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■ Miles Maguire: Recent Trends and Topics in Scholarship ■

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Indian LJ



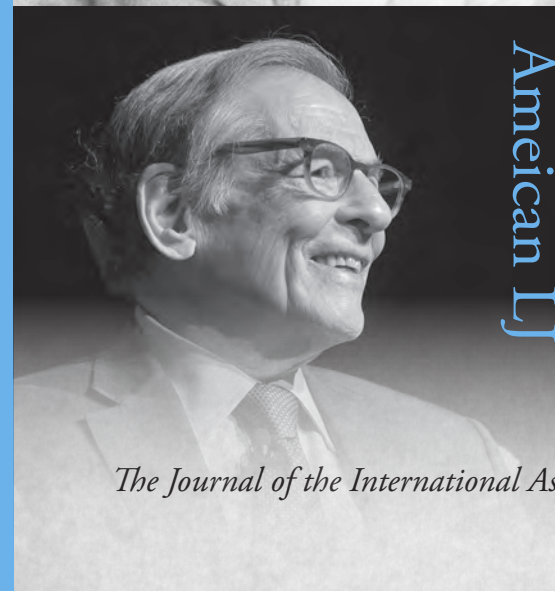
Cuban LJ



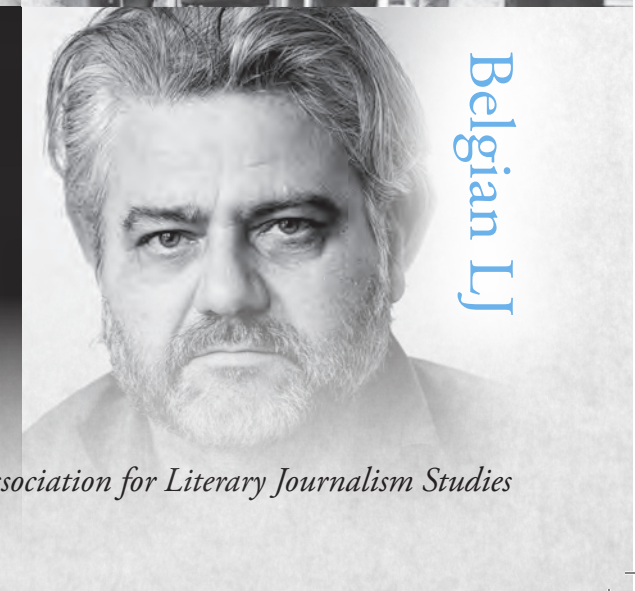
Polish LJ



German LJ



American LJ



Belgian LJ

The Journal of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies



Literary Journalism Studies

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Melchior Wańkowicz (Courtesy Dawid Walendowski, Wańkowicz's great-grandson).

Literary Reportage or Journalistic Fiction?

Polish Reporters' Struggles with the Form

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Abstract: This study explores the national specificity of Polish literary reportage and its historical changes from the second half of the nineteenth century to contemporary times. It analyzes selected examples of Poland's literary journalism in the context of the interdependencies between journalism and fiction, fact-based and fictional prose, and, finally, the press and the book sector. In particular, the analysis highlights the role of sociopolitical factors in the evolution of Polish reporters' writings and their professional ethics. Special emphasis is placed on literary devices derived from the allegorical narrative strategy of the so-called "small realism," which was often the only chance to pass censorship in Communist Poland. Moreover, the study examines the circumstances that have led to a symbiotic relationship between press and book forms of Polish reportage. It also discusses the aesthetics of the genre established along two separate lines: the journalistic variety and the literary variety (with the latter represented, among others, by Ryszard Kapuściński, the most recognizable Polish reporter worldwide). The genre of Polish reportage is further investigated, referring to two theoretical visions of the reporting craft that have gained currency in post-war World War II Poland: Melchior Wańkowicz's and Krzysztof Kąkolewski's approaches. Wańkowicz's concept, referred to as the mosaic theory, challenged the canonical journalistic principle of keeping fact and fiction separate. In this study, the mosaic approach is discussed as a source of potential, though not obvious, similarities between the Polish and U.S. forms of literary journalism. In addition, the study also touches on possible directions developing Polish reportage in the digital media age.

Keywords: Polish literary reportage – journalistic fiction – mosaic theory – small realism – book reportage

In the late 1940s, Kazimierz Wyka, an eminent Polish literary critic, remarked that reportage was consistently ahead of literary prose, because reporters took up themes that were too current to become a legitimate object of artistic creation.¹ Originally intended as a comment on books falling on the borderline between the novel and documentary prose, Wyka's observation soon became part of the accepted theory of Polish nonfiction writing. The tradition of creative nonfiction in Poland also comprises literary reportage, a unique form of reporting on real-life events or problems presented from the author's perspective, which makes use of artistic literary devices.

Apart from combining current themes and narrative techniques derived from fiction writing—the two characteristics that Wyka proposed—Polish reportage meets the universal criteria of literary journalism, such as immersive reporting, accuracy, focusing on everyday life events, and symbolic consciousness.² These are indeed independent of any national context, as the same features came to the fore both in U.S. New Journalism and, earlier, in the east and west European approaches to fact-based prose. Although Polish literary reportage follows well-tested patterns, it also has a number of distinctive characteristics. These specific features can be traced to the dynamic sociopolitical changes that transformed twentieth-century Poland and gave rise to a symbiotic relationship between the press variety of the genre and the Polish book market.

The purpose of this study is to discuss the evolution of this hybrid text form, which not only crosses the borders between journalism and literature, or fact-based prose and fiction, but also crosses the boundary between the newspaper and the book publishing industries.

Journalism or Literature? Two Varieties of Polish Reportage

The tension between documentary journalism and the classically defined notion of literature can be seen at every stage of the development of reportage in Poland. The immediate antecedents of this genre emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century in Polish travel writings, spanning various kinds of reports, descriptions, and travel letters. Fact-based forms that preceded reportage also found their way into artistic prose, especially prose based on the poetics of realism and naturalism. On the other hand, the origin of Polish reportage is closely related to the emergence of the mass press, which in the 1870s in Poland was heavily influenced by west European, especially French, models.

