseph Mitchell. By examining one of Isay's major projects, *The Sunshine Hotel*, as it migrated to multiple media formats, this paper will attempt to address one of the key questions that has emerged in the scholarship about multimedia journalism, namely why its use and development have lagged behind its apparent potential. The paper will also examine some of the borders of literary journalism by situating Isay's productions within the aesthetic tradition of Mitchell.

As Deuze has noted, definitions of multimedia must encompass a range of possibilities. He defines two "ideal-typical . . . 'endpoints,'" one being a web-based presentation using two or more forms of media and the other being the presentation of a story through different media in an "integrated" but not necessarily simultaneous way.[2] Isay's work arguably represents a little bit of both, since much of it is currently available on the web using multiple media formats even though it may have started out in a single medium and then migrated to other media formats.

What to make of multimedia journalism is a question that a few scholars have attempted to answer but with limited results, likely because the ability to move easily from one media platform to another and to incorporate different kinds of storytelling tools is still a relatively new phenomenon. While much of Isay's *Sunshine* documentary predates the explosion of online multimedia

journalism that began with the new century, it is still a worthy object of study for a couple of reasons. For one thing, all of the different versions of the story proceed from and are ultimately controlled by one person. This comparison, then, is not like that of a book or article that is sold off to be made into a movie or television program by a separate creative team. In addition, because the subject matter is relatively narrow, it may be easier to see the influence of medium-specific characteristics that could influence how a story is told. Finally, there may be an advantage in that the *Sunshine* series is in some ways technologically primitive, lacking, for example, an audio-slideshow, a Flash-powered animation, or a video component (although a film documentary about the Sunshine Hotel was made subsequently in an independent effort by Michael Dominic, a New York photographer). This primitiveness may allow for a closer examination of the phenomenon under study here, namely how one story can be told in different media forms and how those different forms may have an influence on how the story is told.

While the scholarship on multimedia journalism at this stage is, not surprisingly, somewhat tentative, there are several themes that have been articulated about the phenomenon. One of them is that multimedia efforts to date have failed to take full advantage of the range of options that are now available.[3] Another is that traditional social roles and self-conceptions of journalists may hinder the development of multimedia, which may be used to maximum effect when it allows for collaborations, either among different journalists or between the journalist and the nonjournalist, which can alter established notions of control.[4] Furthermore, there is the issue of technical competence and the fact that while it is technologically possible for a single journalist to write, photograph, record, and videotape a story, it is unlikely to find someone who is equally adept at working in those different media.[5]

In a summary of scholarship about online journalism, Steensen provides an extensive review of the state of multimedia and particularly the way that the "promises of new technology" went largely unfulfilled through the first decade of the new century.[6] After reviewing a series of studies using a variety of research methodologies, Steensen concludes that "multimedia remains the least developed of the assets offered to journalism by Internet technology."[7] His examination of studies based on interviews and surveys finds that "technical issues obstructed the materialization of multimedia content."[8] Examining the issue from the perspective of users, Steensen notes two studies indicating that text-only versions of stories had more value than multimedia versions. By tracing the evolution of the *Sunshine* project across different media, it becomes possible to consider these observations more closely and to test their validity.

I say has received some of the top honors in journalism, including five Pea-
bodys and two Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Awards, but he got his start
in the field by accident. Walking through New York's East Village one day
when he was in his early twenties, he came upon two recovered addicts who
were planning an addiction museum. Sensing the story possibilities, he called
around to radio and television stations, looking for a reporter to do the piece.
But the best that he could do was to get an invitation from one radio station
to go out and cover the story himself, which he did, subsequently attracting
the attention of a producer at National Public Radio, who reedited Isay's
work and put in on NPR's *Weekend All Things Considered*.[9]

Since then Isay has produced a large body of work, including nine books
that he has written, edited, or contributed to. All of the books are collabora-
tive efforts, and four of them make extensive use of photographs while two
others incorporate them in a less ambitious way. He has also produced rough-
ly seventy radio documentaries, some of which are the basis of books. Since
2003 Isay has headed an ambitious oral history project called StoryCorps,
which has recorded more than 50,000 interviews and contributes a weekly
segment to NPR's *Morning Edition*. StoryCorps has also produced a series
of short animated films that have been broadcast on the Public Broadcasting
System's *POV* program.

