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The Role of the Literary Journalist in the Digital Era

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Keynote address, International Association for Literary Journalism Studies, Paris, France, May 2014

I wanted to talk today about what goes into the making of a literary journalist and how we literary journalists are trying to keep faith with the elusive thing we like to call truth as we are frog-marched into the post-paper world.

I know those of you who study literary journalism think of it as a field appropriate for scholarly investigation. Of course, those of us who've stumbled into its practice, like me, find this charming and amusing. I hope what I have to say will help those of you who study our work to understand our methods and concerns. It's especially important as we face the digital era in journalism, an era of great potential but that also poses many problems for us.

I, for one, began my professional life as a newspaper intern in New Jersey, as a magazine subeditor, and then as a newspaper reporter. I was not exalted. I was like the early George Orwell, an often rejected writer of occasional pieces, or the young Graham Greene, originally a subeditor of a local paper in Nottingham. Or like the young Joan Didion, who wrote PR copy for *Vogue*. Lowly was a word that defined me—and I like to think still defines me. A writer must cling to humility, or lose everything.

For me, not to demystify things, I see literary journalism as documentary first and foremost. Also I see it as nonfiction *writing*. Literary journalism is not mysterious—or should not be. Its first obligation is to history, and history that lasts is not always an easy thing to maintain in the digital era. Digital media last forever—your post is always findable. But someone has to look for it; it's only present in the public mind for a nanosecond . . . .

But I have to say one thing. As a reporter and a journalist, I was always going to be a *literary* journalist. My interest always lay with fiction, memory, and

writing; with narrative and character; and the rough, sinewy beauty of reality properly observed.

In particular, I did not like covering news, and this is a failing with most literary journalists: they abhor having to cover news. And for good reason: Imagine what this is like. Something happens and you, who are a writer—you have to deal with it as it unfolds. Instead of knowing the whole trajectory of the story and unfolding it for your readers with power and control, you yourself become not very different from your readers: no one knows what the heck's going on!

As a story unfolds in real time, it's almost impossible to know what it means. News is written down, but it is not *written*, and therefore it's not literature. Say you have to cover a murder. I had to cover a murder once when I was a reporter on Long Island. It was, supposedly, a Satanic ritual drug-induced murder—among teenaged boys. The editors sent me to the victim's house to get a quote from his family. I was a rookie and the editors treated me accordingly. Getting a victim quote was not considered an exalted task. It was lowly. I stood in the garden at the end of the path that wound down to the door. This was a path I was not going to travel, I knew as I stood there in the cool evening air. I imagined it: ringing the doorbell. The distraught mother, the angry father. The family hadn't picked up the phone all day, while other reporters called; how would they feel when I came to their door?

There are things one cannot bring oneself to do. So I went to a pay phone and called my editors and told them I had rung the bell—but no one came. And it was partly true: no one came! My editors were disappointed. What if another paper got a good quote, they asked. I didn't care. These were competitions in which I had made no investment. By the way, I can still see that path, that door, the low sky, the breeze of a late afternoon toward summer, the brown grass. I still know I did the right thing. And I know now that I can use that particular memory in my work today, if I choose. Indeed, I am using it now. Memory and time add layers to story. But newswriting is perilously free of those elements, which are the basis of literary journalism, just as they are of fiction.

Still, because of my background in journalism, I've had some funny moments in my life as a literary journalist. When I write nonfiction, critics say it's a lot like fiction. But when I write fiction, they wonder how close it is to journalism. I like straddling this porous border.

When I began to write about Haiti,[1] I learned more about what makes a book—or essay—writer different from a daily journalist, or someone who offers up his reports on Facebook or Twitter or Instagram. Reporters, first of all, in the old days at least, were working for a publishing entity of some sort: a newspaper, a magazine, a television news program, a radio show. They served the

interest of the publication and had to adhere to its conventions. If you worked for *Time* magazine or the *New York Times*, you had to know on which type of American cargo plane Duvalier fled the unrest in Haiti. You had to know the make and caliber of the guns the Haitian army was pointing at the crowd and at you. You had to do crowd estimates and body counts.