This influence has been noticed by Jolanta Sztachelska, who states that Polish newspapers in the nineteenth century were consciously patterned after French newspapers. She argues that the French impact on the newspaper

market resulted in the emergence of tabloids that were “on a much lighter note, less demanding of their readers, more egalitarian.”³ It is because of these influences that the tabloid formula of reporters’ writings became widespread in Poland, with clearly pejorative associations attached. Initially, as noted by Sztachelska, the term “reporter” was used to refer to “a supplier of sensational topics, gossip, and indiscretion.”⁴

Thus, even before it grew into a free-standing genre, Polish reportage was developing along two separate lines: its journalistic variety blending into other press genres and its literary variety comprising mainly travel documentary prose written by widely read authors (including selected writings by the Nobel Prize-holders Henryk Sienkiewicz and Władysław Stanisław Reymont).

This bipolarity was reinforced during the twenty years of the interwar period—that is, from 1918 through 1939—which is commonly regarded as the time when Polish reportage took shape as a genre in its own right. Indeed, it was not until the 1930s that reportage became fully developed, which coincided with the demand for up-to-date factual accounts, growing out of Poland’s independence, regained in 1918. The rebirth of the Polish state, which since the end of the eighteenth century had been under Prussian, Russian, and Austrian partition, effected a change in the public’s expectations. There emerged an audience who “demanded immediate and reliable information both about events and situations that occurred in their own country (which was developing in a rapid and conflictual rhythm) and about events that took place around the world.”⁵

This need to acquaint the reader with current facts was satisfied on the one hand by travel reportage, which evolved into tourist prose, and accounts of adventurous journeys to faraway corners of the globe.⁶ On the other hand, there were journalistic reports documenting the unstable political and economic situation in Poland and abroad. Prime examples of this strain are selected writings of Ksawery Pruszyński and Melchior Wańkowicz. Pruszyński is famous for *W czerwonej Hiszpanii* (In the red Spain), his 1937 correspondence from a Spain torn by “red” revolution; Wańkowicz for *Na tropach Smętka* (Following Smętek), his 1936 report on an expedition to Nazi East Prussia, as well as later books, such as *Bitwa o Monte Cassino* (The Battle of Monte Cassino), published from 1945 through 1947, in which he documented the participation of Polish soldiers in World War II.⁷

Thus, the 1920s and 1930s interwar tradition of reportage in Poland was cocreated by documentary writings focused on a particular problem on the one hand, and by literary forms bordering on fiction on the other. Both approaches played an important role in the contemporaneous debate on innovation and antitraditionalism in art. Viewed as the opposite of narrative

strategies rooted in nineteenth-century realistic prose, reportage became “part of the dispute about the direction of development of the twentieth-century literature.”⁸ Reportage’s theoretical foundations were shaped by then-popular calls for authenticity and by two foreign models: German New Objectivity and Russian *literature of fact*.⁹

The influence of the Russian model is of particular importance and requires a further overview. In the late 1920s, the theoretical propositions of Soviet writers grouped around the magazine *Novyi LEF* (New Left Front of the Arts) were adopted by Polish leftist journals. The texts these journals published in the 1930s usually had a propagandist tone, in keeping with their goal to present the problems of the working class and to lay bare the pathologies of everyday life in the time of economic crisis. Józef Rurawski has noted that Polish left-wing journalists of this period often wrote reports on authentic events or actions (e.g., strikes) while they were occurring. The main function of such texts, which Rurawski identified as examples of “socialist” reportage, was to mobilize workers and the unemployed to actively fight for their rights.¹⁰

Still, as Zygmunt Ziątek demonstrated, and contrary to widespread assumptions, reportage was not the key nonfiction genre in Poland of the 1920s and 1930s. Nonfiction writings also included other forms, more or less closely related to it: from proletarian and societal prose, to memoirs and autobiographical accounts that representatives of various professional groups wrote. What is more, the term *literature of fact* was applied mainly to works of fiction that aimed at authenticity in recording concrete individual or community social experiences.¹¹ This was the goal of the writers who in 1933 formed the literary group *Przedmieście* (The Suburb). Calling for empirical observation of marginalized social groups, its members often used the reportage technique.¹²

The example of *Przedmieście* demonstrates the 1920s and 1930s interwar tendency to regard Polish reportage as a certain method of writing, exploited by fictional writers as well. The identification of reportage with a specific narrative strategy, which at that time was the subject of literary debates, strengthened its affinities with literature. At the same time, however, the development of this genre in Poland was stimulated by events demanding immediate commentary or intervention, that is, by circumstances typically associated with journalism.

These journalistic circumstances coincided many times in the post–World War II history of Polish reportage. Such groundbreaking events—especially the political thaw of the late 1950s and the later workers’ strikes accompanying the birth of *Solidarność* (Solidarity)¹³—inspired heated discussions about

the then-current condition and the future of this genre. Especially controversial in this respect were opinions voiced by Melchior Wańkowicz, whose concept of the *reportage mosaic* challenged the canonical principle of keeping facts and fiction apart.

Facts or Fiction? Polish Reporters versus Literary Verity

Wańkowicz (1892–1974), a prolific author of various texts devoted to national, war, and emigration issues and a bard of an innovative narrative technique drawing upon the poetics of *gawęda*—a story, Polish epic literary genre—is hailed as the father of Polish reportage.¹⁴ He is also remembered as a theoretician of the genre, who argued for the legitimization of elements of fiction in reporter's prose.

