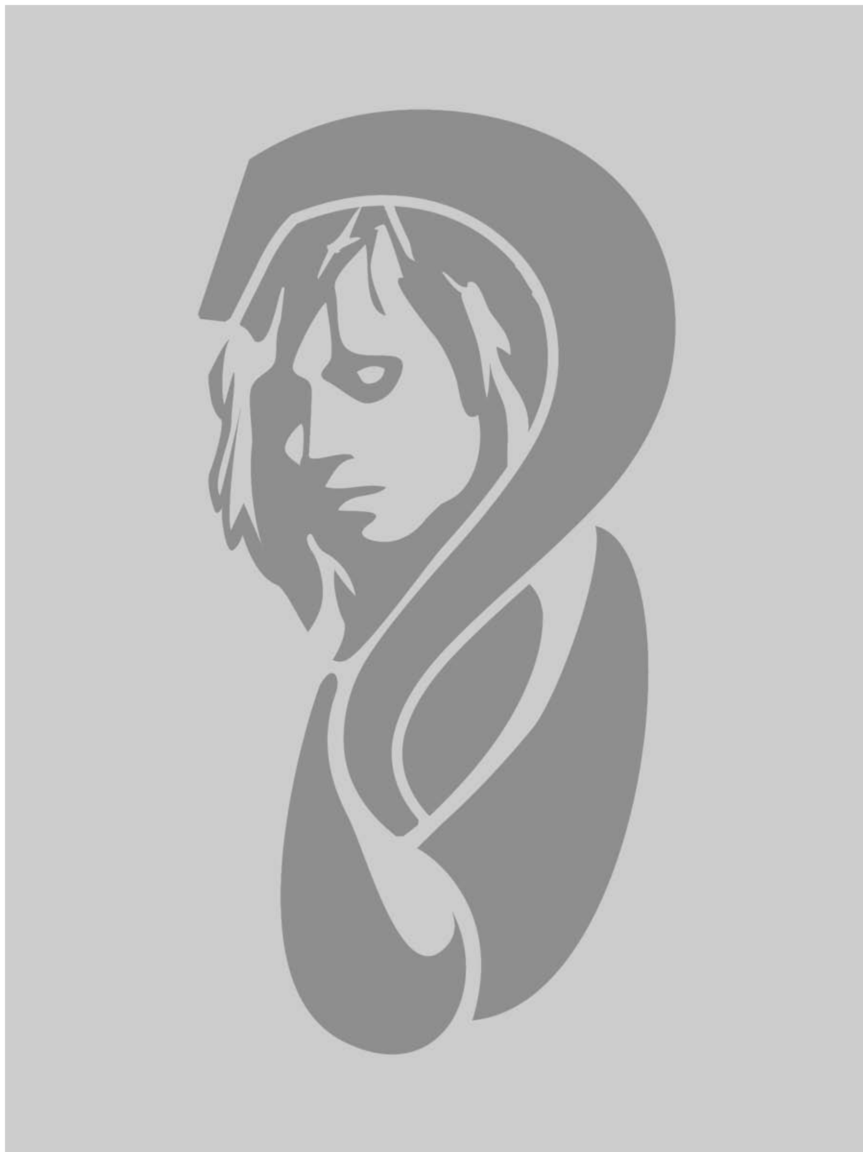

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Finding Emma Larkin

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Abstract: This essay examines the first of two books by Emma Larkin, the anonymous journalist behind two recent nonfiction accounts of the country we otherwise call Myanmar: *Finding George Orwell in Burma* (2005), and *Everything Is Broken: A Tale of Catastrophe in Burma* (2010). By way of a comparison to Janet Malcolm's meditations on narrative and identity, I examine in particular Larkin's strategic uses of anonymity, concealment, and identity exchanges: in her narrative persona and working practice as a journalist; in her role as a literary explicator of George Orwell's life and work; and as a political historian of the complex national transformation from colonial subjugation (as Burma) under the British into the modern totalitarian state of Myanmar. While appearing to write a conventional travel biography of the man (Eric Arthur Blair) who became George Orwell, Larkin actually "finds" a complex, multilayered Orwell in Burma's own fragmentary and illicit literary culture, a culture that to this day sustains its own underground, oblique "reporting" on the abuses of Myanmar's military regime in the early years of the twenty-first century. In turn, that society—and that regime—shapes both Orwell's legacy and what the reporter "Emma Larkin" can be.

For all I know, someone out there has reported on, blogged about, or tweeted out the true identity of the journalist behind the pen name "Emma Larkin," the anonymous author of two recent books on the country we otherwise call Myanmar: *Finding George Orwell in Burma* (2005), and *Everything Is Broken: A Tale of Catastrophe in Burma* (2010). But for now, I've decided that I may be just as happy not knowing who she really is. This is not, I should quickly add, a position that stems from any moral or critical qualms about the biographical fallacy, or authorial intention, or—assuming I fully understood the idea—Foucault's notion of the "author-function." And I'll admit up front that I still can't quite resist pestering my usually cooperative journalism

students with the various possibilities of Larkin's identity, other than the fragments her book jackets reveal: American, born and now living in Asia, educated at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, and—well, that's about it. ("What if she's not really a woman?" I ask. "What if her face seems identifiably Anglo-Burmese?" You know: questions professors ask.) In any event, I've arrived at my somewhat contrarian view of Larkin's anonymity—granting her a privilege we almost never allow a journalist—from the sheer pleasure of teaching her work, and of stumbling across some of the advantages of tarrying around her anonymity. And with that, embracing the challenges of linking her analysis of Myanmar's totalitarianism with the intelligence—or, rather, the political imagination behind the pen name—with whom that political category has long been associated: George Orwell.

I'll also concede that my current preference about Larkin goes against the grain of the ways we customarily talk about either anonymity or a *nom de plume* (inadequate though that latter term is). On the literary side of things, the more customary critical approach is to scour the biographical and psychological archive behind a pen name, the better to ponder the back stories or inside jokes that might be involved. ("Mark Twain," I also tell my students: "two chalk marks on the wall of a Virginia City saloon, keeping track of Samuel Clemens's bar tab.") But the stakes of anonymity or an assumed identity rise considerably—and the issues change—when we are talking about a journalist. Especially, I think, in our current moment.