Whereas I had the leisure, as a book writer, a writer, that is, of literary journalism, to focus on the blue plastic roses on the coffee table in the living room of one of the dozens of the perennial presidential candidates. I had the time and the inclination to examine the blade of a machete after it was used to kill a member of the Tonton Macoutes, Duvalier's feared secret police. I knew that the renegade liberation priest who would one day become president liked to signal his presence to nighttime visitors by jangling the impressive ring of keys he always had with him in sunshine—and in darkness. I could get to know Ti Johnny, a street boy whose mother was a drunk in a shantytown called Fifth Avenue.

By dint of immersion and continuity of presence, I could learn more, over time, than the best newspaper journalists, and my understanding of Haiti, its history, its politics, its unfolding heroic and tragic narrative, its grave wonders and unfathomable human secrets, was and always would be novelistic, encompassing, profound and historic. And one of the things that fed that deep work and novelistic perspective was the work of all the daily reporters who came down to write about Haiti, and the articles where a few of them did discover actual facts and numbers and the names of those planes and the source of epidemics—reporting work that I plundered (and still plunder) without remorse to bolster my books and pieces.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that literary journalism isn't really journalism, with all of journalism's implications of the daily grind and continual output, and the quotidian chore of the workaday. The literary journalist does not feed the news-cycle communications beast the way the real journalist must. Usually the literary journalist is not writing to space—not limited to filling a hole on a page or on a website. Usually, we are not over-tormented by the needs of our editor and publisher. If we are feeding a beast, it's the beast of our literary ambitions and of our writer's hope to influence the world. It's a rarified beast of our own devising, not voracious but picky, and usually off its feed.

That said, in the hands of a writer of what we have chosen to call literary journalism, even Twitter, with its short character count, can provide a platform for great and meaningful writing. I know a doctor who was working in Haiti who in a series of consecutive tweets could conjure up the whole post-earthquake situation right down to the details of her patients' tribulations and the chaos of elections in the ruins.

But let's not forget that there are many similarities between a working journalist and a writer of literary nonfiction. Like the serious daily journalist, the literary journalist, from Mark Twain to Didion to Kapuściński to e to even the great aesthete Bruce Chatwin, writes in order to interact with or to put pressure on the actors in the very world she or he is describing. At the same time, we want to seduce our readers: we write for a two-headed beast, ourselves and our readers. It's a weird act of magic: we pluck up a world, hold it in our hands, and then offer it, often across seas and continents and across cultures and classes, to another world for consumption.

Now, what exactly happens to the subject under consideration, in that transforming moment between the act of the writer's observing and the end point of delivery to the consumer, which is to say publication in all of its guises? What happens between the writer's uploading of her subject and the download to her readers? This is especially important to consider today, on the super speedy two-way street of Internet journalism. What happens between the writer's uploading of her subject and the download to her readers? This is what happens: the subject becomes objectified. Haiti becomes a thing I give to my readers, with all of its people wrapped up in it. It's a present, a gift, to the readers and it is presented that way, too, as a surprise between covers, or behind glossy paper, or running below an eye-catching, even literally moving, illustration at the top of a website.

Yet although the literary journalist brings one world into contact with another, often enough there is very little relation between the subject of a piece of literary journalism and the readers of that piece. Ti Johnny, for example, never met my readers, nor was he likely to. There was no fair exchange. I had kidnapped Johnny from Grande Rue, put him in my pages, and handed him to my readers. In this situation, there was no ransom for poor Johnny. I lifted the child into a kind of history, but Ti Johnny, and Johnny's family, got nothing in exchange. This has always bothered me, the power I wield over my subjects, often without their even knowing it. It's why, I believe, people who live in countries where cameras have not been very present have traditionally felt that photographers are stealing something from them when they take a picture. We are stealing from them: we're stealing their graven images, and we're stealing the material of their lives.

One of my favorite meta-photographs to come out of the 2010 Haitian earthquake had as its subject a young girl in a pink satin dress who had been killed in the tremor. She was lying out on a wall somewhere in downtown Port-au-Prince, her body awkward and ungraceful, as bodies tend to be before the mortician makes his corrections. Around the globe there must have been many pictures published of this girl's body as it lay there, unprotected by her family, who, it is possible, may also have been killed. But this photo that I love is not

just of the girl but of the phalanx of white male photographers with cameras to their eyes, and great big lenses, who stand in front of the wall where she's lying, shooting her. I honor the photographer who took their picture, taking her picture. I call that picture literary photojournalism.