In a series of essays published since the mid-1960s, Wańkowicz compared writing reportage to laying out a mosaic, of which “no element can be painted, but each must be found in its natural color.”¹⁵ It is, however, admissible—or indeed recommended, he argued—that isolated facts (e.g., facts concerning several real-life characters) should be combined into a complex whole. This broadening of the category of verity sought to show the universal truth, the essence, albeit at the expense of literal truth. Wańkowicz's ideas, brought together and systematized in his two-volume *Karafka La Fontaine'a* (La Fontaine's carafe),¹⁶ contributed to a redefinition of literary reportage in Poland. As author of the mosaic view of the genre, Wańkowicz defined the literary quality of a text not as its stylistic property but rather as a synthesis of facts into a multidimensional (and, technically speaking, partially fictional) story.

Wańkowicz aired his views despite the then-widespread tendency to marginalize reportage, which was considered inferior to fiction. The unfavorable opinions on this genre originated in the 1920s and 1930s. As noted by Czesław Niedoziński, reportage in that interwar, Polish era was associated with the inadequacy of traditional forms of artistic expression and with the crisis of twentieth-century European culture.¹⁷ Niedoziński claims that the perception was precisely because a large number of Polish literary critics regarded this genre as an “extreme expression of contemporary naturalism.”¹⁸ During this interwar period, the reportage technique of writing was often characterized as a tendency to depict reality by what were considered “dry,” highly objective reports. Niedoziński states that, according to some critics, the naturalistic aesthetic was an evidence of the expansion of ideas regarded as “destructive” and “nihilistic.”¹⁹

Reportage was also associated with lower literary quality in the first, post-World War II years, which were dominated by strictly journalistic accounts

aimed at documenting the Polish wartime experiences.²⁰ Finally, the negative valuation of reporters was connected with the fact that their texts were regarded as a convenient tool for spreading propaganda. This was particularly the case with biased, socialist-realistic production reportage of the years 1949–55, which reflected extreme levels of authors' ideological involvement. The stereotype of a hack reporter writing panegyric texts about "building progress and socialism"²¹ was challenged by Wańkowicz's vision of an artist-reporter who was equal to fiction writers. Hence, in his approach he called not only for the freedom to make use of fiction but also—indirectly—for the restoration of the professional reputation of the reporter.

Interestingly, although at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s the mosaic technique stirred controversies among Polish scholars investigating this genre, the approach itself was not unknown abroad. Aleksandra Ziółkowska-Boehm points out that a similar strategy of merging truth with fiction can be found in the works of Valentin Ovechkin—a Soviet writer known for his *ocherki*, which John C. Hartsock described as semi-fictional (yet still received as journalistic) "sketches of collective farm life in Russia"²²—and in Egon Erwin Kisch's collections of reportage.²³ Indeed, Wańkowicz in *Karafka La Fontaine'a* made repeated references to the German "Raging Reporter," that is, Kisch²⁴ and his technique. Wańkowicz argued that Kisch, through the form of semi-fictional reportages, gave a "deep human content to the collected facts."²⁵

A separate note must be made of Wańkowicz's reflections on some of the U.S. writers, whose work was associated with narrative journalism. Wańkowicz followed closely the current trends in U.S. literature and culture, which seems quite understandable considering his travels across North America before and after World War II. While working as a correspondent for the interwar *Kurier Warszawski* (Warsaw daily), Wańkowicz traveled to Mexico in the late 1920s. After World War II, in 1949, he moved to the United States and stayed until 1958 (in 1956, he even acquired U.S. citizenship). While on emigration, he traveled across the United States and Canada. After settling back in Poland, he went on other trips in the 1960s to the United States and Mexico.²⁶

At least partially in consequence of Wańkowicz's cultural experiences with North America, his theoretical essays were clearly inspired, among others, by the fiction and nonfiction works of Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Norman Mailer, and Truman Capote. Wańkowicz was very familiar with their prose, as shown by multiple comments and citations he included in *Karafka La Fontaine'a*. Particularly worth mentioning are his remarks on Truman Capote's nonfiction novel *In Cold Blood*, which—as noted by Sophia Leonard—is often recognized by scholars as "the earliest manifestation of New Journalism that became widespread in American journalism in

the late 20th century.”²⁷ Leonard argues that critics called most of their attention to novelistic techniques Capote applied in the book. These literary devices—as multiple analyses have shown—included using omniscient narration, providing insights into characters’ thoughts, dividing stories into sequential sections, juxtaposing killers’ and victims’ perspectives, imposing a viewpoint of panoptic supervision, as well as creating symbolic meanings through the extreme detail and emotive imagery.²⁸ Wańkowicz, however, found Capote’s *In Cold Blood* successful primarily due to its poetics of narrative suspense, enhanced through deliberate arrangement of facts. He compared this device to the cinematic technique of parallel editing and, next, linked it to his own mosaic strategy.²⁹

These references may be seen as a potential, though purely hypothetical, source of some parallels between Wańkowicz’s writings and U.S. New Journalism, which was taking shape at approximately the same time as the mosaic approach in Poland. To begin with, it must be emphasized that there was no direct analogy to the U.S. formation in Polish reportage of the 1960s and 1970s. Nevertheless, Wańkowicz’s texts shared certain features with the model elaborated by proponents of the New Journalism. Even though the Polish reporter’s prose did not contain all four literary devices Tom Wolfe enumerated,³⁰ its most salient elements, such as narrative panache, strong subjectivism, and a high level of linguistic sophistication, are close to the poetics of the New Journalism.

Following from that, there are also important similarities in the reception of the two approaches. In the United States, Wolfe’s revolutionary assumptions were opposed by both conservative journalists and literary artists. Wańkowicz, with his mosaic approach, provoked a similar, though milder, reaction in Poland. In his case, opposition came mostly from other reporters, while professional literary critics remained largely passive.³¹ Krzysztof Kąkolewski (1930–2015)—hailed, next to Ryszard Kapuściński and Hanna Krall, as a cofounder of the Polish school of reportage (hence, its tag 3xK, or the 3Ks)—expressed particularly fierce criticism. Kąkolewski was a proponent of the psychological form of this genre and at the same time a radical proponent of the fact-based approach. He considered fiction a symptom of lacking skill, flouting the conventions, and squandering readers’ trust. Kąkolewski associated the literary quality of writing with the ability to discern events which of their own accord formed a story line or called only for skillful selection and editing. He wrote, “In both cases, however, the artistic value concurs with the information value.”³² This perspective stood in direct opposition to the key assumptions of the mosaic approach.

