

## Reading Otherwise: Literary Journalism as an Aesthetic Narrative Cosmopolitanism

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“All progress is experimental.”<sup>1</sup>

“The first person is the most terrifying view of all.”<sup>2</sup>

We need to pay much closer attention to the “experimental progress” that combinatory and hybridic narrative forms have made and what writers are doing with such forms. We also need to see how these forms interact with “raw material,” the actual workings and driving forces of culture and society. One of the most critically neglected narrative genres, resulting in a not particularly satisfactory term, is “literary journalism” (I’ll spare you my neologisms for variants of this term). Instead of obsessing with genre issues or scrambling for more taxonomic features, it can be more helpful to see how the modes of literature and journalism fuse and function in individual works produced from specific historical moments and contexts. In broad terms, literary journalism is foremost a pairing of literature and journalism—a combination perhaps more intimately related than any other two narrative genres because it is a way of posing problems and pursuing solutions in ways that no other paired or interfused genres can.

I’d like to expand on this point for a moment by inverting and modifying David Shields’s recent argument in his book, *Reality Hunger*: the work of a literary journalist is vital precisely because it permits and encourages readerly knowledge in a way that is less indirect than fiction and less contrived and more open than conventional journalism.<sup>3</sup>

In my talk today, I want to focus on *reading* literary journalism—an under-treated and under-explored element in literary journalism studies—and



James Baldwin by Samuel Price  
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specifically on reading first-person literary-journalistic texts. But I want to do so with the understanding that, like literature, literary journalism is not immutable, self-defining, and non-transgressive. Related to this, the formalistic and ontological natures of literature and journalism, when brought together, do things that we're just beginning to understand. For example, the "literary" in literary journalism is unlike the literary in literature because it is essentially transformed by the journalistic and essayistic discourse; so, too, is the "journalism" by the literary. I would suggest that interpreting a metaphor in a literary journalistic text is not necessarily the same as doing so in a piece of conventional journalism or fiction, and that such literary tools and descriptors as symbol, metonymy, image, and tone can take on quite different qualities and meanings in a literary journalistic work, and particularly, as I'm going to suggest, if the work is in the first person. This of course affects the reading of literary journalism in that one reads (or should read) this genre differently than one reads literature or straightforward journalistic pieces.

But regarding the reading of nonfiction/hybridic/experimental/literary-journalistic prose, this is far from the view espoused by the majority of specialists who have devoted their lives to studying narrative. For example, Dorrit Cohn's *The Distinction of Fiction* argues for "a definition of fiction that applies solely to nonreferential narrative"<sup>4</sup> (e.g., "novels, short stories, ballads, and epics"<sup>5</sup>), while referential narratives (e.g., "historical works, journalistic reports, biographies, autobiographies"<sup>6</sup>) refer to a world outside of the text, and, unlike nonreferential narratives, "are subject to judgements of truth and falsity."<sup>7</sup> Significantly, falling under neither category, a part of her nonfictional argument centers on describing the New Journalists of the 1970s as a "postmodern reincarnation of the New Biographical trend."<sup>8</sup> She asserts:

Some have actually made claim to the creation of a new literary form that wipes out for good . . . all the antiquated distinction between factual and fictional writing. But a look at the oxymoronic subtitles featured on the title pages of these newer crossbreeds—True Life Novel, Novel Biography, Nonfiction Novel—makes it clear that they were largely written and read for their transgressive shock value. . . . [T]heir fictionalizing devices boil down principally to the consistent application of focalizing technique—sometimes in stream of consciousness form—to real life sports heroes, rock stars, and convicted murderers. In this perspective, biographies that act like novels, far from erasing the borderline between the two genres, actually bring the line that separates them more clearly into view.<sup>9</sup>

Cohn, "the doyenne of American narratology,"<sup>10</sup> is both suspicious and dismissive of new journalistic texts and, as she shows later in her book, of combinatory and hybridic texts in general.<sup>11</sup> Quite simply, she doesn't know

what to do with them. Not only does she suggest that the discourses of fiction and history are qualitatively different from each other—"[history] ties to the level of reference and [fiction's] detachment from this level determines distinct discursive parameters"<sup>12</sup>—but she implies that the genres of fiction and nonfiction are un-porous, immutable, and should be seen as mutually distinct; she also suggests (e.g., in her criticism of Tom Wolfe) that these two forms would do best to stay away from each other.

I would agree with her claim that narratologists "have, to a quite astonishing degree, ignored the question of demarcation between fiction and nonfiction"<sup>13</sup> by limiting their analyses to fictional narratives.<sup>14</sup> But I'm going to mistrust any kind of overarching narrative poetics that tends to believe that the entire panoply of literary analyses and tools apply equally well to both fiction and nonfiction, especially when the textual exemplifications for defending this position are drawn exclusively, as they are in Cohn's study, from novels and other fictional genres.<sup>15</sup> According to Cohn, the kinds of discursive and (by implication) reading modes that she argues for in her book "apply equally within and without fiction,"<sup>16</sup> a point she constantly returns to.