Isay was born into a long line of psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, and
there is an intriguing psychological dimension to his work. On his mother's
side, both of his grandparents worked in the field of psychological analysis,
his grandfather as a psychiatrist and his grandmother as the author of a syn-
dicated column called "Human Relations." Their son is a psychoanalyst, and
their daughter, David's mother, is a longtime book editor whose early career
focused on topics such as psychology and psychiatry. In 1964 she married
Richard Isay, a psychiatry professor who has written extensively about homo-
sexuality.

Like an analyst who is trying to lead a patient to new insights, David
Isay has described his goal as taking his audience to places they "probably
wouldn't want to go."[10] He has done most of his work in radio, a medium
that is particularly good for creating a feeling of intimacy. Significantly, his
work revolves around the posing of questions and recording of answers, a
kind of talk therapy. "When you're doing an interview, it can be this very
intense sort of verbal exchange," he said in 2001. "I come from a family of
therapists. And that's enjoyable to me."[11] The focus of Isay's work is often a
personal kind of investigation, in which he explores universal issues by cap-
turing an individual's perspective or experience. Perhaps his greatest knack is
for finding the surprise twist, like the Mississippi police sergeant who is also

his synagogue's acting rabbi, or the secret to be revealed, such as the sounds of a Georgia prison execution gone awry.

In his pursuit of surprises and secrets, Isay seems to be reliving what he has described as "the big drama" in his life. At 22, a recent graduate of New York University expecting to study medicine, Isay paid an unscheduled visit to his father's Manhattan office, where he found a man who was apparently living there. After initially claiming that the man was a patient, Isay's father acknowledged that they were lovers. "That was a complicated thing for me," Isay said later. The incident led him to seek "underdogs, because my dad was kind of an underdog." The revelation also motivated him in "trying to find out about secrets, because my dad being gay was a big secret, and I'm not so sure it was such a great idea to keep it for as long as it was kept."[12]

Although most of Isay's creations consist of radio broadcasts or other sound files, they share many similarities with the words in print format that has been the object of most literary journalism scholarship. These traits include a deep concern for getting the facts right coupled with what might be called artistic techniques to heighten the audience's experience of those facts. One way to demonstrate Isay's rightful position in the literary journalism tradition is to compare his work with that of Joseph Mitchell, whom Isay cites as a source of inspiration and in whose footsteps he quite literally followed to produce *The Sunshine Hotel*. Excerpts from this 1998 radio documentary were published as a feature article in the *New York Times*, which in turn became the basis for a chapter in a collaborative book project with photographer Harvey Wang, *Flophouse: Life on the Bowery*. Isay initially thought about calling his radio documentary "Up in the Old Hotel" after Mitchell's short story and collection of short stories, which Isay used as a guidebook to see where Mitchell had gone before him.[13]

A quotation from a Mitchell article that appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1940 and that was later collected in *Up in the Old Hotel* serves as an epigraph to *Flophouse*:

> "The Alabama Hotel, the Comet, and the Uncle Sam House," he said, in a declamatory voice, "the Dandy, the Defender, the Niagara, the Owl, the Victoria House and the Grand Windsor Hotel, the Houston, the Mascot, the Palace, the Progress, the Palma House and the White House Hotel, the Newport, the Crystal, the Lion and the Marathon. All flophouses. All on the Bowery. Each and all my home, sweet home."[14]

Indeed the first similarity that Isay and Mitchell share is subject matter. Both of them provide respectful, even affectionate, accounts of ordinary people living on the margins of society. Sims describes Mitchell as writing "so often about disappointed old men and women for whom nothing had turned

out the way they thought it would."[15] This is not very much different from Isay's description of his work: "I do stories about people that I like, who are for the most part probably either ignored or misunderstood or not thought about."[16] In another context he wrote that his stories are about "eccentrics, visionaries, dreamers, believers: men and women in pursuit of *something,* and holding on to that at all costs."[17]