In consequence, Kąkolewski engaged in a dispute with Wańkowicz

in an extended, 1973 interview entitled *Wańkowicz krzepi* (Wańkowicz invigorates),³³ in which two alternate visions of the reporting craft were juxtaposed. One perspective highlighted the primary status of facts and was advocated by a large number of post-World War II journalists (including Wojciech Giełżyński and Andrzej Krzysztof Wróblewski). The other drew on the work of Wańkowicz and is associated mainly with Ryszard Kapuściński, whose literary poetics has also become recognizable abroad. Of course, this division must be treated as a simplification, with the border between the objective verity and the authorial verity in the middle-aged and young generation of reporters (e.g., Jacek Hugo-Bader, Wojciech Jagielski, Mariusz Szczygieł, Wojciech Tochman, Witold Szablowski, Andrzej Muszyński) becoming increasingly blurred. This situation is captured by Mateusz Zimnoch, who observes that “it is something of a dilemma in Polish literary journalism studies that more and more nonfiction books are being considered in terms of fictional literature rather than of factual journalism at all.”³⁴

The tendency noted by Zimnoch is also reflected in the works of Kapuściński, who was repeatedly accused of inaccuracies³⁵ or even of purposeful use of fiction. The publication of Artur Domosławski’s controversial biography³⁶ prompted, for example, the following question: “Does reportage understood as an allegory of the world still belong to fact-based prose (and, hence, does it have to satisfy the criterion of ‘truth’), or does it lie in the province of literature, where the criterion of ‘probability’ is more likely to apply?”³⁷ In this way Zbigniew Bauer opens his analysis of the discussion of Domosławski’s *Ryszard Kapuściński: A Life*. More importantly, though, Bauer in his study refers to Gonzo journalism, as represented by Hunter S. Thompson.³⁸

Bauer’s analysis again brings into focus the potential similarities between Polish and U.S. literary journalism at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, mentioned above with reference to Wańkowicz. Paradoxically, the work of Kapuściński, while often associated with the poetics of the New Journalists, seems to contradict this analogy. This is because of the different sources of literary art, which in his case were determined by the Polish reality of his time.

It was a reality in which the freedom of speech was indeed limited. For reporters who wrote in Poland in the time of Communism, making use of literary devices was often the only way to pass censorship and publish in official circulation. As noted by Diana Kuprel:

In the totalitarian system that governed postwar East-Central Europe, reporters had to employ in their reportage sophisticated strategies of encoding in order to pass censorship, and readers had to deploy a highly developed critical sensibility to decipher the language of allegory and metaphor.

Reporters, borrowing techniques from imaginative literature and approaches from the social sciences . . . , would write about anything but the contemporary Communist system.³⁹

In reportages that dealt with home affairs this so-called “camouflage policy” was based on what Grzegorz Gazda describes as “mały realizm,” which translates as “small realism,” that is, on a narrative strategy “concerned with everyday and mundane reality, without any attempt at generalization or a social diagnosis.”⁴⁰ However, these ordinary events were used to conceal the intended, allegorical sense of the text. In fact, an “everyday reality” depicted by Polish post–World War II reporters abounded in hidden references to the current political situation at home. In overseas reportage, on the other hand, the banned content was often disguised by descriptions of exotic places, seemingly remote from the Polish realities. A prime example of this strategy is the reception of Kapuściński’s *The Emperor*, which was read—both at home and abroad—as a parable and an allusion to the Communist government in Poland.⁴¹

By contrast, the literary quality of the works of the New Journalists, immersed in the liberal atmosphere of the U.S. counterculture, stemmed from radically different sources. It was a symptom of the experimental attitude as well as the basis of a dispute with the worn-out models of objective journalism and—according to Wolfe—with contemporary literature, which he claimed shunned current social issues.⁴²

It is also worth noting the fact that U.S. prose moved away from realism can be associated with postmodernism. Jerzy Durczak argues that, in the 1960s, the growing popularity of antiveristic tendencies in the U.S. literature was caused—among others—by exploring works of writers soon to be labeled as postmodern (e.g., Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Robert Coover, John Hawkes). As Durczak points out, all these authors considered imagination and metaliterary reflection to be “more important for artist than the realistic depiction of society and the mechanisms of its functioning.”⁴³ In contrast, postmodernism was never fully present in Polish literature as it was in prose removed from realism. In the 1970s, there was a widespread opinion in Poland that fiction was useless and works that openly ignored real-life problems were dismissed. Thus, reportage was not meant to counterbalance literature but, on the contrary, to reestablish its genre principles.

To conclude these considerations, reporters’ writing in the 1960s and 1970s was promoted to the category of art in different ways in Poland and in the United States. The frames of the Communist regime and socialist reality precluded the provocative, defiant formula used by the New Journalists. In Poland, the openly interventionist function of the genre was hence replaced

by the literary poetics of camouflage, that is, “small realism,” which became much more popular with reporters than did the radical ideas proposed by Wańkowicz.

This preference remained unchanged even after the period of violent workers’ demonstrations and the wave of strikes on the Polish coast in August 1980.⁴⁴ Both publishers and critics voiced opinions asserting the crisis of reportage and artistic stagnation of its authors.⁴⁵ While theoretically providing conditions similar to those that the counterculture created for the New Journalists, the turbulent changes of the sociopolitical scene in Poland did not produce a spirit of artistic liberation. In the 1980s many journalists quit the profession and works in official circulation were still subject to censorship. The situation was further aggravated by the collapse of the printing industry, affecting in particular the book form of reportage.

Finally, it is worth noting that while originally published in daily press and periodicals, reporters’ texts were also available from literary publishing houses. This is another feature of Polish reportage, closely related with the national book market.