Two persistent problems can be seen in Cohn's argument: in the scholarship on narration and narrative theory—and that of literary criticism in general—literary-journalistic texts do not seem to deserve the same degree of scrutiny as fictional texts. But this is essentially a non-issue for Cohn, as it is for Genette, Barthes, Ricoeur, and the standard parade of French theorists from whom she profusely quotes. Thorough formalistic and narrative analyses of the literary-journalistic work of such canonized writers as James Baldwin, Barbara Ehrenreich, Charles Bowden, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, Joan Didion, and David Foster Wallace is noticeably lacking in the criticism. This lack becomes even more striking when compared to the amount of criticism on their novelist and poet counterparts or, equally problematic, to that of their own fictional output.

For example, there's a profusion of commentary on Wallace's novel, *Infinite Jest* (1996), and the critical industry has now clicked in for his unfinished novel, *The Pale King* (2011), but there's very little formal analysis on his best literary-journalistic pieces, among them "Shipping Out," "Ticket to the Fair," and his collection of essays, *Consider the Lobster* (2005), which deserves its own book-length critical study. As borne out by the MLA international bibliography and other scholarly databases, a similar scenario can be seen in Ehrenreich studies. What one generally finds in the criticism are generic biographical sketches and trudging summaries of her major works, usually accompanied by an exclusion or dismissiveness of her narrative importance. Predictably, a notable exception can be found in Steven J. Kellman's critical

review of Ehrenreich's only published novel, *Kipper's Game*.<sup>17</sup> Not accidentally, this kind of critical attention and close reading is not found in the studies of her literary-journalistic work—for example, *Nickel and Dimed* (2001), her hallmark achievement.

Cohn is not alone. For narratologists and narrative theorists such as Monica Fludernik, Brian Richardson, James Phelan, and Jonathan Culler, literary-journalistic texts seem to deserve no attention at all. I've always found it remarkable that many critics trained to recognize the finest grains of formal and generic structures in poetry and the novel, and to interpret their influence with theoretical sophistication, still treat journalistic and literary-journalistic texts as if they expect the texts, based on such forms, to provide transparent access to the thoughts of the writer. The second problem might be best suggested through two questions. One, can we show that the narratives of literary-journalistic texts are unique in their potential for crafting a self-enclosed universe ruled by formal patterns that are ruled out in all other orders of discourse? And two, can we make an argument for a specific reading of such texts dependent on the fact that, in John Hartsock's words, "narrative literary journalism's referentiality to phenomena [is] different from that of other related genres, particularly conventional fiction on the one hand and dominant journalism practices on the other"?<sup>18</sup> As a response to both questions, we can—and must—if we're going to defend the reading of literary journalism as a particular ontological and practical activity, and literary journalism itself as a historical form to be reckoned with by linguists, narratologists, and narrative theorists of every stripe.<sup>19</sup> We also need the mutual recognition of other disciplines—e.g., sociology, anthropology, African American Studies, gender studies, visual studies, media studies, and literary criticism—if literary journalism studies is to reach its full potential.

One last point before I get to my discussion of reading first-person literary journalistic pieces. And this argument concerns issues surrounding histories of American literature, American journalism, and American literary journalism. Please excuse my Anglo-American centrism here, but what I have to say will be largely applicable to international forms of literary journalism and national literary and journalism histories.

In relation to histories devoted to American literature and American journalism, I'll start off with a question: What does literary journalism know? Literary journalism's relation to knowledge of course is complex and open. But what is clear is that this genre's merits as a guide to self-interpretation, self-understanding, and its ability to expand, enlarge, or reorder our sense of the world, is unquestionable. My point is that knowledge and genre are inescapably intertwined because all forms of knowing—whether poetic or

political, journalistic or scientific—rely on an assortment of formal resources, stylistic conventions, and conceptual schemata. The literary-journalistic genre and the knowledge it procures is an essential part both of an American literary history and a journalism history, and therefore its general exclusion from both these histories is more than troubling.