As many will recognize, a good deal of anxiety, of late, has been circling around reporters' identities. In the United States, at least—my comments will necessarily be restricted to the national situation I know best—even the most successful of undercover reporters, for instance, have recently been greeted with new resistance. So, for instance, when Ken Silverstein of *Harper's* ingeniously posed as a representative of Turkmenistan in 2007 to more-than-willing PR firms in DC, the chorus of response from his professional peers was—surprisingly—largely disapproving. If you mean to show that lobbying agencies or corporate giants like Walmart™ aren't being up front about who they are, the reasoning went, neither are you. Moreover, it was now said, the undercover strategy could lead to an unwarranted invasion of privacy. (Imagine a closeted gay man making a pass at Norah Vincent of *Self-Made Man* [2006], only to discover that she is not a he.) Even when the anonymity of a subject or source is putatively protected, some observers will now say that it is unethical to elicit private statements without having informed your source up front that you are a journalist. Nor is US law always so friendly to the undercover ploy, especially if it can be shown—in this second great Age of the Corporation—that you are trespassing, or committing "tortious inter-

ference" with an employee's job. In many US universities, meanwhile, it is probably the case that many of the most famous undercover accounts we are familiar with, from the best traditions of literary journalism—by Nelly Bly, Stephen Crane, Jack London, and Orwell himself—would not pass muster in today's so-called human subject research-ethics reviews. Even prominent US journalists such as Barbara Ehrenreich sometimes seem so gun-shy as to deny they are drawing upon the undercover tradition at all. And thus, a usefully renegade tradition of reporting is subjected to a chilling effect when, in my view, we may need it more than ever.[1]

On top of all that, especially in the wake of the "fact-fiction" scandals of Jayson Blair, James Frey, Michael Finkel, Greg Mortenson, et al., the otherwise contentious camps within the broader study of literary nonfiction can often sound uncharacteristically unanimous in insisting that a journalist be who she says she is. In newsrooms as such, of course, professional reporters have never been inclined to forego the status of the byline. Even though some readers may unconsciously digest daily news as "unauthored" prose, news writers themselves are hardly liable to turn back more than a century and a half of hard struggle for name recognition, all the more important if they turn to writing books. And yet, the really interesting thing is that even if you go out to the farthest edges of the American academic commentary that emphasizes the "epistemological insecurity," or uncertainty, of facticity—say, to the theoretical flights of David Shields in *Reality Hunger* (2010), or the often flippant asides of John D'Agata in *The Lifespan of a Fact* (2012)—you'll find that both these thinkers *also* concede that journalists must not play at the games of creative, inventive genre bending that they themselves do.[2] My sense is that these lapses into argumentative comity are, at least in part, an implicit acknowledgement of the more general cooling of the US news profession's climate around experimental forms of reportage. For example, when the *Columbia Journalism Review*'s Robert S. Boynton edited the invaluable anthology called *The New New Journalism* in 2005, it wasn't hard to pick up the inference in the double-take of his title: "new new" meant a course correction, away from Tom Wolfeish stylistic extravagance (!!?!!!) and from the imitation of experimental or postmodern fiction. Back to immersion, to hard reporting, to topicality—to being, at a premium, what Boynton called responsible "prose poets of the quotidian." Not surprisingly, Boynton's book of interviews was organized by chapter headings featuring his supposedly "new new" journalists' real names, in bold print and all caps.[3]

The journalistic work represented by those names is certainly invaluable, even if the realist protocols often behind it are substantially more "literary" than it sometimes lets on.[4] Here, I would simply begin by observing

that the author calling herself "Emma Larkin" has taken a more unorthodox view of her journalistic identity. In a 2008 online essay for Finlay Publishers about her own naming choice—and, again, that of the man born Eric Arthur Blair—she recounts, for instance, how her own crafting of the name Emma Larkin was "part choice, part chance." She adopted her surname, she tells us, from a street in San Francisco she happened to be driving down when she made her choice. Now that her work has gained repute, she adds, her decision to stay anonymous has occasionally had comic results. For instance, she reports that she often stutters when answering phone calls for Emma Larkin; that she blushes when her proud mother whispers her secret to close relatives; that she sometimes responds haltingly when someone in her regular life asks, as people still will, "And what do you do?" (It would seem to such inquisitors, she adds, not very much at all.) And then, she uses these self-deprecations to connect, in turn, to the similarly idiosyncratic and even baffling ways that Blair used "George Orwell." At times, Blair employed "Orwell" interchangeably with his birth name, even in print; sometimes he used "George" with late-in-life friends (though childhood ones knew him as Eric); he even loaned out "Orwell" to a wife. Privately, he sometimes said he used a pen name because he felt overexposed in public, fearful of the "black magic" that negative reviews might direct at him.[5] (No pen name, alas, can ward off that curse.)

Now, to be sure, the online person behind Larkin might be accused of sheer whimsy, prolonging her ruse—or, simply tantalizing us, a bit like the proverbial Cheshire Cat of Lewis Carroll. (Or, I guess, of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson.) And whatever name she uses, people will surely continue to raise questions about her work: about her biographical and literary judgments concerning Orwell; about whether it makes sense to think of an apparent "travel biography" as *reportage* at all[6]; about whether, in particular, Larkin avoids the well-documented pitfalls of the Western (and female) subject once again revisiting the haunts of former empires. (One thinks, for instance, of Mary Louise Pratt's drubbing of Joan Didion's *Salvador* [1982] in *Imperial Eyes* [2007].)[7] But I myself think Larkin's applications of her name choice are anything but whimsical, arbitrary, or conventional. On the contrary, they represent inventive, strategic, on-the-ground decisions mobilized to report on something—a totalitarian regime that viciously denies press freedoms and access—that might otherwise risk being unreportable. Moreover, her choices go to the heart of crucial dimensions of journalistic authority, and thus of the interpretations we as readers commonly make by acceding to it. Whether we recognize it or not, names and identities are entangled with all kinds of intentional and unintentional cover stories journalists may use, and these entanglements often carry over into "the what of the what" those reporters represent.

In these lights, it is telling that Larkin also used the occasion of her online rumination on pen names to cite East Asian traditions that themselves, she says, treat names rather differently than many in the West do. As Larkin has it, citizens in Asia may use name changes to acknowledge the various ways that "our true identities do not reside in random names we are given at birth." Rather than marking us permanently, as if identifying the bloodlines behind our ink, names may instead be modified to mark important alterations in our lives, to register a change in our social affiliation or status, and sometimes to evade capture, imprisonment, or public defamation (as when Salman Rushdie lived as Joseph Anton). Not coincidentally, in fact, the two central identities identified in Larkin's title, *Finding George Orwell in Burma*—one a pen name and the other a national identifier—turn out to be vital to her argument about Myanmar.[8] An argument that has, as its central claim, the ingenious idea that three of Orwell's works—*Burmese Days* (1934), *Animal Farm* (1945), and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)—are an "unintentional trilogy" (109) on that country's history and current identity. Larkin, furthermore, also makes a more covert claim that moves in nearly the opposite direction: along with finding Orwell in Burma, she argues that Burma is crucial to understanding not just the contents of those three works by Orwell, but the literary sensibility shaping them.

It turns out, as well, that *Finding George Orwell* is itself a hybrid of literary identities, genre forms, and literary modes. It mixes biography, travel writing, and literary criticism, to name but three of its most obvious modalities.[9] Moreover, these modes are also brought together, put in conversation with each other, even allowed to shape-shift into one another—indeed, most importantly, allowed to shape Larkin's reporting on Myanmar's present. I want to begin, however, in a different place altogether: with Janet Malcolm's *The Journalist and the Murderer* (1990), itself a mixed-mode text with its own shadow dramas about names and journalistic authority.