The Press or the Book? Reportage in the Polish Book Market

The fact that reporters’ prose spread to the publishing sector does not necessarily mean their style became more literary. It can be said that not all book editions demonstrate high artistic merit. Likewise, it can be said that press-printed texts may represent a writing style that is way more sophisticated than that of typical fact-based narratives. Still, the problem of the medium seems important to the present discussion because, in Poland, collections of reportage—both those written to be published in book form and those originally published in the press—have been an integral part of national literary production.

This is shown by the fact that reporters’ works appear in the catalogs of the most prominent publishing houses, often as part of thematic series. One of the most recognizable reportage series has been established by the Czarne (Black) Publishing House, which actively promotes Polish and foreign reportage. Literary journalism is also propagated by the Institute of Reportage in Warsaw, which runs the publishing house Dowody na Istnienie (Evidence for existence), named after the title of Hanna Krall’s book, and by a nonfiction bookshop combined with a coffee bar, Wrzenie Świata (Boiling of the world), named after the four-volume collection of Kapuściński’s writings published in the late 1980s. Books written by Polish reporters feature prominently in all-Poland literary contests. There is also the Ryszard Kapuściński Award,⁴⁶ dedicated specifically to literary reportage, which is gaining in prestige.

There are various reasons for this contemporary trend in the history of the genre. The popularization of book-length reportage in Poland resulted, among other reasons, from changes in the preferences concerning the reception of news in the mass media. Ziątek points out that reportage “calls for a democratic audience,”⁴⁷ thus making use of outlets that offer unlimited access to current information. In the interwar, 1918–1939 period, newspapers were vehicles of such content for Polish readers. Reporters published their texts in all-Poland leftist magazines (in particular, in *Miesięcznik Literacki* [Literary monthly], which promoted nonfiction) and in sociocultural weeklies (e.g., in the prominent *Wiadomości Literackie* [Literary news]). Book editions of reportage, printed by private-sector publishing and bookselling houses, were at that time elitist. Lucjan Biliński observes that because of the high cost and limitations connected with the then-common illiteracy, “the book was generally inaccessible for a wide range of potential receivers.”⁴⁸

This situation changed radically after World War II because of an education program introduced by the Communist government. A large-scale action aimed at making books popular among the masses and promoting reading habits helped to restore Poland’s cultural heritage. During World War II, a major part of national book collections was destroyed as a result of military action or the purposeful policy of the occupying forces. In the planned restoration, reportage played an important role, because it satisfied the basic need of the centrally controlled publishing market—it enabled education of the society in the spirit of socialism.

This assumption influenced the choice of books published in the first years of the People’s Republic of Poland (PRL), established after World War II under Communist rule. Apart from works of literary classics and professional writings, the market was dominated by sociopolitical literature,⁴⁹ which readily made use of reportage techniques. These texts, often in the form of a commentary on the current Polish and world politics, were mostly—but obviously not with the same intensity—infused with ideological content. Dariusz Jarosz argues that in post-World War II Poland, the term “sociopolitical book” actually referred to multiple and diverse writing genres: belles-lettres, publicity, reportage, popular science, or strictly scientific papers on social, political, and economic issues. However, the one trait all these publications shared was “the direct utility in forming the awareness, attitudes and social behaviors recognized as appropriate by the Communist authorities.”⁵⁰

The official governmental propaganda noted above was directly denounced by underground prints, published in the second half of the 1970s in the so-called “second circulation” (which also included reprints from emigrant publishing houses outside Poland).⁵¹ This term refers to both the “pub-

lishing movement outside the reach of censorship” and the “social-cultural movement, which was organised independently of the PRL authorities.”⁵² Stanisław Siekierski states that sociopolitical literature (which consisted primarily of journalistic writing) made up approximately forty percent of books published in the “second circulation” in Poland between 1976 and 1986. During that period, all the Polish underground writers “were sharply critical of the so-called social realism in the USSR and people’s democracy countries.” As noted by Siekierski, this criticism was concerned with “the ideological assumptions, the past, and the existing reality.”⁵³ Moreover, a high proportion of these illegal publications discussed the sociopolitical consequences of martial law imposed in Poland in December 1981 in an attempt to crush the Solidarity movement.⁵⁴

It is also worth noting that these underground books included memoirs, essays, and interviews with dissidents as well as reports documenting current events and activities of the opposition.⁵⁵ Such literary and journalistic works were accompanied by various kinds of archive materials, documents, reprints of history textbooks, or lexicons created before World War II and by emigrants to other countries, articles, and monographs concerning post-World War II Poland. As noted by Magdalena Mikołajczyk, all these forms were qualified by Polish underground publishers as source materials compatible with the existing “preference for the documentary record of the epoch.”⁵⁶ With regard to reportage, providing this kind of record was the purpose of many texts published in the Reporters’ Series OKO (Eye), founded by the underground publishing house Pokolenie (Generation).⁵⁷

For underground publishers, the reportage technique was a means to fill in the missing pages in the censored history of Poland. As noted by Ryszard Ciemiński: “Virtually all generations of reporters . . . were to meet first in the second circulation press and somewhat later in the second circulation books. Knowing little of one another and, with few exceptions, never coming in touch, they all sat to write their yet unwritten books.”⁵⁸ This observation demonstrates the characteristic feature of Polish underground publishing, which initially focused on magazines. Individual houses usually emerged as outlets for specific press titles, with the uncensored materials supplementing texts printed in various journals, periodicals, and booklets, known as *bibuła* (independent, illegal publications). It must be noted, however, that underground book reportage, published with primitive printing methods, did not fully respect the principles of the genre. It often overlapped with other nonfiction genres, in particular, with memoirs and interviews.

As mentioned above, while reporters’ books that were published underground criticized the party elites’ abuse of power, those published officially

were often used to mold desirable social attitudes. Jarosz describes these behaviors as “socialist patriotism,”⁵⁹ defined by anti-clericalism, leftist interpretation of the past and contemporary history, proletarian class consciousness, as well as criticism of the so-called bourgeois ideology and revisionism.