The artistry of both men is such that critics have questioned the degree to which their work was based on journalistic fact and the degree to which it was shaped for aesthetic effect. Mitchell did, of course, acknowledge that one of his characters, Hugh G. Flood, was a composite, but he also identi-fied the real-life sources of his composite creation and argued for its essential truthfulness "I wanted these stories to be truthful rather than factual, but they are solidly based on facts."[18] Similarly, Isay has drawn questions about the veracity of his radio documentaries, which are known for their rich audio backgrounds and their reliance on the voices of ordinary people rather than those of credentialed experts. His answer is straightforward: "When we go in, we do the basic journalistic work, the research, the background, the digging, talking to people, getting to know them, and checking their stories as best we can."[19] Even in his current oral history project, which draws its strength by accumulating accounts that are in the best sense of the term "folklore," Isay stresses the importance of making sure the stories that are broadcast over NPR can be relied upon as true. "When StoryCorps goes on the air, that story is fact-checked to death," he says.[20]

Isay and Mitchell also share a patient, time-consuming approach to their subjects in which they expend enormous time and effort to gather detailed information. When it comes time to present that information, they then work almost equally as hard at making their own presence as little-noticed as possible. Mitchell, describing his method, says, "My whole idea of report-ing—particularly reporting on conversation—is to talk to a man or a woman long enough under different circumstance . . . until, in effect, they reveal their inner selves."[21] In contemporary terminology, what Mitchell was engaged in would be called "immersion journalism," a time-consuming process through which the reporter absorbs and, in effect, experiences the reality of the sub-ject and then reflects that experience back through words, sounds, images, or other media elements. In Isay's words, the process "is a matter of going into a dark place and doing a lot of recording and then creating this space through audio where people can step into this other world."[22] As Sims has noted, "no casual technique" can account for Mitchell's ability to reveal the inner selves of his subjects, and Isay also is remarkable for his recognition of the need to invest time in gathering material so that he can select out and reconstruct the

words and sounds he needs to achieve his desired effects. *The Sunshine Hotel*, which in its finished form took up about twenty-three-and-a-half minutes of airtime, began as seventy hours of raw tape, which Isay edited down.[23]

A key technique that both men use is to minimize the overt presence of the journalist in the finished piece as a way of maintaining the audience's engagement with the subject matter. The goal is to create an experience that is not undone by an awareness of the inherent artifice. "You hope the reader won't be aware," Mitchell told Sims. The intrusion of obvious symbolism will break the illusion, Mitchell added. "You want to take the reader to the last sentence. I don't want to take him there just by *fact*. I want to take the reader there by going through an experience that I had that was revealing." One of Isay's trademarks in his later documentaries has been the elimination of the journalist/narrator, the standard technique of having the voice of omniscience make connections for the listener or introduce the observations of a subject matter expert. In language remarkably similar to Mitchell's, Isay has explained his rationale for this approach:

> The idea was to bring you into a space, and I mean I always just thought of it as taking you some place you probably didn't want to go and having you be in this, like, very close place, which is a great way to do radio, and also having it be so interesting that you couldn't turn off the radio. So I always imagine myself, like, kind of lifting people up from behind and then, like, dragging them on this journey, and then when they realize they've been done, when they realize they are somewhere they don't want to be, then the whole thing is done, then dropping them off. [24]

To make this technique work, Isay "zeroed himself out" so that the audience is more fully engaged with the subject.[25]

> And every time my voice would come in, it would pull you out of that place, the flophouse, whatever it is. Immediately you're out of it. You're not with the people. You're with some voice of wisdom.[26]

Just as Mitchell often merged his sensibility with that of his subject, Isay is trying to accomplish something similar. He is clear about his source of inspiration for this approach: "It's kind of a Joseph Mitchell sort of thing. But he was, you know, an absolute master."[27]

Ultimately, the greatest commonality between the two artists is the way they construct their stories and transform the people and things that are found there into symbols that can be used to explore the psychology of their subjects and themselves. As Norman Sims has noted about Mitchell's masterwork, *Joe Gould's Secret*, "Mitchell used both structure and symbolism purposefully" in an examination of such matters as a writer's motivations, the nature of secrets,

the frailty of human existence, and the quest for purpose and meaning.[28] Isay similarly applies these literary elements in his radio documentary *Sunshine Hotel*. Although listeners may not recognize it on a first listening, the documentary is structured as an epic descent into the netherworld, framed at the beginning and end by matched sequences of sound. After a scene-setting welcome from the manager of the hotel, the next two voices to be heard are of a tenant "checking out" and of another who is moving in. Some twenty-three minutes later, as the documentary is wrapping up, the order is reversed as the manager first checks in a new tenant and then bids farewell to another tenant who is leaving. (Only the tenant who is leaving at the end is identified by name in the broadcast transcript.)