A chapter in my last book[2] was called "Werewolves in the Camps." This chapter was about the relief and recovery effort after the Haitian earthquake, but also about the traditional Haitian folk-figure of the Loup Garou, or werewolf. Actually, that was going to be the title, for a while, of the entire book: Werewolves in the Camps. During times of unrest or disaster, this traditional figure emerges rather strongly among storytellers in Haiti. The loup garou steals children and sucks the blood out of them, and in using that name in a title, I was trying to compare this strange, stalking, ravenous monster to the exploitive outside organizations that used maimed, raped, and orphaned victims of the earthquake to beef up their PR videos and fundraising.

But in talking about the loup garou among the traumatized Haitians, I was also talking about myself, the observer and writer. It was fully my intention to take the Haitians' story, to suck it up, and then sell it back home. I saw myself clearly as a kind of loup garou. As James Agee wrote about literary journalism in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men:*

> It seems to me curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying, that it could occur to . . . an organ of journalism, to pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings, . . . for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings, in the name of science, of "honest journalism" (whatever that paradox may mean), of humanity, of social fearlessness, for money, and for a reputation for crusading and for unbias . . . without the slightest doubt of their qualification to do an "honest" piece of work, and with a conscience better than clear, and in virtual certitude of almost unanimous public approval.[3]

Even with better known people who appear as characters in my literary journalism, my writing gives me a power over them in which they have no say—and that is how they are handed over to my readers. I don't just mean Haitians but also the Californians I wrote about in my book about California and all the other individuals I've allowed or forced into my work over the years.

I'm not just an information vector, I'm a middleman, and I can add or subtract value from the resource I'm selling. I always tell my students in the literary journalism program at the University of California, at Irvine, that they are the kings of their pieces. And I mean this. They rule! As they like to say.

This is why it has become rote to call a nonfiction writer's characters "subjects." Not just the topic of the piece but the characters in it. A piece of literary

journalism is a country where the writer rules as a harsh dictator. The failures of that "country" are his, its successes also. The people who, as subject matter, are sucked into a piece of literary journalism are utterly controlled by the writer. Almost as much as in fiction, they are ruled by her fierce demands and the demands she imposes by her choice of narrative. She marshals her subjects, she deploys them; they scatter at her command. She decides, within the contours of her narrative, where and when her characters will die, or at least come to their inevitable and inexorable finale.

This is why writers can so easily become arrogant and prideful, even though we here at this conference know that writers are also famously frightened and insecure, like powerful queens who nonetheless fear the handmaid's poison. It's important, then, to recognize the position of the writer, both as she writes the story but even more important, as she appears in the story and as she appears to her subjects. Without that recognition, a writer can become obscene and immoral, as Agee says.

It's crucial to know how our presence as the writer influences the outcome of our story, how it changes the behavior of our subjects; what impact it really does have, what effect the book or article is assumed by the subjects to be about. For though there is little relation between the writer's reader and her subject, there's plenty of unacknowledged exchange between writer and subject. The writer bows to his subject and then turns and bows to his reader, equally, like a dancer in a minuet.

Here's one way these relations play out between writers from the developed world and their subjects in less developed countries. In almost all of these stories, the joke is on the writer. When I was working on my first book, I used to go visit Andre Pierre, a *houngan*, or voodoo priest, just outside Port-au-Prince. He lived off the national highway in Croix des Bouquets in a *lakou*, or courtyard, where he ruled his family—another king in another domain. He wore a tweed hunting cap and a brown argyle plaid sweater in the tropical heat; he chain-smoked, he had big bags under his eyes. No teeth to speak of. He was always glad to have a gulp of rum, at ten a.m., at five p.m., and whenever in between, and also before—and also after. He had, at that time, thirty-two children, by his best calculation. He was already ancient when I first met him. I never neglected to bring him a bottle of rum when I visited.