It should be noted, though, that Polish readers were explicitly indoctrinated with such ideas primarily in the Stalinist period, through classic Marxist texts and socialist-realistic books.⁶⁰ However, after the political thaw of 1956 (also known as “Gomułka’s Thaw” or “Polish October”),⁶¹ when the process of de-Stalinization reached its climax in Poland, the number of works renouncing the propagandist tone in favor of the “camouflage” policy—discussed earlier—distinctively increased. Apart from that, clearly not all reportage books published in official circulation aspired to demonstrate high levels of political engagement.

Paradoxically, the last remark applies also to reportage practices remote from exclusively ideological intent, yet well-received by the Communist regime. By way of explanation, a separate note must be provided here. In post-World War II Poland, fact-based literature referring to socialist principles served in some cases educational goals perceived as a priority. For instance, reportage technique spread to popular science prose that promoted knowledge from various fields. By providing a long-term social value, this didactic approach was consistent with the prime directives of the then-governing party. Regardless of the political basis, this educational attitude may be seen as valuable from the contemporary perspective as well.

Furthermore, the ambition to educate and improve citizens was also visible in children’s and youth literature, which was the speciality of the National Publishing House Iskry (Sparks) founded in the 1950s. Its range of publications included reporters’ works seeking to arouse interest in the surrounding world. Urszula Kowalewska noted that “virtually from the beginning of its activity, this publishing house drew outstanding, original journalists, in this way forming a kind of Polish post-war school of reportage.”⁶² Widely read book series, including *Naokoło świata* (Around the world) and *Świat się zmienia* (The world is changing), contributed to this development with stories written by reporters and travelers in adventure-book style. In this way the publishing house developed a recognizable brand of fictionalized reportage describing expeditions to remote parts of the globe and aspiring to educate young minds.

Incidentally, it should also be pointed out that a large number of those far-off-land stories—especially the ones taking place in Third World countries—represented the poetics of Cold War socialist internationalism. On the whole, the term referred to a policy of maintaining political, economic, and cross-cultural friendship relations within the Soviet Bloc.⁶³ This principle had

a noticeable impact on travel destination choices made by Polish correspondents and, thus, resulted in reportage series depicting the PRL's allied nations. These "solidarity" publications were compatible with the government's education program mentioned earlier, as they provided the reading public with current accounts of places regarded as socialist-friendly. The discussed trend—shown, for example, in Ryszard Kapuściński's well-known reportage books concerning the Third World⁶⁴—seems to be another evidence of Polish reporters' problematic but, at least in Kapuściński's case, not so patently obvious entanglement with the ideology.

To return to the previous point, the adventure variety of reportage gained an enormous popularity with readers and publishers in Poland under Communist rule (continuing also after the political transformation of the country⁶⁵). In addition, in the second half of the twentieth century, reportage books were brought out on a massive scale in sociopolitical and general book series. These were published by leading Polish publishing houses, such as the publishing cooperative Czytelnik (Reader), the first press founded in Poland after World War II, which brought out early editions of Kapuściński's works.

However, despite the growing number of reportage books published, at that time reportage was still more popular in the press. It became "the basic genre in literary and sociocultural weeklies,"⁶⁶ such as *Po prostu* (Simply), *Świat* (World), *Przegląd Kulturalny* (Cultural overview), *Życie Literackie* (Literary life), *Tygodnik Powszechny* (Universal weekly), *Nowa Kultura* (New culture), and *Polityka* (Politics). In the 1970s, reporters' works continued to be popularized mainly by two journals: *Literatura* (Literature), published in Warsaw, and the monthly *Kontrasty* (Contrasts), published in Białystok.

Interestingly, since the 1920s and 1930s, and throughout the whole post-World War II period, pieces of reportage were often published in literary studies periodicals or next to texts that concerned the theory of literature. For example, reporters' works as well as the genology of reportage, that is, a description of the genre, were regularly discussed by critics in the literary annual *Rocznik Literacki* (Literary yearbook). In the late 1950s, the editorial board of this magazine established a separate reportage section. However, as noted by Joanna Jeziorska-Haładyj, in the 1960s, reportages were published in the journal alongside fiction genres, such as novels and novelettes,⁶⁷ whereas in the 1970s, the reportage section was incorporated into a broad and diverse prose section.⁶⁸

This trend demonstrates once again that in Poland reportage was closely associated with the field of newspaper and other periodical literature on the one hand and with the book market on the other. Its connection with the latter was reinforced by the fact that most texts published in journals were later

reprinted in single-authored collections or in anthologies, which often came into being after journalism contests. As noted by Krystyna Goldbergowa, a longtime editor of *Iskry* and a propagator of the works of Polish reporters, book editions “were never mirror images of the reportage pieces published in the press.”⁶⁹ Although this remark can be read as an attempt to elevate the status of reportage books, Goldbergowa’s perspective taken here positions them as inferior with regard to the first press editions. It seems so because Goldbergowa defines the book form of reportage not by its own characteristic qualities (implied by the specificity of the book medium), but by measuring its distance from the press reportage. Thus, she unwittingly exposes the dependence of book reportage on the press variety of the genre.

This poses the question of the autonomy of reportage in the book and the press sector. In Poland, the line between these two has always been fuzzy, as clearly demonstrated by the *Ekspres reporterów* (Reporters’ express) series, popular at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s. The publishing house advertised it as “the only reportage book series on the Polish book market which addresses up-to-date issues.”⁷⁰ Volumes appeared monthly, each containing three pieces: one concerned with a particular event, another discussing socio-cultural problems, and the third one in the form of detective reportage. Thus, *Ekspres reporterów* preserved the press formula and regularity, but in size and volume, it resembled a book. As Lech Borski emphasized in the mid-1980s, it is because of this literary context that publishing in this series was regarded as elevating, especially for young, aspiring authors.⁷¹

Also, today in Poland reportage books are still viewed as a symbol of professional prestige and a complement to the writer’s activity in the press. This is demonstrated by *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Electoral newspaper), a high-circulation, sociopolitical daily, which since the early 1990s has been leading the way in promoting Polish reporters. It boasts the biggest reportage section among national papers, first supervised by Hanna Krall and later developed by a long-term editor and journalist Małgorzata Szejnert. Texts published in *Wyborcza* seem to be a prime example of the overlap between press and book reportage. On the one hand, works by authors collaborating with the daily appear in the newspaper’s weekly reportage supplement *Duży Format* (Big format). On the other, they are often reprinted in book form by literary publishing houses, such as Czarne, Dowody na Istnienie, and Agora (which is also the publisher of *Wyborcza*).