The manager, who serves as the piece's narrator, provides the structural framework as well as a symbolic presence. His name is Nathan Smith, and like Virgil in Dante's *Inferno*, he serves a tour guide, taking the listener from one part of the hotel to another and along the way introducing various residents. They tell their stories in highly condensed form, sometimes only a few sentences, that have been woven tightly together. The guests give the true accounts of their lives, but it is not hard to make the leap to understand them as aspects of the human personality. Eddie Barrett, a guitarist who worked as "band boy" for Tito Puente until suffering a mental breakdown, represents the compulsiveness of human behavior, the urge to retreat into repetition of the familiar. Smith, the narrator, remarks, "The funny thing about Eddie is that he always plays the same songs over and over and over again."[29] Without missing a beat, comes Eddie's voice:

> Maybe I might sit down and come up with a new tune in my mind, but by the time I pick up the guitar, I done forgot the tune I had in my mind, see?[30]

Another one of the inhabitants who also exemplifies an aspect of the human unconscious is Anthony "Fat Tony" Coppolla, a 420-pound example of the unconstrained id. His impulsive and uncontrollable eating has ballooned his body so that he can no longer wear regular clothes and instead covers himself with a sheet. In the radio broadcast, he explains.

> Sometimes I knock off a twenty-six-ounce can of Chef Boyardee Ravioli. That is for five people in the family. And I be eating it cold right out of the can. That is a load of eats! That's a lot of grub there.[31]

Given his size and lack of clothing, he rarely leaves the hotel. He overcomes his lack of mobility through the use of the hotel's runner, a Vietnam veteran named Bruce Davis who represents a kind of fantasy thinking that can elevate a routine task into a heroic deed. Here is an excerpt from the original radio transcript, where the italics signify the speaker commenting

on the action that's taking place, alternating between interior and exterior monologue:

> BRUCE: *It's a work of constant steps and most of them are mental.*

> *(Footsteps.)*

> BRUCE: Tea, two sugars, one Rolaid, two packs of Monarchs, large Bacitracin.

> BRUCE: *And walking all the time, you've got people constantly distracting you. Distraction's your biggest enemy.*

> BRUCE: *(Mumbles.)* All I need is a tea with two sugars.

> BRUCE: *You get to store. . . .*

> BRUCE: Yeah, tea with two sugars.

> BRUCE: *You got to realize that you got to constantly be on guard, constantly be in guard. You're in the hustler's capital of the planet. Every third person you meet is trying to hustle you out of your money, store clerks included.*[32]

The other characters in this real-life radio play include a 30-year-old Russian immigrant named Max who gets arrested for shoplifting, a former psychiatric patient named Lawrence, and Paul Donoghue, "the only deaf-mute crack addict on the Bowery."[33]

Isay's depiction of the Sunshine Hotel developed from news clippings on flophouses that he had been collecting over time. With a nudge from a colleague, Stacy Abramson, Isay began to focus on the project in the spring of 1997. Initially, they had little success, as both flophouse owners and residents shied away from outside attention. Their breakthrough came in January 1998, when Smith, the Sunshine manager and eventual narrator, agreed to help. He secured permission from the hotel owners for the radio journalists to have the run of the place. "We spent two months at the flop, recording day and night," Isay recalled in an author's note that appeared in the book version of the work.[34]

Although the radio form of this story is the urtext from which the other versions derived, it was not the first to be exposed to the public. The documentary was broadcast on NPR September 18, 1998, but five days earlier the *New York Times* had devoted almost two full pages to a montage of photographs by Harvey Wang and interview transcripts interspersed with explanatory comments by Isay and Abramson. A book contract followed, and Isay and Abramson went back to the Bowery to record additional skid row stories.

The resulting book included a chapter on the Sunshine Hotel, consisting of edited interview transcripts, color photographs of the interior of the hotel, and black-and-white photographs of residents. Two other versions of *Sunshine* exist, one in the form of a transcript of the radio documentary, which is posted on one of Isay's websites, along with the audio from the NPR broadcast. The transcript does not track precisely with the broadcast but instead includes several segments that were left out of the NPR version, including one in which a hotel resident is taken away by ambulance. Isay also issued the documentary on compact disc.