Like many voodoo priests in Haitian history, Gangan Pierre was also an artist. In his case, it happened that he was a very great artist. His pictures are jewel-like crowded contained radiant canvases strewn with majestic gods and goddesses in the full midst of godly activities. He's dead now, but I visited him for years, for maybe a decade, on and off. I would just let him talk, let him run on. He was prophetic and majestic, himself. He held my book together with

his amazing pronouncements. I loved him—although it must be said we didn't have a lot in common. But I would sit on the hard black wooden chair in his studio, I guess you would call that one small sunlit room, and have coffee prepared by his acolytes with chicory and tons of sugar, and he would paint and talk and drink and smoke, and pour rum for the gods.

One day, about a year after my book was published, I went to visit Gangan Pierre. He was painting. Behind his canvas, I saw the glint of a piece of glossy paper that had never been there before. It looked strangely familiar to me, somehow. He gestured me to my black chair (all visitors sat there), and I sat and squinted to get a better look at the scrap of paper. Ah. Yes, could it be? It was: it was a review of my book that had appeared in *Time* magazine, I think it was.

After painting in silence for some time, Gangan Pierre took a swig of rum and was prompted into speech. He started talking about the painting in front of him and the gods in it, Erzulie Freda, Kouzin Zaka, Papa Legba, Damballah Wedo, and the rest, as if they were his nieces and nephews—or possibly a few of his thirty-two children. And then he plucked up the *Time* review. A wealthy foreign patron had brought it to him, he told me. Gangan Pierre pointed at the piece of paper, or really pointed into it, with a jutting, jabbing, paint-stained finger pushing at the surface, and began to quote by heart in Creole from a paragraph in it that was a quote from him that I had quoted in the book. The patron must have read it to him, translating.

It was clear that Gangan Pierre had absolutely no idea that the piece of paper had anything to do with me. He did not know that it was a review of a book, much less a book written by me, his faithful friend and rum-bringer. I am not sure he ever fully took into his mind that I was a writer, or what that might mean, exactly. I don't think he was ever aware of my name, not even my first name, although I introduced myself on a regular basis. He certainly did not know that I was the writer of the book that was being reviewed on the piece of paper he had in front of him. I don't think he could read.

He definitely was never going to begin to conceive of the idea of a book review—that was not in his wonderstruck universe, luckily for him. But he had memorized the quote from himself and knew he was being quoted in a place where the quote, as well as his name, could be seen, as he said, by the *mond entye,* the whole world (or at least, I said to myself at the time, some New York subscribers).

He was quite pleased. I felt ridiculous. There was a yawning crevasse of understanding between us that I was not about to begin to try to explain to him. Imagine explaining it. Imagine, if you will, explaining to someone, to anyone of good faith, what a book review is. In any case, what dazed me most about this weird moment was that this person whom I had quoted in

my book as a dispenser of timeless truths, as a poetic seer, as a visionary who gave life and Haiti meaning—this man, this colossal artist, felt in some way validated by . . . well, essentially by his appearance in my book.

Again: the writer must understand her role. She must understand not just how she herself crafts a narrative out of the material she gathers, but how she and her project are perceived and understood by her subjects, who are her basic material, after all. In other words, literary journalists, if they're serious, are taking the world and making art from it: a big claim, I know, but true—and I think you all agree.

The only problem is our art ain't fiction. Like documentary filmmakers, to whom we are closest in the narrative arts, we make our art out of other people's lives, hardships, woes. What we do is simply a lot less fictive than fiction, but it's fiction-y, nonetheless. It's an awkward, vexed combination: this fiction-y nonfiction, the stuff that lies on both sides of the porous border.

I can tell you that once I'm finished with a story, I often find myself wishing that there weren't so much reality in it. For example, I don't like it when my characters strike back; when what I thought I had pinned to the page turns out still to have a life of its own and flies in my face. This was the case, to an extent with Gangan Pierre, though it was merely a gentle reminder.