Emma Larkin: No Lois Lane

Admittedly, Malcolm's sometimes strident and even obtuse treatise—hereafter *JM*—is pored over more by academics than by working journalists, even though it improbably offers itself as a defense of the news-writing fraternity. Page by page, as many readers will know, the book eviscerates what it characterizes as the self-aggrandizing and irresponsible treatment of murder suspect Jeffery MacDonald (another JM) by true crime writer Joe McGinniss (yes, another JM). Initially positioning himself as MacDonald's friend, confidant, and defense team colleague, McGinniss is depicted as having betrayed MacDonald by eventually casting him, in *Fatal Vision* (1983), as a ruthless

psychopath who murdered his own family. Rather than centering on this criminal act, however, *JM* focuses instead on McGinniss as the quintessential example of the sinning journalist who has superimposed his own theories (and sloppily, at that) onto the story his source, MacDonald, really wanted told. As a book on the profession, *JM* is full of blanket meta-commentary on journalistic practice: about psychoanalytic transference between reporters and their subjects; about the temptation to be "literary" and New Journalistic; about what reporters can learn from McGinniss's ostensibly Promethean theft of MacDonald's trust.[10]

And yet, when it turns its argument back on itself, *JM* seems to draw back from the implications of these very same cautions. The moment that comes to mind is an interlude in the book's afterword, when the narrator created by the book—you'll see in a minute why I'll initially speak of its voice that way—begins referring to the scandalous legal case of its own author Janet Malcolm (yes, again) involving psychiatrist Jeffrey Masson (okay, I'll stop). Anticipating that "some readers" would be liable "to think of [*JM*] as veiled autobiography"—that is, as a confession of the sins Masson claimed Malcolm had committed against *him*—the narrator says that such mistake derives "from a misconception about the identity of the character called 'I' in a work of journalism" (159). The narrator goes on to explain:

> This character is unlike all the journalist's other characters in that he forms the exception to the rule that nothing may be invented: the "I" character in journalism is almost pure invention. Unlike the "I" of autobiography, who is meant to be seen as a representative of the writer, the "I" of journalism is connected to the writer only in a tenuous way—the way, say, Superman is connected to Clark Kent. The journalistic "I" is an overreliable narrator, a functionary to whom crucial tasks of narration and argument have been entrusted. . . . He is an emblematic figure, an embodiment of the idea of the dispassionate observer of life (159–60).

Whatever one thinks of *JM* as a whole, this does not seem, at first glance, its best moment. Given that the book has rather viciously belittled the literary license assumed by McGinniss, it seems incredible that *JM* now wants to claim some for itself. Moreover, having shown the professional claim of objectivity to be entangled with personal desires and interpretive traps of all kinds—the subplots we infer from all of the book's literary play on shared initials—it seems illogical for the narrator to suddenly fall back on a claim to detached impartiality. *JM*'s analogy about Clark Kent and Superman, moreover, seems to confuse the indeed often quite superhuman powers of narrative with the outright invention of the journalist's own character in his or her report. We actually do *not* expect reporters to reinvent their identities wholesale

in text, just because they have put their reporting into narrative form.

Over time, however, I've become less interested in debunking Malcolm herself—and you can see, now, that I really do think it's silly to call her a narrator—than in what we can gather about these particular conundrums concerning journalistic identity generally. I say that because her analogy about Clark Kent and Superman is, when applied to Emma Larkin, almost precisely, weirdly, *literally* apt—and yet strangely in many ways backward. For example, Malcolm is partly correct that the writing up of a report can reendow a journalist with powers he or she does not have in the real: seeming invisibility, uncanny foresight, even (especially impossible) narrative omniscience, to name just a few. It might be, then, that *JM* is agreeing with Joyce Carol Oates, who concluded in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1987 that a "pseudonym . . . [is] not so very different from the cultivation [of] . . . narrative voice," since both are "inventions" of a sort.[11] But Malcolm's very point about journalism, we recall, has all along been that the "I" created by such effects should not stray too far from its original blood-and-bone author and his or her actions on scene. In fact, she says that's what distinguishes a given text as journalism in the first place.

And yet, it's not even quite *that* simple. The interesting thing about Larkin's online rumination, for example, is that it is not just her written-up persona, the term I'll use for her "I" in the text, which gets a literary fleshing out. On the contrary, that rumination renders a literary version of what we colloquially call Larkin's "real self." Moreover, that self-portrait—as a somewhat casual, hang-out-with-her-mother kind of person, ranging over the hills of San Francisco, blushing and stammering through life—correlates, we think, with the person behind and within the "Emma Larkin" voice in the text of her reports (and it's more than a voice, of course). And therefore, rather than becoming Malcolm's paragon of dispassionate authority, "Emma Larkin" is represented more as a regular person, much like the rest of us, ostensibly: as we see in Larkin's reports and books, she is a bicycle rider, a book lover, fond of sitting down in a café and talking about literature or politics. Therefore, whatever disinterestedness this voice may achieve, it actually derives its authority more from that "ordinariness," to use a word that Raymond Williams frequently honored; hardly invulnerable at all, that voice is, we might say, not *Suped* up so much as normalized.[12] Meanwhile, a related claim is made, implicitly—and I will return to this in my closing section: we are led to suppose that this identity is "regular" in the sense that she is not, in the obverse, an interested observer, in the sense of being anyone with an ax to grind about Myanmar. (Suppose, for instance, we discovered that Emma Larkin is actually a former ambassador to Burma. Or John Bolton. Or Dennis Rodman.)

In the meantime, in Larkin's reportorial practice—here, the term I'll reserve for the investigating, note-taking, and gathering up of what she reports, including her physical presence on the scene—things can get even more, to use Larkin's online term for Orwell's identity, "multilayered." As she is doing her legwork, Larkin indeed uses, as Malcolm would point out, her own given name (assuming she is not traveling to Myanmar on a forged passport). Importantly, however, this everyday identity is actually what provides her *cover* as she reports. This would be, again, akin to Malcolm's shrewd insight about Clark Kentism: reporters quite commonly come as they are without explicitly displaying the apparent trappings of their professional backgrounds or their prior training. Not Michael Lewis's MSc from the London School of Economics; not William Finnegan's training in an MFA program; not Ehrenreich's doctorate in cellular immunology. But whoever Larkin is, at most she uses the prior work done under her real name to supplement that cover—and sometimes she leaves that work unmentioned altogether. And again the inverse layer is important, too: as *JM* would insist, "Emma Larkin" is quite literally a "pen name," insofar as it is the retrospective, interior presence we encounter as we read her books.

Meanwhile, Emma Larkin never reveals her true or everyday identity to us, of course, as readers. While she is on assignment, only Myanmar officials, sources, and friends get that privilege, we gather. As far as those people on the ground are concerned, "Emma Larkin" turns out to be the secret identity. For us, the opposite is true. But as similar as this may sound to *JM's* analogy, this is where Malcolm gets things almost exactly backward. That is, because of the need to seem *not a reporter* on the ground in Myanmar, the pressure to seem ordinary becomes all the more vital to Larkin's practice. Her particular cover is sustained, we come to learn, by the fact that whoever Emma is, she apparently is careful not to come off as, say, a Lois Lane while she's doing her job (always searching out the scoop, making headlines, and so on). As a result, the quite grounded, earthly limitations this journalist describes in her online reflection also shape what the pen-named "Emma Larkin" can be, even in her text; the person authorizes the persona. And the persona largely stays in that name's ordinary domain, despite the superpowers that narrative might lend to her.

But, you might be asking, is Emma Larkin traveling or working undercover? Well, as I've been suggesting, the answer is both no and yes. Her ordinary identity, presented to the officials of Myanmar, is neither a lie, nor invented. Nevertheless, in practice it is selected from and refashioned, and it serves as both a cover and a constituent element of the literary persona we follow along when we read. As this Larkin seeks out George Orwell, she

travels through city after city in Myanmar, modeling her itinerary on his; in the familiar mode of travel narrative, Larkin strings together reflections along the way, on his biography, his writings, and his theories of totalitarianism, focusing on the local conditions that got him (and get her) thinking. Again, however, part of the drama of the book is that the past is being voiced to us, as her secret readers, as a way of reporting on Myanmar's present. But the ruse is not let out of the closet very much, to anyone around her, in real time.