From Isay's perspective, the use of one medium or another to tell a story is not a matter of one medium being better than another. To him the story is what it's important; the way it is told is secondary so long as the medium is used to maximum effect. "For me it's about telling everyday people's stories, stories that interest me," he said. "It's 'by any means necessary,' whatever the medium is."[35] Because of his experience in working across media, Isay has a perspective that includes several points that may be easily overlooked, or even difficult to accept from the standpoint of mainstream journalism. First of all, and perhaps most challenging to traditional standards, Isay does not believe that an account in one medium needs to be an exact replica of an account in another medium even if the underlying event is the same. Specifically, he argues that words that are spoken on tape do not need to, and should not, track with words that are printed on paper. "Words and phrases that read well are not always the strongest spoken moments," he writes in a note to *Mom*, his 2010 collection of recorded stories about mothers. "And the reverse is also the case. As a result, a story may vary slightly from audio to print."[36]

An example of this kind of slight and subtle change can be found in the interview with Sunshine Hotel resident "Max R." For the radio documentary, he is recorded as making this comment:

> Most of the people just lay on their bed all day in their cubicle, watching TV or listening to the radio or staring into space or sleeping, and just keep vegetating in these little cells. With fluorescent light overhead coming through the chicken wire. And, so uh?, that's their life.[37]

In print, both the book and the newspaper, this quote is altered in a way that seems almost trivial but may also be a reflection of a meticulous level of care. The first sentence is separated into two complete sentences, following the addition of a pronoun, and the wording of the penultimate sentence is rearranged to clarify, and perhaps emphasize, that each lodger's cubicle is topped by chicken wire:

Most the people just lay on their bed all day watching TV or listening to the radio or staring into space or sleeping. They just keep vegetating in these little cells with the fluorescent light coming through the chicken wire overhead, and that's their life.[38]

The print versions appear as part of longer interview transcripts while the radio documentary consists of short snippets of speech. On tape, for example, Max's story is told through three brief statements by him separated by comments from the hotel manager/narrator. In print the editing that occurred may have been done for clarity within the context of the overall transcript rather than for reasons related to a particular passage that was changed.

Isay also addresses the issue of why journalists with traditional training or a skill set that is built around the written word may be slow to embrace the possibilities of new technology. As he explains it, working in different media entails increasing levels of complexity that may not be immediately apparent. "In some ways print is easier, right?, because in audio you can't change the words." Print, he argues, only has to "read right." But audio also has to have the right sound.

With print I can change tense and stuff that like. . . . If someone is off-mike, you can still put it in print. In radio it has to sound right, the tone of voice has to be right, it has to be crystal clear in order for it to work and to be something that rises to that level of poetry.[39]

In Isay's view, working in print is like working in one dimension, working in radio is like working in two dimensions, and the addition of visual elements adds a third dimension.[40]

When it comes to visuals, Isay freely acknowledges that he is out of his element and reliant on collaborators. It's not simply that he is less proficient in dealing with images; photography is a skill that he does not possess. "I never took photographs for anything," he says. Jokingly, he quotes his photo collaborator on *Flophouse*: "Harvey Wang used to say I had a wooden eye."[41] Wang and Isay worked together for years on several different projects that became books, their styles are complementary, and their joint efforts have been artistic and journalistic successes. But their example may be the exception that proves the rule, namely, that cross-media efforts can unify to become more than the sum of their parts rather than being limited in one component.

An examination of the three main versions of *Sunshine* shows how the work changes as it moves from medium to medium and what is gained or lost along the way. Leaving aside questions of aesthetics, one can begin by examining the actual content in each version and offering some assessment of how that varies. In all, thirty-five individuals are identified by name and two

others are identified by occupation (Clerk, Ambulance Man). An unnamed Tenant, a designation that may apply to separate individuals, is listed in the radio transcript. Three of the named residents in the radio transcript were cut from the actual broadcast and also do not appear in either the book or newspaper version. One indication of how the work was changed to suit the different media is that only six of these men appear in all three finished versions: Nathan Smith, Vic K., Vinnie Gigante, Anthony Coppola, Bruce Davis and Max R. The radio transcript includes by far the largest number of individuals, twenty-nine; the book includes seventeen; and the newspaper eight. The book also includes two portraits of tenants who are not identified by name.