But after my California book was published,[4] I was made queasy when I heard that one of my subjects had taken to her bed for three days after reading my pages on her. And then she managed to get a *New Yorker* writer to do a very friendly profile on her around six months later. I didn't like being taken off the social circuit by my former friends in Hollywood. There were two things about it: my characters were punishing me (the handmaid's poison, as I call this phenomenon), but also I felt guilty for causing them public embarrassment, I felt guilty about betraying them. They had let me in, a guest among their gold furnishings and paintings of Marie Antoinette (seriously!!); they had let me in imagining I was one kind of journalist, a Hollywood journalist, but I had behaved like a literary journalist, and that, for them, was unforgiveable.

But that is as nothing when compared to the unequal relationship I feel to my Haitian subjects. A journalist from an imperial country poaching on a colonized, globalized population, a rich bitch in a poor land. In Haiti, no matter who I think I am, I end up being a representative of the hegemonic power, a living embodiment of the United States and France and the white man and the whole torrid history of the island with its masters. Here I am, great white bwana, sitting on the one chair in a rundown, dirt-based, tin and cardboard *lakou* in a Haitian shantytown, eating a Haitian sweet and listening to the family's stories of tragedy with my notebook open, with my notebook actually resting on the narrow back of a little girl who has decided to perch herself on my

lap and has clambered up as if I were a climbable statue of a seated Napoleon or Columbus. Actually, in such circumstances I feel more like a combination of an intrusive, bratty Goldilocks and Alice in Wonderland, when she's ten feet tall. And here I am, stealing their sweets and their stories, which they give me so freely. The child's braids hang over my notebook, and I brush them aside to write.

If you're writing about people in Beverly Hills or Washington, D.C., it's not too surprising that they can try to get back at you. They'll hear about your book; they'll read it; they'll complain, sometimes publicly. But now in the digital world, even the most oppressed subject may hear about your work and strike back, although, except in one instance, Haitians never have struck back at me. Yet! Again, Internet writing is a two-way street as is anything that's viewable on the Internet. Interactive: an interesting word. Here's an example: Another reporter-slash-writer went to Haiti to write a piece for *Mother Jones* about a post-quake gang rape victim. The story was to appear online as well as in print. The reporter spent time with the woman,[5] and then one day she was with her in Port-au-Prince some time after the rape when the victim started screaming and freaking out because she had just seen some of her attackers.[6] The reporter was with her at that moment and witnessed the woman's reaction to seeing these men. The reporter tweeted about it in real time.

Well, the rape victim found out about the story the reporter was filing to *Mother Jones*—someone she knew had seen the series of tweets, I think it was—and went to a lawyer in Haiti. The rape victim also wrote a note to Haitian American novelist and nonfiction writer Edwidge Danticat in which the victim said: "Our choices about when and how our story is told must be respected."[7] Danticat published the letter online.

Take that, White Bwana. Take that, Goldilocks. This kind of public chastisement of writers and documentarians by their subjects will become more and more common, because imperial writers are now writing in places where they can be read by everyone—and more important, by anyone.

So the Internet can keep us honest by letting the voices of our subjects into the conversation. But it is also demanding, and it demands, above all, action and narrative in long-form writing, because "clicks" and "eyeballs" are attracted to what is fastest moving and most cinematic in writing; clicks and eyeballs are also attracted to links and illustration, to video and photographic attachments running alongside your literary nonfiction. Thus this year's much-touted *New York Times* magazine story "Snowfall," about skiers caught in an avalanche, was overburdened with links and attachments that the narrative, moving quickly but with little character development or description or introspection or meaningful context or even real suspense, could not support.

So the variety and complication of Internet presentation of nonfiction, while it may beef up a story's appearance, also can easily sully and detract from literary quality. Depth is sacrificed to surface appeal—the literary swirl of the Internet is often a reflective and seductive but shallow lake. Because of this, I have not yet written long-form literary journalism directly for the web, although I do write a blog. But to write long form for readers who are seeking thrills, I don't think I can satisfy that, so I don't think my work would necessarily get seen.

I'm not positive (because I can't find the reference for the quote anymore), but I believe it was Ryszard Kapuściński who said, "Evil people cannot be good journalists." Let's define evil as having no moral scruples. If you have no moral scruples, QED, you cannot be a good journalist and—I will add—you especially cannot be a literary journalist.