Take the case of some of the representative American literary histories as exclusionary examples: *The Columbia History of the American Novel* (1991); *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: The American Novel: 1870–1940* (2014); *A Companion to the Modern American Novel, 1900–1950* (2009); *A Companion to American Fiction, 1865–1914* (2009); *The Cambridge Companion to American Novelists* (2013); and *A New Literary History of America* (2009). Although many of us consider literary journalism as a historical *literary genre*, much like modernism or realism, none of these histories have any chapters on literary journalism, in whole or in part, and its relation to US literature. None list the term "literary journalism" or such related incarnations as "creative nonfiction," "reportage," and "investigative fiction" in their indexes or tables of contents. Nor do any of these histories, with the exception of one chapter in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* (2011), David Schmid's "The Nonfiction Novel," and a subject-related chapter, Betsy Klimasmith's "Journalism and the Urban Novel" (from *The Oxford History of the Novel in English*), contain any discussions about American literary journalism, as if both its knowledge and form were immaterial and its historical formations nonexistent.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, histories of American journalism also tend to efface the term *literary journalism*, and exclude the genre as essential to journalism history.<sup>21</sup> In a random sampling of book-length studies on the subject, my results were mostly negative. Predating the New Journalism of the 1960s, an older work such as Frank Luther Mott's *American Journalism: 1690–1960*<sup>22</sup> perhaps understandably does not contain substantive content on literary journalism nor is this term listed as part of any chapter title or in its index. But neither do more recent studies, including *The Press in America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media*<sup>23</sup>; Hilary H. Ward's *Mainstreams of American Media History*<sup>24</sup>; and Ken Auletta's *Inside the Business of News*.<sup>25</sup> Even more specialized studies often concerning alternative narrative forms, such as Jean Marie Lutes's *Front Page Girls: Women Journalists in American Culture and Fiction, 1880–1930*<sup>26</sup>; Everette E. Dennis and William L. Rivers's *Other Voices: The New Journalism in America*<sup>27</sup>; Lauren Kessler's *The Dissident Press: Alternative Journalism in American History*<sup>28</sup>; Bob Ostertag's *People's Movements, People's Press: The Journalism of Social Justice Movements*<sup>29</sup>; and Todd Vogel's *The Black Press: New Literary and Historical Essays*<sup>30</sup> eschew the term literary journalism and its old

and new avatars.

This is not to deny that there have been excellent, groundbreaking studies done on American literary journalism history. We are all immensely indebted to Norman Sims, John Hartsock, Thomas B. Connery, Shelly Fisher Fishkin, Phyllis Frus, Jan Whitt, Karen Roggenkamp, Doug Underwood, Ben Yagoda, John J. Pauly, Mark Kramer, and others. And there have been useful social histories on American newspapers that include, for example, discussion of literary realism and new journalism, such as Michael Schudson's *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*<sup>31</sup> or Cecelia Tichi's cultural history on muckraking in America, *Exposés and Excess*,<sup>32</sup> or Jeff Allred's study of 1930s documentary forms, *American Modernism and Depression Documentary*.<sup>33</sup> But it is to say that we have work ahead in reciprocally engaging with other disciplines—and in considering in our work not only literary criticism and journalism studies but also American studies, African-American studies, gender studies, and so on—to create an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural and international study of literary journalism that would include its various national, area-based, and local histories. A principal challenge for American literary journalism studies—a challenge which can be applied transnationally—is that a case must be made for literary journalism as a *necessary* category for literary and journalistic historiography.<sup>34</sup>

Now, what does all of this have to do with first-person forms of literary journalism? Not surprisingly, I'm going to say, "everything." As a backdrop for the rest of my talk, the act of reading first-person forms can best be contextualized, not through an atomized approach (i.e., inexplicably separate and largely mutually exclusive histories for American literature, American journalism, and American literary journalism), as is the case today, but rather through a certain kind of historical, interdisciplinary, international way to both present narrative history and to interpret narrative.<sup>35</sup>

This is also a way of suggesting a specific phenomenology of reading that contains both an inside (experience in and of itself) and outside view (historically and culturally determined experience).<sup>36</sup> Put another way, the historical claims that literary journalism history makes need to be embedded in the reading process.

But why the primary focus on first-person narratives? To my mind, the first person is best positioned to provide a window into and a history of subjectivity—or in Svetlana Alexievich's words, "a history of feelings,"<sup>37</sup> arguably the heart-blood of literary journalism, which third-person and other narrative points of view do much less effectively. Secondly, the increasing presence of first-person narrative is the current ballast of our Internet age—and is therefore imperative to study. Thirdly, and most importantly, the first-person liter-

ary journalistic point of view can serve as an important inroad to developing a discipline of literary journalism studies that not only informs a theory of the field but creates a platform in which the genre can be examined on its own terms, and not necessarily on those of mass communications, journalism, and literary studies.

### Baldwin in the First Person

James Baldwin's first-person narratives will serve as a kind of template for what I'm suggesting in this talk. But I'm going to try to do this without assuming that you know about or have necessarily read James Baldwin. My argument begins with an exploratory poetics of Baldwin's first-person literary forms and ends with a discussion of what I'm calling a "literary-journalistic reading pact," largely transferable to first-person forms in general.

"First person is where you can be more interesting," Shields writes in *Reality Hunger*. "The wisdom there is more precious than the sage overview."<sup>38</sup> He associates such wisdom as conducing to "the real world, with all its hard edges, but the real world fully imagined and fully written, not merely reported."<sup>39</sup> On the other end of the first-person debate and the use of the "personal" in narrative journalism, the journalist, Eve Fairbanks, criticizes the personal essay and "confessional articles" as harming serious journalistic endeavors. In a recent article for the *Washington Post*, she laments what she calls "the personal essay boom," which draws the reporter away from the wider domain of human experience and—in a position diametrically opposed to Shields's—creates "a disconnect between how we imagine ourselves and who we really are."<sup>40</sup> Fairbanks argues for an in-depth and "outside" view but concedes: "perhaps in our new age of instant news deadlines and dried-up travel budgets, plumbing the depths of [one's] own life seem[s] to be the only way to spend time on a topic, to take the breath and say something slower and more considered, to draw 'reporting' from a wider time frame than this morning's press conference."<sup>41</sup>

In the context of this debate, the writings of Baldwin can be seen as offering an intriguing affirmation of *both* positions. That is, the merit of his work exists precisely in that its overt personal meditations intend to result broadly in some kind of social or racial understanding—and the work does not want to be confessional or idiosyncratically individualized. As forms of resistance to mainstream representations, his literary journalism demonstrates that the domains of aesthetics and philosophical reflection are coextensive and that it can be impossible to disengage individual political claims from artistic practice. At its best, driven by a stylistic forcefulness, his first-person narratives fuse a "sage overview" with a penetrating "personal account."