Looking For What's Not There

With good reason. Larkin's reporting on Myanmar coincided with the moment when its military junta's forty-year reign reached its nadir of political repression and economic exploitation. By the end of the 1990s, the ruling elite of Myanmar had conducted another round of ever more aggressive series of raids on its own civil society: banning unions and civic associations, prohibiting unregistered computer modems and e-mail, even making it a crime for its own citizenry to invite foreigners into its homes. Constantly watching or recording internal movements, the regime also outlawed gatherings of more than five people and, of course, continued to restrict entry by foreign journalists and intimidate its own press through censorship, harassment, and round-ups. While the country's predominantly rural population drew even more impoverished, its army and cooperating economic elites grew far richer—in some cases, while becoming the world's leading producers of opium. AIDS also became rampant, and a formerly respectable heath care system fell, by some measurements, to next-to-last, globally. And millions of Burmese (largely members of nondominant ethnic groups) were exiled or displaced to border regions where sporadic internal warfare continues to be waged. Economic sanctions by the West, meanwhile—begun by the Clinton administration in the late 1990s and tightening over the next decade—may have only had the effect of driving the country deeper into the orbit of India, Thailand, Russia, and especially China, all eager to draw upon Myanmar's energy resources and, in some cases, sell its military their armaments. Some foreign journalists apparently resorted to the cover of tourism to gain entry to the country, but even the occasional travel writer—real or undercover—was obliged to point out that much of the tourist industry itself was erected on the backs of forced labor.[13]

As a result of all this, it was Larkin's decision, as I've said, to make her ordinariness her strategic asset and cover. That is, she tells us in *Finding George Orwell*, because her previous journalistic work had only rarely touched on Myanmar, she found that she could most easily "blend in" among tourists or the small community of expatriate businesspeople she discovered still there

(6). But even the tourist pose was a complicated, dangerous game. Because of the junta's extensive surveillance system, for example, we read that she was forced to repeatedly resubmit her passport, sign local form after form, and so on. In real time, therefore, she repeatedly uses the real name we, as readers, never hear. On the other hand, she occasionally lies to her watchers (but not to us) about her real occupation and the purpose of her visit (94). To reinforce this ploy, every time she arrives in a Burmese town, she tells us, she makes a point of visiting a church, since the locals assumed that's what Westerners are there to do (101). Once in a town or village, she is liable to blithely ride about on a bicycle, wittingly and sometimes unwittingly stumbling into areas where she is not supposed to be (61). And in turn, the ruse travels back out to what she writes: Larkin confesses that, in the book we're reading, she has even had to "change the names of the Burmese people [she] spoke with and, in some cases, their [actual] locations" (6). Larkin even admits that she invented such elaborate codes for places and events in her notes that she herself "sometimes had difficulty deciphering them later" (172).

Again, we might easily give in to the current impulse to scandalize these moments: to complain about "fictionalizing," point to composite characters, or theorize about the supposedly intrinsic "epistemological insecurity" of facticity itself. All, to be sure, legitimate concerns. But in my view, I think much of what we have here is simply a working journalist making pragmatic, reasonable, and quite productive decisions on the ground, and also seeing where they take her. (I don't believe we should lose any sleep over the hoodwinking of Burmese generals, either.) For like Susan Sheehan or Katherine Boo, Larkin has come to practice, I think, an art of indirection, using a persona and a practice of seeming unobtrusiveness, both of which are constituted in an "I" whose own observational powers are shaped by the practical considerations and situational ethics of her self-assignment. And she is willing to blunder into taboo spaces, all the while appearing as no threat to the powers that be. Therefore she is omniscient neither in the epistemological nor the narrative sense; neither is she aggressively digging underneath or behind facades, as we tend to think reporters should.[14] Rather, she accepts that, given her context, she will be forced to do what many of her sources and Burmese subjects do: dissemble, read, listen to whispers and rumors, infer the truth from what is *not* said (131)—to become experts, one friend tells her, at "looking for what's not there" (168). I can illustrate this complicated synergy with her context further, in three ways—let me start with two more obvious points, and then close this section with a less apparent, more multilayered one.

First, "Emma"—and now, we might ponder the suggestive literariness of the name—portrays her practice as strategically linking this persona of

unobtrusiveness to her female identity. Not to edgy bodily vulnerability, say, as Didion had, in *Salvador*; not to the fly-on-the wall, clinical minimalism of Sheehan; not to the secretive moral disdain, unspoken psychological analysis, or "Japanese" reticence to which Malcolm, oh so ethnocentrically, compares her method (98).[15] We can imagine Burmese officials (mistakenly) regarding Larkin as lacking in confidence, or deferential to the hypermasculinity that, *in situ*, expresses their repressive ethnic nationalism and xenophobia. Secondly, of course, Larkin's body in her practice, and as represented by her persona, marks her as a foreigner to Myanmar, or enough so that her friends and sources there are sometimes loathe to be seen with her, again for fear of government recrimination (24). To modify one of *Finding George Orwell*'s own favorite tropes for its Emily Dickinson–like circuitousness, she's never on a tandem bike. Most conversations we see her having are in enclosures that are neither precisely private nor public. Rather, they are liminal spaces, names of places where we meet informants who, again, were in all likelihood renamed in the text we are reading. (In a few cases, Larkin also talks with unnamed exiles outside of Myanmar.)

My third example of her practice and persona is likewise related to Larkin's characterization of Myanmar as a totalitarian state. The instance emerges when she describes a defense mechanism she experiences under the pressures of surveillance by the government and its beehive of informants. She enlists the help of Czeslaw Miłosz's *The Captive Mind* (1953), a book also indebted to Orwell:

> When I thought too much about the ever present surveillance I found it incredibly unnerving. I would view everyone I met with paranoia, weighing up the possibilities that he or she might be an informer or a member of [military intelligence]. If someone approached me while I was sitting on my own in a tea shop and asked too many questions I would often give him or her the cold shoulder. . . .
>
> I tried to develop the mask that I had seen so many of my Burmese friends wear in public. . . . "One does not perform on a theatre stage," says Milosz, "but in the street, office, factory, meeting hall, or even the room one lives in. Such acting is a highly-developed craft that places a premium on mental alertness. . . . A smile that appears at the wrong moment, a glance that is not all it should be can occasion dangerous suspicions and accusations. . . ."
>
> "It doesn't matter whether the things [informers] say about you are true or not," a friend told me. "You will be taken away to a detention centre and tortured or pressured until you have confessed to something you didn't do" (80–81).

There's a lot going on here: Larkin is describing a personal reaction that is partly temperamental, partly strategic, and even unconscious to a degree.

But mainly what seems to be happening is that she found herself developing a mask on top of the masks she had already been using. The multilayered irony is that, if Larkin begins by fashioning an ordinary, unobtrusive, even vulnerable "I," that persona-in-her-practice actually gets redoubled by the fearful conditions on which she is reporting.[16] And thus, finally—one might well have to revise one's syntax accordingly—*this* is how we begin to find Emma Larkin. That is, "find" not in the sense of discovering, or seeing behind, or even necessarily seeing more deeply into. Instead, I mean "finding" in the sense of coming to, connecting to, even making a readerly accommodation with: an accommodation with the journalistic authority she has constructed within the limits she has described. And this means coming to accept that there are some things that even a direct witness—even transformed by the white magic of narrative's superpowers—cannot fully penetrate or claim to know with certainty.