In the newspaper, the first and perhaps most obvious shift is that the dominant voice is no longer that of Nathan Smith, the hotel manager, but of the journalists, Isay and Abramson. They provide a thirteen-paragraph opening as well as shorter introductions to each of the residents whose stories are told. The piece itself is structured as a series of vignettes built around extended quotations, ranging from five to seven paragraphs, and Wang's portraiture. It takes up the top half of the paper's City section, all of a left-side interior page, and columns one and two of the facing page. It includes thirteen pictures. One figure appears in the newspaper who does not appear in the other versions: Joseph Braddy, a former drug dealer who has taught himself sign language to communicate with a hotel resident, Paul Donoghue, who can neither speak nor hear. Braddy is not in the radio documentary, but Donoghue, despite his limited vocal ability, is. He can be heard grunting ever so briefly after an introduction from Smith.

Isay has attempted to maintain some aspects of the narrative structure of the radio documentary, by quoting Smith at the beginning and the end of the main section of the article. The vignette on Smith is the first to appear after the introduction by Isay and Abramson, and in it Smith provides an overall description of the hotel and also explains his desire to be one of those who check out of the Sunshine. His closing quote comes in the final vignette, about Max R., after it has been explained that this resident has lost his room after being arrested for shoplifting. This is another instance of a printed quote that differs from the audio recording. In the newspaper, Smith says: "He's just a clean-out now. Nothing personal. I'm going to clean him out and sell his room. Immediately if not sooner."[42] But the audio version is longer and includes a more specific time frame for replacing Max with a new tenant: "He's just a clean-out now. Nothing personal. He's a clean-out, and I'm gonna clean him out and sell his room. Maybe tomorrow. I'll probably sell it tomorrow, more than likely."[43] While both quotes contain overlapping and generally equivalent content, they are not the same. The standard at the

Times, as articulated by the *Times*, is that the paper "does not 'clean up' quotations" and that readers "should be able to assume that every word between quotation marks is what the speaker or writer said."[44] The discrepancy in the Smith quotes highlights the fact that Smith's narration in the radio broadcast is more than some artfully edited commentary that was pieced together from unrehearsed conversations to provide a coherent arc for the story. As Isay explains in the liner notes for the CD version, Smith was an active collaborator in developing the script for the radio documentary and spent many hours in a recording studio.[45]

While the newspaper account lacks the symbolic and structural grace of the radio broadcast, as well as some of the breadth of voices and perspectives, it is richer in overall information content, both because of Wang's photographs and because of the space provided for extended excerpts from the interviews with residents. For example Smith, in the radio broadcast, describes the range of people who have been residents: "I've had everything here from a priest to a murderer. You wouldn't believe the characters that stay here at the Sunshine."[46] In the newspaper, Smith is able to provide added detail about the murderer, who turns out to have been "the cannibal Daniel Rakowitz." Readers learn that Smith threw Rakowitz out of the Sunshine for keeping twenty-seven gerbils in his room. "Next thing I know he's serving a girl in a stew to the homeless in Tompkins Square Park," Smith recalls. "But he was a down dude—a very nice guy."[47] Another example of the greater depth provided by the newspaper is in the interview with Vincent Giganti, who is presented as a possible relative of mobster Vincent (Chin) Gigante. He has throat cancer and uses a mechanical voice box, which is captured movingly in the radio broadcast. But the radio script does not have time to provide a full account of Giganti's experience with the Sunshine Hotel. As teenagers he and a friend used to drive by with rolls of pennies that they would throw on the sidewalk so that they could watch the Bowery bums go scurrying after the coins. "And God forbid, I knew I'd end up in this same damn place," Giganti is quoted as saying in the newspaper. "This is what kills me—I think of it every day."[48]

In their introduction to the individual vignettes, Isay and Abramson describe the Sunshine Hotel as a "chaotic, bizarre, depressing and fascinating place."[49] The pictures and interview transcripts serve to justify this characterization, but the modular, rectangular layout that sets off the individual vignettes in boxes serves to undercut at least two of these impressions. The layout is extremely orderly, sending a visual clue that undermines any sense of chaos. Similarly, while the individual stories may be bizarre, their presentation provides a sense of normalcy and decorum. The stories are shaped, at least visually, to fit the proprieties of the *Times*.