Baldwin's "I" prompts us to understand his function as a writer bringing together, or pairing, literature and journalism—in ways and under a certain African American literary journalistic tradition that have gone largely unrecognized by Baldwin critics. In fact, extant Baldwin scholarship is still largely bifurcated between Baldwin's essays and his fiction, his political advocacy and his literary art.<sup>42</sup> This scholarship pays scant attention to his hybridic experimental progress and literary use of raw material, particularly if it concerns forays into his visions of journalism.

Nevertheless, most of Baldwin's first-person literary journalistic pieces seem to have as much "fiction" in them as his fiction does, but at the same time their aims are different: the mediation between the reader and writer is sharper and closer in his first-person literary journalism. This is the case even when the issues and events described are chronologically distant and overtly topical. Clearly, it is Baldwin's "I" that conflates the subjectivity of the personal essay and the objectivity of the public essay, the intelligence of the personal witness with the atemporal political prognostics that make his first-person accounts so powerful and compelling.

### Baldwin's Autobiographical Selves

I'm now going to sketch out a poetics appropriate to reading Baldwin's first-person narratives. First, though, as conventional narrative categories go, the most substantial difference between a first-person nonfictional narrator and that of its counterpart in fiction is that the writer is not the same person as the narrator. In works of nonfiction, the writer and the narrator are almost always the same.<sup>43</sup> To a certain extent, Baldwin's work can be productively conceptualized through such a division.<sup>44</sup> His first-person accounts generally give special attention to the relations among the narrator, and the audience and the something that has happened or perhaps might or will happen. Although for him the first person might be "the most terrifying point of view," it is arguably his preferred point of view.<sup>45</sup>

Here are the major elements of the poetics:

First, Baldwin will clearly identify his autobiographical self as the author of the text. For instance, the "Jimmy Baldwin" in the profile "Sidney Poitier" is the actual James Baldwin described in the text,<sup>46</sup> as is the friend "Jimmy" to Lorraine Hansberry in the portrait, "Sweet Lorraine."<sup>47</sup> So, too, the obvious but unnamed young James Baldwin is the real-life protégé of Beauford Delaney, the African American visual artist, in "The Price of the Ticket." To put this differently, Baldwin's narrative reflections in his essays commonly begin with an identification and an inquiry into the specific nature of the autobiographical self—and then work outwards towards social and racial realities as

they affect this self.

In congruence, Baldwin's first-person literary journalism makes us think about what it means to read ourselves into history. Tracking the conditions of his first-person journeys constitutes a certain historical enterprise, one that does not mitigate historical fact but persuades us of its inextricability from aesthetic articulateness. *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), *The Fire Next Time* (1963), *No Name in the Street* (1972), and *The Devil Finds Work* (1976) all insist on the importance of their first-person historicity. At the same time, the internal perspectives of these literary-journalistic texts, achieved through first-person narrations, best promote narrator identification and reader empathy.

Second, Baldwin's literary-journalistic intensity is inseparable from his first-person self-exposure. In this self-exposure, Baldwin interweaves instruction and provocation, vulnerability and authority, self-condemnation and prideful racial and sexual beliefs, to carve out his own spaces between the interstices of "fiction" and "nonfiction."

As a result, unlike other writers traditionally considered nonfiction or essay writers, he does not insist on the unassailable verisimilitude of his writing. Instead, he follows his emotions and intellectual logic while fusing his truth claims with the creation of himself as a symbolic cultural and racial figure who, with his journey of the "I" at the center (and not infrequently eliding into his various incarnations of "we"), freely imagines experiences and makes readers virtually feel his beliefs. In this way, for example, the dramatized "I" in such essays as "The Harlem Ghetto," "Equal in Paris," and "Stranger in the Village" becomes the persona of an alienated outsider who at the same time wishes to upset the comforting shibboleths of Western institutions.

Third, Baldwin's first-person narratives (e.g., *Notes of a Native Son* and *Nobody Knows My Name*) maintain the literary as a structure of knowledge.<sup>48</sup> While his fiction contains elements such as figurative language, imagery, conflict, voice, and characterization, his first-person literary journalistic pieces transform into an arguably closer polemical-emotional bond with the reader than his fiction allows. In this sense, it is symptomatic that Baldwin, like Didion, tends to work in a smaller, more intimate range, creating sketches rather than large, synthetic narratives.