But what does this shape-shifting have to do with finding Orwell? And beyond that, with finding the country no longer officially named Burma?

Orwell Found And Lost In Myanmar

> Most of the old names [of Myanmar's cities or streets] were Anglicized Burmese names that had been used by the British colonial government, and the [new] regime claimed that the changes were a long-overdue move to discard these colonial tags. But there was a deeper-rooted motive. The generals were rewriting history. When a place is renamed, the old name disappears from maps and, eventually, from human memory. If that is possible, then perhaps the memory of past events can also be erased. By renaming cities, towns and streets, the regime seized control of the very space within which people lived; homes and business addresses had to be rewritten and relearned. And, when the regime changed the name of the country, maps and encyclopedias all over the world had to be corrected. The country known as Burma was erased and replaced with a new one: Myanmar (*Finding George Orwell,* 13–14).

Read primarily as a biography, *Finding George Orwell in Burma* returns to many tantalizing moments and speculations that have preoccupied scholars for years: for example, it discusses Blair/Orwell's admiration for Kipling (200); covers the question of whether the young colonial officer took a Burmese mistress (210); offers a meditation on whether, as Norman Sims recently noticed, the writer really ever shot an elephant (224).[17] Larkin also devotes a significant amount of her text to the possibility that Eric Blair had mixed-race, Anglo-Burmese cousins (206 ff.). This last item is especially germane, she argues at length, to the author Orwell's eventual representations of race—including, Larkin suggests, the significance of the birthmark on the

face of *Burmese Day*'s English protagonist, John Flory. In part, this final argument is Larkin's attempt to parry any charges of Orientalism directed at Orwell or herself (see 20). And such a preemptive move is understandable, given that she spends a good deal of time haunting colonial graveyards, documenting the longings of displaced elites and former colonials, and—after all—seeing Burma's history primarily through the lens of a white Westerner named Eric Blair. Larkin is also deeply interested in how Orwell's books would be received in-country. Indeed, *Finding George Orwell* devotes a disarmingly large number of pages to patrons of tea shops, to booksellers, and to holders of private libraries; her informants are as liable to name their favorite book, or tell their favorite joke, as to discuss the national political scene. As a result, to some readers, it may seem that Larkin (like many a literary biographer) can be too fond of her subject-author, falling victim to overplaying his prophetic talents and confusing the man and the writer. As Larkin tracks down the literal boy inside the master-pen-name, the younger not-yet writer seems to become endowed with all the interpretive foresight that the biographer's hindsight can give him. As if unaware of this risk, Larkin herself frequently refers to Eric Blair as "Orwell" or "the young Orwell." She also clearly prefers the colonial name "Burma" (rather than "Myanmar"), and not always when referring to the past.

But the truth of it is that any book, *Finding George Orwell* included, is not only what it contains, but what we ourselves choose to name it. Rather than a unilinear biography, Larkin's book actually involves a quite complex layering of past and present, biography and imagination, history and prophecy. And her name choices throughout prove quite strategic. As the long passage I have quoted above suggests, for example, she turns her interest in naming and authority to show how the presence of "Orwell" is itself necessarily entangled with the current regime's historical memory and political objectives. On the one hand, therefore, Orwell (not Blair) might seem completely findable in Myanmar's political scene—that is, one might envision his account of totalitarianism everywhere, as if *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were the regime's own playbook. On the other hand, that very same text (along with *Animal Farm*) has in fact been banned from the country's bookshelves: in this more literal sense, "Orwell" (as the shorthand we use to name a corpus of work) is hardly "in" Myanmar at all. If you like, he's become a name banished down *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s infamous memory hole. Or, one might say, he's only "in" Myanmar's lost or remade past. As these temporal paradoxes suggest, Larkin presents Myanmar/Burma more as an Alice-in-Wonderland terrorscape pockmarked with all sorts of absences, renamings, and reinventions of political memory; it is often as if she were writing within

in a kind of Mobius loop of time and memory. But perhaps I should be more straight-line than Larkin typically is. I might say her problem as a journalist goes something like this: you can't use Orwell for your critique until you have really found him. And, on top of that, it may turn out that a lost or forgotten Burma *itself* helped to make him—helped to make not just Blair, but Orwell, the name we use for the literary imagination we find in his texts. Even Mynamar itself has undergone any number of identity inversions that complicate where we might find Orwell "in."

How could all of this have happened? Well, to begin with, British colonialism in Asia was, as we know, its own special backwater: with its milieu of soggy tennis clubs (242) and military rigmarole, it preserved an Englishness that might well have been laughable in modern Great Britain itself. But by pickling itself in colonial arrogance, overseas Englishness also created legacies of its worst imaginings. Ironically, Larkin argues, much of Myanmar's present is a byproduct of Britain's own colonial system—as it were, subaltern mimicry turned malevolent farce. Exposing a bizarre flipside to the "civilization" the British thought they were exporting, Larkin shows the junta of Myanmar to have learned, instead, from England's own rabid censorship in the colony (127); its own use of forced labor (46, 102); and again its surveillance over the indigenous population, largely under the guise of crime control (74). Above all, this learning curve was inspired, she argues, by what Blair hated most about colonialism: its own stiflingly repressive character. That is, rereading English colonial rule as a tightly controlled, closed, prototypically total system allows Larkin to show how Orwell's descriptions of his days in Burma can be read as harbingers of what seems like prophecy in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. For example, a society described as a "world in which every word and every thought is censored," "even friendship can hardly exist," and "[f]ree speech is unthinkable" (273) turns out to be the inner world of colonial rule, not Oceania.

Larkin's portrait of the subsequent postcolonial turn, then, emphasizes the dark ironies of Myanmar's own introjection of its past colonial masters' political paranoia. She presents Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, for example, as materialized in Myanmar's infamous Insein prison; Larkin shows how, retaining a colonial British name that she reminds us is pronounced "insane" (146), this madhouse has been used by the junta to house and torture resistors, and to incarcerate anyone whom it thinks acts suspiciously. (As people under suspicion are liable to do.) Meanwhile, the notorious disdain of the British for race-mixing, a trait Larkin suspects Orwell himself both exhibited and felt shame about (212), is reproduced in the rabid ethnic pride of the current regime. In a bizarre replay of the British obsession with racial

purity, the generals publicly pillory any figures of Anglo-Burmese descent, such as the leading reformer Aung San Suu Kyi, thus vaunting themselves as “more equal than others” (217–18). If theirs is a “Burmese” nationalism, it is an “ethnicity” (as Werner Sollors famously put it) operating as a form of invention; once again, the inmates and overseers have simply switched positions: those formerly treated as beasts, you might say, now walk on two legs like Englishmen. And worse yet, it is not just English blood that is now anathema to these generals’ identities; they suppress Burma’s other ethnic minorities as well (45), thus further dividing the nation they claim to be reunifying.[18]