By contrast the book *Flophouse* was published in a nonstandard format: eight and a quarter inches square. This format is an immediate visual and tactile signal that the book is out of the ordinary and idiosyncratic. It also serves to showcase Wang's photos, which were all shot in a square format. In the newspaper, the images are reduced, with most of them no more than the width of one or two newspaper columns; in the book nearly all of his images are six inches on a side. The use of the square format, as opposed to the more common rectangle of 35mm film, helps Wang to accomplish one of his artistic goals, namely, to reduce the obvious presence of the photographer, a strategy that is in keeping with Isay's effort to emulate Mitchell's method of minimizing the overt presence of the journalist. "I strive in my work to be as honest as possible, and I tried to be objective when making the pictures in the book," Wang wrote in a 2001 essay about the photography in *Flophouse*. "Though the residents are responding to me and are active participants in the picture-making process, I hoped that I would remain 'invisible.'"[50]

Photographs play a much bigger role in the book than in the newspaper. In a typical spread, an interview excerpt appears on the left-hand page, rarely coming close to filling it, and the right-hand page is a portrait of the person whose oral history it accompanies. While Wang's portraits are displayed to much stronger effect in the book, they remain complements to the oral histories rather than drivers of the narrative. In fact, Wang's photographs were usually taken after the taping of the oral histories, which he used to prepare for his shoots, "to get a sense of the subject's story."[51]

Aside from expanding on the content in the newspaper story, the book chapter also presents aspects of the Bowery that are not apparent in the other two versions. For example, one of the residents who appear only in the book, Matthew Griffin, is gay, and another who appears only in the book, Cashmere, is transsexual. It's suggested that two of the residents are a couple: They share a room, and their story is told as an interlocking dialog. In addition, the book is more ethnically inclusive, presenting an oral history and photo of a Tibetan immigrant named Sering Wang Du. Both the book and radio versions include only whites and African-Americans.

Some of the oral histories in the book are quite short. Carl Albino, who is photographed looking away from the camera as he plays a game of solitaire, says simply this:

> This is a roof over my head. I live within my means. You never live above your means. I mind my own business. I stay by myself. I don't bother anybody, and nobody bothers me. If they say, "Hello," I say, "Hello." If not, I go about my business. It's a roof over my head.[52]

But in most cases the residents speak at some length about their back-

ground, their reasons for being at the Sunshine Hotel, and their outlook on their future. The manager, for example, describes how his predecessor committed suicide: "Shot himself in that bed right there—the very same bed I happen to sleep in today."[53]

The story of the Sunshine Hotel changes slightly but perceptibly as it moves from medium to medium, and it isn't simply a matter of shifting emphasis. The story is bound up in its medium, and none of them is complete on its own. In the radio version, the hotel residents become more than their actual selves to take on symbolic roles in an exploration of the human psychology of failed lives or unfulfilled promise. The newspaper returns the residents to their places in an urban drama that is in all essentials realistic, situated within the city's ecosystem of political, social, and financial tensions. In the book version of their story, the residents are transformed into objects of art, haunting images of human existence that are woven together with fragmentary texts that, like the photographs they accompany, present only a glimpse, however heartfelt, of lives that are far removed from those of both artist and audience. It is no coincidence that each of those texts is described as an "oral history," another allusion to Mitchell and his stories about Joe Gould—the writer's subject, character, and alter ego.[54]

This phenomenon of modification is similar to what happens when a text is adapted for the cinema in some ways, but it is also distinctive because of the overlay of journalistic truth-telling and the expectation that a journalistic account will conform with the facts of a story. A movie can tell a different story from the book on which it is based and still be satisfactory so long as it makes the most of the cinematic conventions within which it is presented. Multimedia, or cross-platform, journalism, on the other hand, will be assessed not only on its use of the capabilities of different media but also on the degree to which it approaches truth. Each part will be judged, as will the totality.

The simplicity and easy availability of technological tools for storytelling—digital voice recorders, still and video cameras, editing software—may serve to obscure the complexity of the situation they create. As shown in the crossing of media borders with *Sunshine,* the medium may not be the whole message, but it does play a significant role in calling out aspects of a story that can be especially well told in a given format. In the selection of which details to include, multimedia journalists must factor in which details are most significant in telling a story and which ones are most conducive for their chosen medium or media. Like Isay, they may also decide that certain elements, such as quotes or points of view, can appropriately be altered to suit a given medium.