For example, in *No Name in the Street* (1972), when Baldwin is about to give the suit he wore at Martin Luther King's funeral to a former childhood friend, he muses about his present existence: "I had no conceivable relationship to them anymore—that shy, pop-eyed thirteen year old my friend's mother had scolded was no more. I was not the same, but *they* were, as though they had been trapped, preserved, in that moment of time."<sup>49</sup>

In *No Name in the Street*, a fragmented, literary-impressionistic, and non-linear recounting of the black freedom struggles and the civil rights movement, Baldwin intimately associates his own existential alienation with the racial and social power struggles then taking place in the US. His intense polemical-emotional bond focuses on sensory intimacy and personal feeling that converge with his interrogation of black historical memory and experience.

Fourth, Baldwin's autobiographical selves, specifically his intention to let the reader know that the biographical Baldwin is both the narrator and author of his texts, readily conduce to pronouncing his views on racial or ethnic communities *and* on his own writerly state. "What the writer is always trying to do," Baldwin asserts in "As Much Truth as One Can Bear," "is [to] utilize the particular in order to reveal something much larger and heavier than any particular can be."<sup>50</sup>

This is why Baldwin, in such rarely examined profiles as "The Fight: Patterson vs. Liston" (1963), wished to provide the reader with a sensation of referential directness and clarity, while at the same time being about Baldwin's "self-story" rather than a conventional autobiographical "life story,"<sup>51</sup> and producing his conception of an essayistic literary style.<sup>52</sup> In "The Fight," first published in the *Nugget* in 1963, Baldwin identifies himself as a "journalist,"<sup>53</sup> though a rather hapless one, suffering the press conferences, and freely admitting that he's not "an aficionado of the ring."<sup>54</sup>

As Baldwin stated in a 1959 questionnaire, "the private life, his own and that of others, is the writer's subject,"<sup>55</sup> a maxim teased out in "The Fight." That is, at crucial times in the profile, Baldwin focuses, both referentially and subjectively, on his real-life subjects' privacy (e.g., Patterson's "will to privacy") and on the narrator's own ("I had had a pretty definitive fight with someone with whom I had hoped to be friends").<sup>56</sup>

Fifth, in such first-person pieces as "The Fight," Baldwin, the biographical author, turns himself into a narrator who reports directly to us on persons and events: either on his own experience, when the highly personal, autobiographical dimension prevails, or on others' when a more impersonal journalistic "story" is involved. Baldwin's first-person literary journalistic pieces may be narrative, dramatic, or poetic—depending on which configuration dominates—or they may be all three. His literary journalism can be stretched in any direction, which can well explain the neglect of the genre in literary studies.

Sixth, Baldwin's literary-journalistic pieces are "lyrical" or "poetic" to the extent that he appears to be talking to himself rather than to others. This is the case with "Stranger in the Village," in which the first-person narrator-protagonist recurrently tries to explain to himself why he feels like a "stranger"

in a small Swiss village, "despite everything [he] may do to feel differently."<sup>57</sup> Thus some of his "I"-accounts will characteristically take the form of a "mediation" overheard by the reader.

On the other hand, the content of some of these pieces, the fact that they are concerned with ideas ultimately addressed directly by an author to a reader, assigns the genre primarily to a category of didactic, expository, or critical writing. Insofar as the literary-journalistic account's essential quality is persuasion, in so far as in its purest form it is argument, for example *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985), the aesthetic organization of the material remains subordinated to the treatment of an event or situation that exists in time and space, of an idea or text which the writer is ultimately committed to telling the "truth" about, a truth for which he is answerable.

Seventh, in an ancillary way, we might ask if Baldwin's first-person literary journalism, besides being a narrative mode, might be conceived more productively as an analytical mode that—in evoking a certain authority to the referential—distinguishes it from fiction and conventional journalistic texts, and that we must adjust our reading (and teaching) practices accordingly.

Eighth, reading Baldwin's literary journalism, I am continually adjusting myself to the emerging aspects of his fictional and journalistic selves. What this necessary adjustment perhaps also underlines is that the prevailing sense of his first-person literary pieces tend to be diachronic rather than synchronic: his first-person literary journalistic accounts are and are not literature; are and are not journalism; or rather not yet literature or not yet journalism but could evolve or dissolve into either narrative form. This speaks to Baldwin's inclination, in his first-person narratives, towards a "free improvisation," which, as Carter Mathes argues, "begins to capture part of the critical and formal interplay between vernacular tradition and formal innovation that Baldwin executes in his texts."<sup>58</sup>

Ninth, Baldwin's first-person literary journalism is exemplary not so much for the wealth of his knowledge as for his "vision"—a vision that contributes to bringing the writer's racial-historical conceptions as a whole before us. Baldwin's first-person visionary potential is representatively evinced in "Down at the Cross":

Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in their duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.<sup>59</sup>

The dramatic "I" in "Down at the Cross" adopts a *persona* as an outside

prophetic viewer of Western culture and history. “[Baldwin’s] conception . . . of a prophetic dimension,” as Hortense Spillers has argued, “would be borne out in the democratic process as the route to the achievement of ‘our country’: one that is no longer based on skin color, but rather on consciousness. . . .”<sup>60</sup> Baldwin’s private, intimate “I,” however, is most meaningful in a public, trans-racial, transnational sense.