In her analysis of Agora’s position in the Polish literary market, Agnieszka Chamera-Nowak draws radical conclusions: “The press reportage becomes truly successful if it gets published in a book form.”⁷² Such a statement may seem radical because the author, whether intentionally or not, implies that

the press reportage itself is not commercially viable or formally attractive enough to gain a wide reading public without an explicit literary signature. In doing so, she clearly emphasizes the preference for book reportage among contemporary Polish readers.

Still, it must be noted that books of reportage published in Poland today are increasingly more remote from the genre prototype. With characteristic subjectivization, stylistic experiments, and adaptation of schemata characteristic of diaristic and essayistic prose, they seem closer to the Wańkowicz paradigm than to the self-disciplined approach advocated by Kąkolewski. Thus, it appears that they are indicative of a transformation of the literary reportage towards journalistic fiction—a hybrid form, but still retaining general characteristics of the original genre.

Literary Reportage or Journalistic Fiction?

In Poland, similar observations have been made by multiple scholars, who have drawn attention to the progressive tightening of the association between art and reportage. Ziątek goes so far as to regard the expansion of this genre as one of the three factors that “shaped the Polish fact-based prose of the twentieth century: directly, by its own development towards literary maturity; and indirectly, by its impact on experimental quests in the field of fiction.”⁷³ Moreover, in his discussion of the present condition of reportage, in turn, Ziątek observes, harking back to the 1920s to 1930s, interwar period:

At the moment we witness a nearly exact reversal of the pre-war situation: there do not seem to be any fact-oriented trends in artistic prose, or even less so reportage-style developments. In contrast, there are increasingly more frequent and more noticeable symptoms of reportage being treated as literature—both by those who write it and by those who read.⁷⁴

According to Ziątek and other scholars, literary reportage is inseparable from journalistic fiction, as it adapts narrative techniques, at the same time engaging in current events and evolving according to their course. Even a brief survey of this evolution shows that the twentieth-century body of texts by Polish reporters is a result of a constant struggle and search for a universal form of expression. This universal technique was to reconcile apparently opposite elements: the social expectations associated with reportage and artistic aspirations of the authors, which were in principled conflict with the journalists’ ethos.

The first element is, of course, directly related to the journalistic character of the genre. As Zbigniew Kwiatkowski notes, reportage is “one of the most sensitive barometers indicating changes in the beat of political and social life.”⁷⁵ As shown by the analysis of book reportage published during the Communist

period, the journalistic character is clearly visible in the prose of Polish reporters, who were treated as proponents of ideology, propagators of knowledge, or advocates of freedom, depending on the changing historical context.

It should be noted, however, that the historical variability of social roles seems to be a rather universal attribute of all reporters, regardless of their national background. This assumption is reflected, among others, in Paweł Urbaniak's study on reportage as a source of knowledge about society. Based on the model of communication proposed in the 1950s by Bruce H. Westley and Malcolm S. MacLean, Urbaniak compares reporters to "professional communicators" situated between the social world and its receivers. He enumerates multiple functions of such communicators (e.g., the role of interviewer, gatekeeper, rapporteur, analyst, researcher, interpreter), depending on current social demands. Urbaniak's final conclusion is that in each case "a reporter assumes the role of an intermediary, although the nature of this intermediation is obviously diverse."⁷⁶

As pointed out previously, the diversity of social demands has had a direct impact on the changes in reporters' social status in Poland. At the same time, the literary element in Polish reportage, present in the debates over fiction and in the allegorical poetics of some texts, is also undergoing a considerable transformation in the age of digital media. For example, in Poland, multimedia reportage has been rapidly developing for some time, and there are also inspirations borrowed from transmedia storytelling. The written mode of the genre is thus constantly competing against the internet reception mode, marked by the dominance of audiovisual culture and interactive involvement with the audience.

These factors are gradually forcing literary reportage out of the printed press. In Poland, the tradition of press reportage is continued on a large scale only by *Gazeta Wyborcza*, although, as pointed out by Chamera-Nowak, its reportage supplement brings no real profit and is published mainly for the reason of prestige.⁷⁷ Małgorzata Wyszynska notes that, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, press reportage has no longer been profitable for editorial boards in Poland and, thus, has been regarded as a "dispensable" and "aristocratic" genre. Wyszynska argues that when a newspaper has financial problems, reportage is more likely to disappear from the columns than news or publicity. The reason for this is that reporting "requires time, profound documentation, costly business trips, arduous work on the form, and the ability to empathize."⁷⁸

On the other hand, Beata Szady has noted that Polish reporters themselves gradually resign from publishing in the press, due to low wages. Szady regards book publishing houses as an alternative way of funding reportage, but she also makes it clear that, for the time being, book publishers in Poland

are not yet prepared to cover the cost of such reportage production.⁷⁹

These changes call for a redefinition of the general assumptions of Polish reportage and its major directions of development. This need is emphasized by Ziątek, who observes that “driving reportage out of the press means cutting its umbilical cord and suspending the criteria of currency and eyewitness account, thus making it look for another *raison d’être*.”⁸⁰

An analysis of the dynamic transformations in the media market in Poland helps identify two potential directions of further evolution of Polish reportage. On the one hand, it seems beyond doubt that its expansion in the digital world will continue, thus consolidating hybrid forms of multimedia journalism. On the other hand, whether book reportage will continue developing remains uncertain, although current publication trends might support this view.