These arcane turnabouts also clarify why Larkin devotes as much time to the country’s literary and intellectual culture as to its political quarters as such. For Orwell, of course, literature is an important repository of the imagination’s capacity to resist power and imagine change. Moreover, it is a reservoir of our own ability to combat the obfuscations, dull seriousness, and willed amnesia of political persuasions and discourses of all kinds. Rather than just calling up the “real” Eric Blair, Larkin therefore uses the literary-“Orwell” side of Blair, the colonial policeman turned literary subversive, as her guide to the renamed place she still calls Burma. Conversely, Burma is imagined as persisting in the country’s own literary memory. “Where does the past exist,” Larkin writes, quoting Winston Smith’s famous meditation, “[i] f it cannot be read in actual sites or in official records, is it preserved only in people’s minds”(63)? To Larkin, this Burma continues to exist as what Benedict Anderson might call an imagined community, in a neverland literary underground.[19] “In Burma,” Larkin writes in the telling present tense, “certain narratives may be forbidden and many books may be banned, but this doesn’t mean that they don’t circulate. They travel between trusted friends, between false covers, from hidden libraries all over the country, and form a parallel universe of alternative truths and secret histories” (63). Present day Myanmar is thus unnamed, the clock hands of its repressive present turned backward.

The challenge, however, is that Larkin, also travelling “between false covers,” finds herself reporting on a nation state that was and is quite *literally* unwriting its past, literary and otherwise. And thus this alternative world she reports on, this lost Burma of secret histories, often risks vaporizing the minute she finds it. Even those libraries betray the problem: “All these [book] collections,” Larkin admits, “had one thing in common: they were gradually disappearing. Their pages were being glued together by damp and mildew. Pull any book from a shelf in Burma and it will be followed by a sprinkling of powder-like dust, the work of white ants relentlessly munching their way through thousands of texts all around the country” (64). Though these tea

shops may be the seedbed of another resistance culture, the immaterial world of Burma hides in books that are themselves hidden; then the books themselves physically dematerialize. In their place is the regime's own propaganda. Ironically, Larkin's problem as a reporter, then, is that Orwell's prophecies about book reading have become all too true.

Fortunately, as I've suggested, it turns out that Larkin can find her Burma in yet another place. That is, betraying her ruse behind what seems like her doubly incorrect usage—but now, we should see, isn't that at all—Larkin also attempts to demonstrate the young Orwell's own reciprocal absorption of key elements of the culture she calls Burmese. The lost Burma, that is, reappears in the Orwell we read. Crucially, as I've said, this reciprocal exchange of identities is connected not just to *what* Orwell wrote, but *how*: his efforts to vary and modify the genres in which he wrote (something Orwell's best interpreters have long been intrigued by). For instance, journalism and biography, we customarily say, are genres or modes of facts: we usually think they help us see a whole life, or see behind things. But when local censors in Myanmar warn Burmese dissenters and authors, "Don't write about life" (35), the threat actually provides a clue to how Larkin's "biography" (as we would misname it) itself channels Burma's genres of underground imagining and reporting. And, full circle, how she casts the forms we might find if we look back at Orwell. After finishing *Burmese Days*, she reminds us, Orwell turned his "trilogy" away from novelistic realism to fable and dystopian futurism. She suggests, therefore, that Orwell's more realistic, novelistic imagining of Burma worked merely as a prequel to the trademark works still ahead of him. (And that Larkin herself is emulating.) Orwell's corpus, that is, underwent genre- and mode-morphing in which his characters, well, morph. For instance, think of the haunting of the farmers' identities in the spirits of the pigs in *Animal Farm,* or of O'Brien's ruse of good fellowship in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, or the fatalistic reversals of Winston Smith (or Julia) at the end of that novel. (A book that some have suggested was first titled, in the inverse, 1948.*)* To suggest Burmese sources for such transformations, Larkin slides into discussions about Burmese parables that show similar patterns: stories where Siddhartha appears in human and animal form (34), for example, or a unnamed legend about a village hero who tracks a dangerous evil dragon to its lair, but then turns into that dragon once it is slain (108). Not simply parallels, I would argue, but what journalists and academics alike call really nice "finds": moments when a lost Burma, as it were, seems to ghost write the literary imagination we call Orwell.[20]

And with that, Larkin postulates a reciprocal exchange of humor and satire, and a Burmese-Orwellian appreciation of the suitability of both modes

for the purposes of political critique. Referring back to Orwell's famous observation that "[e]very joke is a tiny revolution" (112), for example, Larkin retells many underground examples of Burmese survival through subversive humor. Bleak truths arise from an oblique strategy that understands what must seem to be unsaid, and yet somehow manages to emerge through a joke's punch line. For instance, she refers to the Burmese joke that, in the country's newspapers, only obituaries make for reliable news reading (39). The locals likewise refer to "rubber band" laws that can be stretched to allow the state to charge as criminal anyone who acts against it (155). She recounts a Burmese joke about a fish that, upon being returned to a lake instead of being used to feed starving people, offers a sarcastic blessing to the junta's leading general for saving its life (112). Or, a joke about a man who travels to a dentist outside Myanmar, and must explain why he does so when there are (supposedly) plenty of dentists in his home country. "'The problem,'" he explains, "'is we are not allowed to open our mouths'" (115).[21] Obviously, jokes like these work because they invert the everyday, operating again as a Mobius loop that flips over and over again, between tragedy and farce. It turns out that totalitarian rule in Larkin's description produces something like a vile joke—a cartoonish, macabre rendition of governance that reminds us of the futility and horror of such a grandiose lust for control. There is, for example, the horridly funny observation that everyone fears being watched even when they are *not* being watched. Or, there is the laughable terror of when someone confesses something that is not at all true: here, the phantasms of the army's fears get to ghostwrite the state's version of the truth. Or, there is the bleak comedy of official censors who lose track of which material they are supposed to be censoring (125).

Larkin's rendering of the Burma within this totalitarianism is not without its own ambiguities, however. As I've suggested, it may well be that she wants to show us—despite her admission about being unable, in this book, to find much of a *political* underground in-country, except in prisons (269)—that there is indeed a Burma that survives in the ordinary, as (again) an underground not political so much as, again in Anderson's terms, imagined. The refusal of the junta's own *nom de plume* may be Larkin's own tiny revolution, a thumbing-of-the-nose that persists in her second book title as well. Nevertheless, one might still ask whether she is putting too much faith in memory or culture, or perhaps downplaying the extent to which the evocation of "Burma" could itself be bound up in racialist and autocratic traditions. Though I am no specialist on the country, my own view is that these associations with the name "Burma" probably all exchange meanings with each other, much as (especially in Orwell) the past, present, and future always do. I have also

tried to suggest that Emma Larkin herself is very aware of the challenges of channeling prophecy into a book of reportage. It is one kind of contribution, as Orwell did, to imagine totalitarianism, to conjure it up in the dystopian novel. It's quite another thing to report on it as a journalist: to see what cannot be seen, to observe when one is always observed, to record what cannot always be written down. Or, to find what has been so intentionally lost. And to try to do all that while being forced to put on masks over masks.