### Literary-Journalistic Reading Pact

As part of his first-person strategies, Baldwin (ideally) creates, heightened by his profusion of personal data and references, what I call a literary-journalistic pact or tacit narrative understanding with the reader. For the pact to be effective, not only must “the author, the narrator, and the protagonist . . . be identical,”<sup>61</sup> but the author must be convincing both on a referential level and on a story or discourse level. Implicit in this pact is the reader’s attention to the world created by the referential world outside the text *and* by the text itself. For Baldwin, this world would include the immeasurable problems of race, racial exclusion, and poverty, as well as the possibilities of a modern racial ideal, and, as suggested in *Nobody Knows My Name*, a de-racialization of the self as a precondition for being in society.<sup>62</sup>

Thus the literary journalistic pact cannot be concluded, or conclusively analyzed, by taking text alone into consideration. Nor can it be concluded by neglecting the author’s purposes of enlivening, reiterating, or bringing attention to the referential level. This pact forms the basic relationship through which literary journalists bind themselves to their readers, that is, by warranting true statements that can be factually verified; by insisting on a verifiable autobiographical self; and by simultaneously employing a literary expressiveness as effective as the discourse of a literary text. In contrast, in a fictional text, the author is not necessarily identical to the narrator, and the protagonist and the contents of the text need not be verifiable.<sup>63</sup> This pact therefore suggests that the literary journalistic text is as much a mode of reading as it is a genre of writing—which, in my view, most differentiates literary journalism from either literature or journalism.<sup>64</sup> For the pact to work, however, “the lure and the blur of the real” must effectively combine with an “overly literal tone, as if a reporter were viewing a strange culture.”<sup>65</sup> And, I should add, as if this strange culture were being explained for the first time.

The reading of Baldwin’s first-person narratives should not only be an attempt to look at literary-journalistic writing as a cultural or historical document, but also to attend to what these narratives do as distinct from other language acts.<sup>66</sup> More precisely, congruent to the pact, this position entails a phenomenology of reading in which experience is always related to narrative

and new experiences will constantly affect our narrative interpretations. As Hanna Meretoja has argued in her discussion on the ontological significance of narratives: “narrative interpretations have a very real effect on our being in the world: they take part in the making of the intersubjective world . . . and affect the ways in which we act in the world with others.”<sup>67</sup> Reading Baldwin’s use of the first-person singular—and of such forms in general—demands new formalistic tools based on such a pact, the value of which is inescapably linked to the experience of the reader and to the reader’s willingness to be changed by his or her reading experience.<sup>68</sup>

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### Notes

1. John Jay Chapman, *Practical Agitation* (New York: Scribner, 1900), 17.
2. James Baldwin, *The Art of Fiction*, no. 78, Interview by Jordan Elgrably, *Paris Review*, Spring 1984, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2994/the-art-of-fiction-no-78-james-baldwin>.
3. David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (New York: Vintage, 2011), 202–03.
4. Doritt Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 9.
5. *Ibid.*, 15.
6. *Ibid.*, 15.
7. *Ibid.*, 15.
8. *Ibid.*, 28.
9. *Ibid.*, 29.
10. Craig Cravens, “Review: *The Distinction of Fiction*” by Dorrit Cohn, *Comparative Literature Studies* 37, no. 1 (2000), 78.
11. I’m defining narratology as the study of the ways a text functions. As the narratologist Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan argues, narratology operates with a “double orientation”: it “present[s] description of the system governing all fictional narratives,” while at the same time “indicat[ing] a way in which individual narratives can be studied as a unique realization of the general system” (*Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 4).
12. Cohn, *Distinction*, 117.
13. *Ibid.*, 109.
14. Exceptions include Gerald Prince, *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative* (Amsterdam: Walter de Gruyter, 1982), and Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985). For a more recent study that qualifies as an exception, see Marie-Laure Ryan and

Jan-Noel Thon, eds., *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media Conscious Narratology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014). See also Cecilia Aare, “A Narratological Approach to Literary Journalism: How an Interplay between Voice and Point of View May Create Empathy with the Reader,” *Literary Journalism Studies* 8, no.1 (Spring 2016): 106–29.

15. On this matter, see for example Mark Z. Muggli’s “The Poetics of Joan Didion’s Journalism,” in *American Literature* 59, no.1 (October 1987): 402–421. Although I agree with Muggli’s point that “close analysis of individual journalistic texts has been rare” (402), I don’t think it necessarily follows that “Didion’s rhetoric of fact is best approached through the close analysis practiced by critics interpreting individual literary texts” (403). The works Muggli focuses on in his article—Didion’s *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968) and *The White Album* (1979)—are not exclusively fictional or journalistic accounts but rather literary-journalistic in nature and intention.