A good journalist doesn't just find truth, he combats evil in the world. I keep telling my students: If your goal is to tell a happy story about happy people, go tell it somewhere else. I am not interested in "upworthy." Which, by the way, is the name of a website dedicated to good news. I say leave good news to the believers, and meanwhile, we who question norms, hierarchies, and rules that are handed down will go on being literary journalists, which is to say, again: writers.

So these literary journalists, the long-form nonfiction writers—explorers, really, who have Kapuściński's moral scruples—will go on, in spite of the web's demands for speed and sometimes superficiality, questioning leaders, power brokers, cronies, and bankers. We'll continue framing the stories that we find as narratives, with characters who have backstories and psychological baggage. We'll keep looking at how life is lived on the planet. We'll notice eccentricity and explore it. We'll discover worlds you never knew existed, and bring back their histories and their lives to you. We'll find new activities people are engaged in, and we'll watch them and live with them and emerge bringing you their tale, wherever they are, wherever you are. We may do this for free, or for pay. Hopefully paid, because it costs money to go places and learn things. We may do this on paper, but more likely online. We may take notes in notebooks, or on smartphones. But the moral quest of literary journalists will always be the same, same as it ever was: to find truth, to tell stories, to change the world.

And in the digital age, despite the obstacles confronting literary journalists, a good, smart, profound story that "gains traction" or "goes viral" can have a huge impact. And I am glad about that. I'm truly glad; it's important.

But my heart and my mind still lie with the great stories, the greatest stories, ones that, in their eccentricity of interests and idiosyncrasies of form, tower above the rest, and will never gain traction, will never, can never, go viral.

Amy Wilentz is an award-winning journalist who has covered Haiti since the end of 1985, during a period of great turbulence in that country's history. She has also written about the ongoing conflict between the Palestinians and Israel. She is a contributing editor at the Nation *magazine and was the Jerusalem bureau chief of the* New Yorker *magazine 1995–98. Her work has appeared in those two publications as well as in the* New York Times, Time, *the* Los Angeles Times, *the* New Republic, *the* London Review of Books, Vogue *and* Condé Nast Traveler. *Her most recent book,* Farewell, Fred Voodoo: A Letter from Haiti *(Simon & Schuster), won the 2013 year's National Book Critics Circle Award (Autobiography). She is a professor in the Literary Journalism program at the University of California, Irvine, and is currently beginning work on a documentary book about life in a Haitian shantytown, as well as finishing her second novel. Her blog, which focuses largely on Haitian politics and culture and news, can be found at www.amywilentz.com.*

Notes

1. Amy Wilentz, *The Rainy Season: Haiti Since Duvalier* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989).
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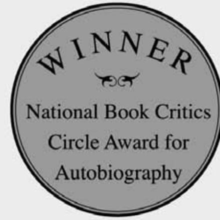
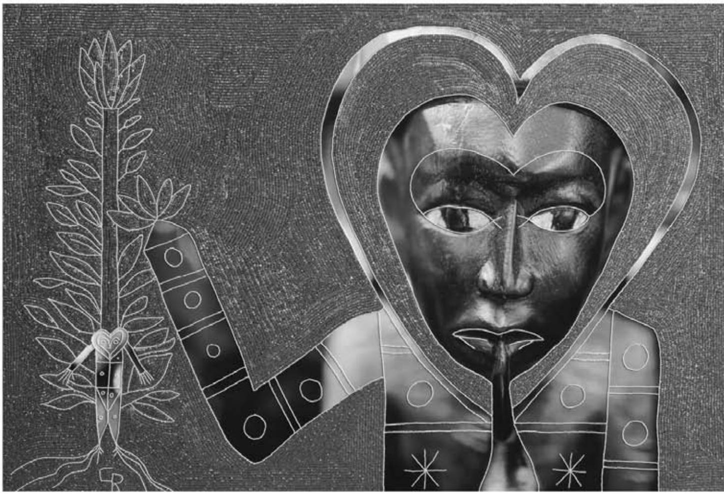
"Note-perfect prose and unflinching inquiry. . . . [An] intimate, honest, bracingly unsentimental book." —BEN FOUNTAIN, *The New York Times Book Review*



FAREWELL, FRED VOODOO

A LETTER FROM HAITI



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