Conclusion

That the Penguin US paperback of *Finding George Orwell* retains the British spellings of its original London edition—though not its title[22]—also allows me to annoy my students with this final question: "What if Larkin is not really an American?" With little prompting, they quickly get the point that the real question I'm asking is whether it matters if she is. I myself am thinking, of course, of the familiar exceptionalist error for American writers who chose to criticize European colonialism: the risk of making it seem that the international role of the United States itself shouldn't be considered "imperialist" at all. I thought of that hazard especially because I began teaching *Finding George Orwell* right in the fall of 2012, as the United States announced a warming of relations—a *rapprochement*, a reengagement, you pick the label—with the ruling government of Burma/Myanmar. A new relationship was now made possible, American officials said, by the junta's release of prisoners (including Aung San Suu Kyi), by a turn to new parliamentary elections, and by a new openness to Western investment. Even President Obama made a visit that year, as his administration eased sanctions previously imposed by two previous administrations. And in May 2013, White House spokesman Jay Carney drew attention to the fact that the Obama administration was now using "Myanmar" more often, reversing its own past practice and that of several past presidencies.[23]

Of course, whether the Obama administration is concerned primarily with human rights, or simply fears economic competition from India, China, and elsewhere is a matter only the future may show. Democratic activists within Myanmar and without, meanwhile, continue to worry that new investment by the West will simply deepen existing inequalities and corruption in the country, since large (often infrastructure or extraction) industries have remained in the hands of the army and its cooperating elites.[24] As in other parts of the world, in other words, the heralding of "the transition to democracy" often only provides cover for the more difficult questions of who manages the economy, how religious tolerance will be nurtured, and how power will be shared or transferred. (In 2011, a joke circulated by the Irrawaddy—

an Internet news agency founded in 1993 by a group of Burmese journalists living in exile in Thailand—said that Myanmar's president "had indeed handed over power"—from his right hand to his left.) And sure enough, gains for Myanmar's dissenters were followed by the return of ethnic violence and continuing repression of indigenous journalists.[25] In many ways, therefore, Larkin's reporting remained not only relevant, but—in a new light—became even more urgent, now, for her American audience. It was one thing, that is, to pillory the British colonial past. But would the US government simply repeat English failures of engagement with Asia, all over again? Would Americans turn a blind eye to persisting totalitarian disciplines underneath the Burmese junta's current proffer of democratic reforms? In other words, would *Americans* still find Orwell in Burma?

And then, of course, there was the matter of which Orwell they might find, and to what ends. Reading Larkin's work, one can easily forget that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has always been something of a cultural inkblot test, with writers on the left doubting Orwell's socialist credentials and those on the right taking perverse joy in embracing him. As John Rodden has put it, even Orwell's canonization has often meant "assimilation" to the middlebrow and the middle school, at some cost to the writer's original intentions. These days—despite the marking of Orwell's legacies upon the passing of the banner year 1984, and then on the centenary of Eric Blair's birth (2003)—it often seems that critics are as ready to point to the aesthetic and political limitations of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm* as to their strengths. In particular, as important as Orwell was to his own moment, some have begun to say, it can seem questionable how applicable his essentially Eastern European template for totalitarianism can be to Asia today, much less to our age of increasing globalization, resurgent ethnic nationalisms, and international terrorism.[26] And one has to remember that some attempts to keep Orwell's ideas about totalitarianism alive have not always been so comforting, either. Neoconservatives in the United States, for instance, have revived the term in order to conflate religious fanaticism with political tyranny, under a supposed emerging "axis" of "Islamofascism." The late Christopher Hitchens, for example, even contributed an essay for the *Cambridge Companion to Orwell* in 2007 vehemently defending this particular part of Orwell's legacy for our times—as Hitchens had, we might add, when defending the American invasion of Iraq. We might all be cautioned by realizing that, in that essay, Hitchens also referred to Emma Larkin's work quite approvingly, and precisely in these terms.[27]

Was this final reading the real Emma Larkin? My advice, naturally, would be to find out for yourself. Certainly, like anyone else, I'm going to be upset if Larkin turns out to be an interested party, or someone with intellectual or political baggage that her self-constructions serve only to conceal. Who wouldn't be? For now, however, the Larkin I find is a bit different from the one driving an appropriation like Hitchens's. For, as I've tried to say in this essay, Larkin is not simply recuperating Orwell, or "writing a life," in order to serve up any particular country-saving solution for Burma/Myanmar. Instead, she is folding into Orwell, and into the reporting behind *Finding Orwell*, fable-like transpositions of the human and the animal, stories of unsaid whispers and rumors, and a healthy mixture of pathos and farce, all of which troubles any brand of political certainty. In reading her work, I am instead reminded—*contra* Hitchens—that the label of totalitarianism has often served those who, unlike Larkin herself, have preferred not to look too closely at the West's version of liberalism (classical, imperial, market-, neo-, you pick the prefix). Or, those who refuse to think historically and contemporaneously about the global power used to promote that liberalism.[28] (And, lately, the powers of surveillance so used.)[29] Indeed, we might also consider the relevance of Larkin's musings on naming, identity, and political transformation to the broader challenges of labeling the ever-changing scheme of our current global order—when we notice, for instance, that the label "Cold War" (a phrase Orwell himself famously coined) is itself currently making a comeback. Whether or not this is the name we should use for our times, we might remember that when Orwell originally conjured the phrase, he actually meant not to describe a world order that was static or, in truth, very "cold" at all. Rather, it was one in which key players might often morph; in which superpowers were liable to find themselves switching their identities with their supposed antagonists; where victims of colonial repression might become its perpetrators; and where ambitious regime changers abroad could find themselves—well, regime-changed at home.[30] Both Eric Blair and George Orwell, I think, would have appreciated that it doesn't always take slaying a dragon to actually become one.

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Notes

1. My overview here is largely limited to examples from the United States, though even here the literature on the ethics and legality of undercover work is enormous. For examples, see Aaron Schwartz, "Is Undercover Over?" *Extra!,* March 2008, 28–31; Howard Kurtz, "Undercover Journalism," *Washington Post*, June 25, 2007; Mark Lisheron, "Lying to Get the Truth," *American Journalism Review*, October/November 2007; and David A. Logan, "Masked Media: Judges, Juries, and the Law of Surreptitious Newsgathering," *Iowa Law Review* 83 (October 1997): 161. The Silverstein piece was "Their Men in Washington: Undercover with D.C.'s Lobbyists for Hire," *Harper's,* July 2007, 53–61. For Ehrenreich's denial, see *Nickel and Dimed: On Not Getting By in America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001), 6. For comparable debates in Canada and England, see Carolyn Morris, "Undercover Blues," *Ryerson Review of Journalism*, January 13, 2009, http://rrj.journalism.ryerson.ca/undercover-blues/, and the articles listed at http://dlib.nyu.edu/undercover/undercover-journalism-debated. For my thinking on journalism's importantly renegade status, I am indebted to Barbie Zelitzer, *Taking Journalism Seriously: News and the Academy* (New York: Sage Publications, 2004), 189–90, 204–05.

2. Compare John D'Agata and Jim Fingal, *The Lifespan of a Fact* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), 19, and David Shields, *Reality Hunger* (New York: Vintage, 2010), 169.

3. Robert S. Boynton, ed., *The New New Journalism* (New York: Vintage, 2005), xv. Notably, this "new new" formulation allowed some writers to say explicitly that they were *not* "new journalists" at all: see, for instance, the response of Calvin Trillin, 401. As John Hartstock shows, the norms I describe here commonly dominate the field of American literary journalism studies. See *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* (Amherst:

University of Massachusetts Press, 2000). These norms are also discussed from a dissenting viewpoint, different from my own, in Doug Underwood, *The Undeclared War Between Journalism and Fiction* (New York: Palgrave, 2013), esp. 39, 64, 67 ff.