16. Cohn, *Distinction*, 109.

17. Steven J. Kellman, “Ehrenreich’s Game,” *Michigan Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 375–84.

18. John C. Hartsock, *Literary Journalism and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 2.

19. Unfortunately, most critics of American literature are paying little attention to contemporary nonfiction writers or to a group that Robert S. Boynton refers to in his study, *The New New Journalism* (New York: Vintage, 2005), as “the New New Journalists” (Jane Kramer, Jon Krakauer, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, et al.). The claim that Boynton makes in the book’s introduction—“the New New Journalism has assumed a premier place in American Literature” (xxx)—would be astounding news to these critics, as well as to most cultural historians and American Studies scholars. This does not detract from the point that scholars of American literature should be reading and writing about this extraordinary group of nonfiction writers and literary journalists.

20. Elisa Tamarkin, “Literature in the News,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, ed., Russ Castronovo, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), is one of the rare studies on American literature by a literary historian that demonstrates a firm grasp of journalism scholarship.

21. For the “built-in identity crisis” in journalism history, see John Nerone’s “Does Journalism History Matter,” *American Journalism* 28, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 7–27.

22. Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: 1690–1960* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

23. Michael Emery, Edzin Emery, Nancy L. Roberts, eds. *The Press in America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media*, 9th ed. (Needham Heights, MA: Pearson, 2000).

24. Hilary H. Ward, *Mainstreams of American Media History* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997).

25. Ken Auletta, *Inside the Business of News* (New York: Penguin, 2003).

26. Jean Marie Lutes, *Front Page Girls: Women Journalists in American Culture*

*and Fiction, 1880–1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

27. Everette E. Dennis and William L. Rivers, *Other Voices: The New Journalism in America* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2011). Originally published 1974.

28. Lauren Kessler, *The Dissident Press: Alternative Journalism in American History* (London: Sage, 1984).

29. Bob Ostertag, *People’s Movements, People’s Press: The Journalism of Social Justice Movements* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).

30. Todd Vogel, ed., *The Black Press: New Literary and Historical Essays*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

31. Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

32. Cecelia Tichi, *Exposés and Excess* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

33. Jeff Allred, *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

34. What I’m ultimately considering here is the possibility of a certain history of narrative, in an expansive and inclusive sense, as opposed to a literary history or a journalism history or a literary-journalism history. This could be something in the spirit of the *Oxford History of the Novel in English* (2014), as expressed in the Oxford website’s blurb for the volume: “The *Oxford History of the Novel in English* is a comprehensive, worldwide history of English-language prose fiction in all its varieties. The series spans more than six centuries and draws on the knowledge of a large international team of scholars. It offers a new understanding of the novel’s distinctiveness, its continuity, and its global significance in the modern world” (<https://global.oup.com/academic/content/series/o/oxford-history-of-the-novel-in-english-ohne/?cc=fr&lang=en&>). Literary-journalistic texts, of course, in and as part of a general history of narrative, would find their own distinctive home.

35. Literary journalism studies should probably be more often associated with the discipline of world literature. Both have strong transnational aspirations, studying narrative forms outside of and beyond a single national tradition; both have a tendency to favor encounter and relation—to other texts, cultures, and disciplines; and both have a commitment to a more global scholarship and pedagogy.

Like the case of world literature, we are still struggling to find the concepts and tools that permit us truly to study literary journalism at the global level. These concepts and tools will gradually materialize.

36. See Jens Brockmeier, *Beyond the Archive: Memory, Narrative, and the Autobiographical Process* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

37. Svetlana Alexievich, “Boys in Zinc,” trans. Arch Tait, *Granta* (Autumn 1990), 537.

38. *Reality Hunger*, 182.

39. *Ibid.*, 69.

40. Eve Fairbanks, “How personal essays conquered journalism—and how they can’t cut it,” *Washington Post*, October 10, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/postevery-thing/wp/2014/10/10/how-personal-essays-conquered-journalism-and->



why-they-cant-cut-it/.

41. Ibid.

42. This critical neglect overlooks the essential functions of Baldwin's "I" narratives in relation to his racial politics, cultural commitments, and essayistic eloquence. Essentially ignoring Baldwin's fusions of narrative mediums, the artificial bifurcation has also resulted in a critical neglect of Baldwin's aesthetics—and specifically how his activism and writing have mutually influenced each other. For exceptions to this neglect, see Marianne Dekoven, *Feminist Locations: Global and Local, Theory and Practice*, ed. Marianne Dekoven (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2001); Wolfgang Karrer, "Discursive Strategies in James Baldwin's Essays," in *James Baldwin: His Place in American Literary History and His Reception in Europe*, ed. Jakob Köllhofer (Frankfurt: Main & Bern, 1987), 113–28; and James Cunningham, "Public and Private Rhetorical Modes in the Essays of James Baldwin," in *Essays on the Essay: Redefining the Genre*, ed. Alexander Butrym (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989). For a formal analysis of Baldwin's poetry, see Meta Deuwa Jones, "Baldwin's Poetics," in *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin*, ed. Michel Elam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 41–55.

43. See Ruediger Heinze, "Violations of Mimetic Epistemology in First-Person Narrative Fiction," *Narrative* 16, no. 3 (October 2006): 279–97.