Another way in which the opportunities of multimedia may be deceptive is that the opening of possibilities for cross-platform storytelling may not result in stories being told in more satisfying ways. If Isay is correct in his assessment that working in multimedia is akin to working in multiple dimensions with increasing levels of complexity, the production of multimedia journalism will require both unusual talent and significant investments of time. In the end, however, it is the inherent instability of multimedia journalism that may hold its greatest promise—as well as the bar to wider to acceptance and use. There are reasons why borderlands are unsettled, both in the sense of lacking coherence and lacking inhabitants. Those who travel through the borderlands may return with amazing stories. But it is not at all clear that journalists, or their audiences, would be willing to embrace a mode of storytelling that not only tells true stories in new and different ways but that also tells different versions of the same true story all at once.

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Notes

1 See, for example, Norman Sims, "Preface," and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "The Borderlands of Culture: Writing by W.E.B. Du Bois, James Agee, Tillie Olsen, and Gloria Anzaldúa," in *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Norman Sims (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); or Jan Whitt, *Settling the Borderland: Other Voices in Literary Journalism* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2008).

2. Mark Deuze, "What Is Multimedia Journalism?" *Journalism Studies* 5, no. 2 (2004): 140.

3. Ibid., 141.

4. Susan Jacobson, "Emerging Models of Multimedia Journalism: A Content Analysis of Multimedia Packages Published on nytimes.com," *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 18, no. 2 (2010): 74.

5. Deuze, "Multimedia Journalism," 145.

6. Steen Steensen, "Online Journalism and the Promises of New Technology," *Journalism Studies*, 12, no. 3 (2011): 311-327.

7. Ibid., 320.

8. Ibid.

9. David Isay, *Listening Is an Act of Love* (New York: Penguin, 2007): 250–52.

10. David Isay, interview by Miles Maguire, July 30, 2010.

11. Melissa Ludtke, "Radio Documentaries Take Listeners into Dark Corners," *Nieman Reports,* Fall 2001, http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/101584/Radio-Documentaries-Take-Listeners-Into-Dark-Corners.aspx.

12. David Stewart, "Audio Producer David Isay: Curiosity . . . Respect . . . Trust," *Current*, April 23, 2001, http://www.current.org/people/peop0108isay2.html.

13. Ibid.

14. Joseph Mitchell, *Up in the Old Hotel* (New York: Pantheon, 1992): 33–34.

15. Norman Sims, "Joseph Mitchell," in *A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism: Representative Writers in an Emerging Genre*, ed. Thomas B. Connery (New York: Greenwood, 1992): 206.

16. Ludtke, "Radio Documentaries."

17. David Isay, *Holding On* (New York: Norton, 1996): 11–12.

18. Mitchell, "Old Hotel," 373.

19. Ludtke, "Radio Documentaries."

20. Isay interview.

21. Sims, "Joseph Mitchell," 207.

22. Ludtke, "Radio Documentaries."

23. Stewart, "Audio Producer David Isay."

24. Isay interview.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Norman Sims, *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2007): 184.

29. David Isay, *The Sunshine Hotel*, transcript, http://soundportraits.org/on-air/the_sunshine_hotel/transcript.php.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. David Isay and Stacy Abramson, *Flophouse: Life on the Bowery* (New York: Random House, 2000): 147.

35. Isay interview.

36. David Isay, *Mom: A Celebration of Mothers from StoryCorps* (New York: Penguin, 2010): 5.

37. Isay, *Sunshine* transcript.

38. Isay and Abramson, *Flophouse*, 128; David Isay and Stacy Abramson, "The Sunshine Hotel," *New York Times*, September 13, 1998, City section, 13.

39. Isay interview.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

42. Isay and Abramson, "Sunshine," *New York Times*, 13.

43. Isay, *Sunshine* transcript.

44. New York Times Co., "Guidelines on Integrity," http://www. Nytco.com/company/business_units/integrity.html.

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46. Isay, *Sunshine* transcript.

47. Isay and Abramson, "Sunshine," *New York Times*, 12.

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50. Harvey Wang, "These Pictures Are Not about the Photographer," *Nieman Reports*, Spring 2001, http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitemprint.aspx?id=101734.

51. Ibid.

52. Isay and Abramson, *Flophouse*, 120.

53. Ibid., 108.

54. Sims, "Joseph Mitchell," 1992.