4. I have written elsewhere about the dominance of this realist tradition in contemporary literary journalism. See, for example, my "The Underwater Narrative: Joan Didion's *Miami*," *Literary Journalism Studies* 3 (Fall 2011), 9–29, and "When Noir Meets Nonfiction," forthcoming in *Twentieth-Century Literature*.

5. Larkin's reflection can be found at http://www.finlay-publisher.com/articles.htm.

6. With characteristic balance, Hartstock discusses how travel writing sometimes troubles the category of "literary journalism" itself (13 and ff.).

7. See Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 2007), 222 ff.

8. Emma Larkin, *Finding George Orwell in Burma* (New York: Penguin, 2006). All further citations in text.

9. Augustin Zarsosa has recently suggested that the idea of a "mode" is a more instructive way of thinking about the rhetorical strategies that traverse genres and that these operate as discursive models that "[regulate] our knowledge of reality" (237). "Melodrama and the Modes of the World," *Discourse* 32 (Spring 2010): 326–255.

10. Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer* (New York: Vintage, 1990). All further citations in text.

11. Quoted in Carmela Ciuraru, *Nom de Plume: A (Secret) History of Pseudonyms* (New York: Harper, 2011), xiv.

12. See, for example, Raymond Williams, "Culture Is Ordinary" (1958), reprinted in *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*, ed. Robin Gale (London: Verso, 1989), 3–18.

13. "The Ruin of Myanmar," *New York Times,* November 19, 2000; Blaine Harden, "How to Commit a Perfect Dictatorship," *New York Times,* November 26, 2000; Seth Mydans, "Myanmar: No. 1 in Opium Production," *New York Times,* December 21, 2001; "Ending Repression in Myanmar," *New York Times,* May 7, 2002; Jane Perlez, "Myanmar Is Left in Dark, an Energy-Rich Orphan," *New York Times,* November 17, 2006; "The Despotism Formerly Known as Burma," *New York Times,* September 26, 2007. See also David I. Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), and Ian Holliday, *Burma Redux: Global Justice and the Quest for Political Reform in Myanmar* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

14. I discuss this presumption about exposé in "The Underwater Narrative."

15. "Being a woman," Susan Sheehan has written with something of a wink, "has been a great help in interviewing, in that you're less of a threat." In Jack T. Huber and Dean Diggins, *Interviewing the World's Top Interviewers* (New York: S.P.I. Books, 1992), 247–48.

16. Larkin's strategies might also be compared with those of Australian ethnographer Monique Skidmore, author of *Karaoke Fascism: Burma and the Politics of Fear* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004): "When I am in Burma

. . . I scare myself. I practice self-censorship. I engage in self-talk and fear rationalization and minimization strategies. In short, I do many of the things that Burmese people do when confronted with repression. And that forms the basis of my analytical strategy…" (8).

17. Sims's comments that this brief suggestion by Larkin affected his reading of Orwell's famous essay: see "The Problems and the Prospects for Literary Journalism Studies," *Literary Journalism Studies* (Spring 2009): 9.

18. Werner Sollors, *The Invention of Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

19. The name "Burma" is preferred by many democratic activists and exiles. Thomas Fuller, "Burma? Myanmar? New Freedom to Debate Includes Name," *New York Times,* October 6, 2012. I refer here, of course, to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1993).

20. Larkin's hypothesis therefore provides an important reply to those critics who have faulted Orwell's use of allegory or fable for political critique; cf. Morris Dickstein, "*Animal Farm:* History as Fable," in *The Cambridge Companion to Orwell,* ed. John Rodden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 133–45. Importantly, the contemporary archive of folklore from across Burma is deeply indebted to the pioneering work of Burmese journalist and activist Ludu U Hla, who collected some of his tales from fellow prisoners while being imprisoned for three years by his government. His first-person account (1958) of those years has been translated into English as *The Caged Ones*. See *The Folk-tales of Burma: An Introduction*, eds. Gerry Abbott and Khin Thant Han (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 22 and ff.

21. As Choe Sang-Hun pointed out in the *New York Times*, this particular joke Larkin retells actually landed one Burmese performer in prison; "Myanmar-Magic: Tell a Joke, and You Disappear," October 29, 2007. On the regime's suppression of humor, compare Skidmore 126–7, and Holliday 75.

22. The British edition was called *Secret Histories* (London: John Murray, 2010).

23. See the transcript of Carney's press conference, at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/20/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-5202013.

24. Aung Zaw, "Are Myanmar's Hopes Fading?" *New York Times*, April 25, 2013. See also Thomas Fuller, "Democracy Leader Cautions Investors against 'Reckless Optimism' in Myanmar," *New York Times*, June 2, 2012; Mark McDonald, "Rights Groups Assail U.S. Decision on Myanmar," *New York Times*, July 12, 2012; Thomas Fuller, "A Myanmar in Transition Says Little of Past Abuses," *New York Times,* June 15, 2013.

25. "Myanmar's Journalists Still at Risk," *New York Times*, May 24, 2014, reported arrests and new jailings. The joke I recount is reported by Holliday, 86. The *New Republic*, meanwhile, did manage to track Larkin down, seeking out her assessment about whether a "Burmese Spring" was or wasn't in the air. She saw hope, but was cautious. See Emma Larkin, "The Awakening," at http://www.newrepublic.com/article/world/magazine/99537/burma-spring-aung-san-suu-kyi. Her essay originally appeared in the *New Republic* on February 2, 2012.

26. On Orwell as a "Rorschach," see E. Bruce Douglass, "The Fate of Orwell's Warning," *Thought* 60 (November 1985): 263; John Rodden in *The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of 'St. George' Orwell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 30, 395 ff. Michael Clune begins his essay "Orwell and the Obvious" (*Representations* [Summer 2009]: 30) citing the range of critics who argue *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has become a period piece. See also Robert Conquist, "Orwell, Socialism, and the Cold War"; Bernard Crick, "*Nineteen Eighty-Four*: Context and Controversy"; and Erika Gottlieb, "George Orwell: A Bibliographic Essay," all in *Cambridge Companion to Orwell:* 126–32, 146–159, and 190–200 respectively.

27. Christopher Hitchens, "Why Orwell Still Matters," in *Cambridge Companion to Orwell*, 207.

28. On this point, see Michael Halberstam, *Totalitarianism and the Modern Conception of Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

29. Thanks to the anonymous *LJS* reader who pointed me to the *International Business Times* claim (based on Amazon.com statistics) that "George Orwell's 1984 Book Sales Soar[ed] 6,000% on Edward Snowden NSA Prism Data Leak." Article by Hannah Osborne, June 11, 2013, at http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/george-orwell-sales-1984-rise-edward-snowden-477262.

30. I'm thinking here, of course, of Orwell's famous essay, "You and the Atomic Bomb," available at http://orwell.ru/library/articles/ABomb/english/e_abomb. Importantly, the political views of Barack Obama's own grandfather, Hussein Onyango Obama, had been vitally shaped by his years spent in Burma. Peter Baker, "In Visit to Myanmar, Obama Will See a Nation that Shaped His Own Grandfather," *New York Times*, November 18, 2012.