44. But narrative theorists have complicated this conventional equation by questioning first-person narrative taxonomies. John Paul Eakin, for example, argues that all first-person narratives can be defined as "autobiographical narratives," since such narratives depend as much on a process of self-invention and imagination as on historical fact. See John Paul Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 330. In a different vein, J. David Vellman, objecting to equating "selves" to "actual persons," emphasizes the relationship of reflexivity to self-knowledge: "The self does not denote any one entity but rather expresses a reflexive guise under which parts or aspects of a person are presented in his own mind." See J. David Vellman, *Self to Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Narrative creation may be a significant feature of the self, but does not necessarily compose a whole life narrative. The generic ambiguity of first-person narrations and taxonomies of the self aside, however, Baldwin imparts to his texts a fictional status while at the same time distilling within his texts autobiographical facts that can be authenticated as biographical data.

45. For example, in *Notes of Native Son* (1955), eight of the eleven pieces in this collection are cast in the first person; in *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), only one out of the fourteen essays is not in the first person. In the majority of Baldwin's nonfiction, the first person dominates.

46. James Baldwin, "Sidney Poitier," in *James Baldwin, The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage, 2011), 223.

47. James Baldwin, "Sweet Lorraine," in *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 757, 761.

48. The essay is by no means a self-evident narrative category. Baldwin's essays

take the form far beyond a prose composition that has a focused subject of discussion or is merely a long, systematic discourse. While serving polemical ends, his essays are a "style de pensée" (a style of thinking), a literature in its own right. For the origins of the essay as a French literary genre and tradition, see Marielle Macé, *Le temps de l'essai* (Paris: Belin, 2006), 5–8; 247–62. For the essay as a form of "paraliterature," see Claire de Obaldia, *The Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism, and the Essay* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). For an incisive study on the protest essay as a distinct literary genre, see Brian Norman, *The American Protest Essay and National Belonging* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007); and for the personal essay form in African American writing and inquiries into multiplex identifications, see respectively Gerald Early, *Speech and Power: The African American Essay from Polemics to Pulpit* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), Robert Reid-Pharr, *Black Gay Man: Essays* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), and Phillip Brian Harper, *Private Affairs: Critical Ventures in the Culture of Social Relations* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

49. *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, 361.

50. *Cross of Redemption*, 41.

51. Arnaud Schmitt, "Making the Case for Self-Narration Against Autofiction," *Auto/Biography Studies* 25, no. 1 (Summer 2010): 130.

52. For this distinction, see Schmitt, 130–33.

53. As with Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Richard Wright, and Langston Hughes studies, this is a self-identification largely unexamined in Baldwin scholarship.

54. *Cross of Redemption*, 210.

55. Colm Toibin, "Baldwin and 'the American Confusion,'" in *James Baldwin: America and Beyond*, ed. Cora Kaplan and Bill Schwartz (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 62.

56. Baldwin is referring to Norman Mailer here. See David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1994), 183–84.

57. *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, 121.

58. Carton Mathes, "'The Mind Is a Strange and Terrible Vehicle': Fractured Time and Multidimensional Sound in *No Name in the Street*," *African American Review* 46, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 591.

59. *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, 346–47.

60. Hortense Spiller, Afterword, in *James Baldwin: America and Beyond*, 244–245.

61. Phillipe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*. Trans. K. Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1989), 5.

62. As more explicitly expressed in Baldwin's later writings and interviews, this ideal would also include a "sexual maturity" dependent on a "racial maturity." As Baldwin stated in the 1984 interview with Richard Goldstein, "the sexual question and the racial question have always been entwined. . . . If Americans can mature on the level of racism, then they have to mature on the level of sexuality." "Go the Way Your Blood Beats': An Interview with James Baldwin," in *James Baldwin: The*

*Legacy*, ed. Quincy Troupe (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 178.

63. My argument here is indebted to Philippe Lejeune's *On Autobiography* and Philippe Carrard, "Biography and the Representation of Consciousness," *Narrative* 5, no. 3 (October 1997): 287–305.

64. How might the distinctiveness of reading literary-journalistic texts result in certain epistemological forms of interpretation? In a matter of degree vis-à-vis literary and "mainstream" journalistic works, does narrative journalism, in its reading demands, encourage more a co-creating or forging of links between things that were previously unconnected? Might the emphasis on reading such texts be on acts of making rather than unmaking, composition rather than critique, substantiating rather than subverting?

65. *Reality Hunger*, 5.

66. Baldwin's first-person literary journalistic forms establish an affective model of aesthetic response that stresses the reader's activity. Although the act of reading is not an act of understanding something necessarily contained and given in advance by the text; it is, however, never separate from historical process and referent. With its interest in describing individual consciousness or experience, the first person lays its emphasis on the singularity of each reading encounter.

67. Hanna Merejota, "Narrative and Human Existence: Ontology, Epistemology, and Ethics," *New Literary History* 45, no.1 (Winter 2014): 101.

68. I would like to thank Roberta S. Maguire for her comments on an earlier version of this essay and Christopher Wilson for our ongoing conversation about reading reportage and literary journalism, and on teaching the reading of these forms.