This prediction may be supported, for instance, by the fact that the book format manages, at least partly, to overcome the limitations of space and funds that are held responsible for the gradual disappearance of the press variety of the genre. The book format also offers favorable conditions for artistic expression and, in this way, corresponds with the literary tradition of Polish reportage and preferences of Polish readers. The book as a media form has long been adapted to audiovisual format. Its electronic editions do not preclude parallel printed versions, which cater to subconscious communication habits of the receivers. Thus, a chance for written reportage to survive appears real not only in Poland, but also in other nations.

In conclusion, as Marcin Rychlewski observes, “More and more frequently . . . we come face to face with a printed word via screens or monitors. However, the media revolution has not made its assimilation impossible for us.”⁸¹

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Notes

¹ Wyka, *Pogranicze powieści*, 83.

² See Sims, *True Stories*, 6–8.

³ Sztachelska, “Reportaż,” 156 (translation mine). The author expresses deep gratitude to Krystyna Warchał, who translated the first-submission manuscript to English from the original Polish and provided ongoing consultation for the author’s further revisions.

⁴ Sztachelska, 159 (translation by Krystyna Warchał).

⁵ Ziątek, “Autentyzm rozpoznai społecznych,” 701 (translation by Krystyna Warchał).

⁶ The Polish reader more often gained insight into the exotic parts of the world from writers and travelers than from professional journalists. This variety of Polish interwar reportage is exemplified, among others, by Arkady Fiedler, the patron of the award for the best travel book, which has been granted in Poland since the mid-1990s. See “Nagroda [Prizes].”

⁷ Pruszyński, *W czerwonej Hiszpanii*; Wańkowicz, *Na tropach Smętki*; Wańkowicz, *Bitwa o Monte Cassino*.

⁸ Niedzielski, *O teoretycznoliterackich tradycjach prozy dokumentarnej*, 110 (translation by Krystyna Warchał).

⁹ See Niedzielski, 122–36.

¹⁰ Rurawski, “O reportażu,” 17.

¹¹ Ziątek, “Literatura faktu,” 84.

¹² Faron, “Przedmieście,” 253.

¹³ Solidarność [Solidarity] is a Polish trade union founded in 1980 under the leadership of Lech Wałęsa. In the 1980s, Solidarity was an anti-Communist resistance movement, whose members used the methods of nonviolent action to fight for workers’ rights and sociopolitical reforms. The Solidarity-led opposition resulted in semi-free elections in 1989 and is regarded as a symbol of the fall of Communism in Poland. For further reading, see, for example: Goodwyn, *Breaking the Barrier: The Rise of Solidarity in Poland*.

¹⁴ Many non-Polish studies use the title “father of Polish reportage” to refer to Ryszard Kapuściński, the most recognizable Polish reportage author worldwide. It must be noted, though, that Kapuściński represents the second generation of reporters, born in the 1930s and publishing their first texts in the 1950s and 1960s, that is, long after Wańkowicz earned the title.

¹⁵ Wańkowicz, *Prosto od krowy*, 48 (translation by Krystyna Warchał).

¹⁶ Wańkowicz, *Karafka La Fontaine’a*. Wańkowicz published the first volume of *Karafka La Fontaine’a* in 1972, and the second volume was published posthumously in 1981. In the study, I refer to the reprints of both volumes from 1983 and 1984.

¹⁷ Niedzielski, *O teoretycznoliterackich tradycjach*, 144.

¹⁸ Niedzielski, 151 (translation mine).

¹⁹ Niedzielski, 149 (translation mine).

²⁰ Occupation was also a frequent topic of documentary-style fiction. However, fiction cannot be analyzed according to the criteria applied to classical reportage.

²¹ Bogołębska, "Dydaktyzm reportażu socrealizmu," 26 (translation by Krystyna Warchał).

²² Hartsock, "Literary Reportage," 39.

²³ Ziółkowska-Boehm, *Melchior Wańkowicz*, 7.

²⁴ The term "Raging Reporter" refers to the German title of Kisch's book *Der rasende Reporter*. Kisch himself has also earned a reputation as a "Raging Reporter," due to his adventurous life. See Kisch, *Der rasende Reporter*.

²⁵ Wańkowicz, *Karaśka La Fontaine'a*, 1:196 (translation mine).

²⁶ All these North American travels resulted in several reportage and memoir works, among others: a 1927 collection of political travel writings, *W kościołach Meksyku* [In the churches of Mexico]; a book on the history of Polish immigrants in Canada entitled *Tworzywo* [Material], published in 1954—see also its 1973 English translation by Krystyna Cękańska: *Three Generations*; as well as *W ślady Kolumba* [In the footsteps of Columbus]—a three-volume reportage series on the United States, published from 1967 through 1969. For more biographical details, see Ziółkowska-Boehm, *Melchior Wańkowicz*.

²⁷ Leonard, "Journalism as Artistic Expression," 11.

²⁸ See Leonard, 7–10.

²⁹ See Wańkowicz, *Karaśka La Fontaine'a*, 1:548.

³⁰ Wolfe, "The New Journalism," 31–33.

³¹ Paradoxically, despite the growing tendency to treat reportage as a literary genre, in the time of the People's Republic of Poland reportage was not accompanied by specialized criticism coming from outsiders. As noted by Jerzy Jastrzębski, criticism of reporters' writing had been, since the late 1970s, given as a "colleague self-service," that is, as a service to their colleagues, "which contributed to the effect of a closed circle." Jastrzębski, "Prawdy reportażu," 191 (translation by Krystyna Warchał).

³² Kąkolewski, "Wokół estetyki faktu," 269 (translation by Krystyna Warchał).

³³ Kąkolewski, *Wańkowicz krzepi* [Wańkowicz invigorates].

³⁴ Zimnoch, "Literary Journalism in Poland," 9.

³⁵ See, for example: Marcus, "Prejudice and Ignorance in Reviewing Books about Africa," 373–78; Ryle, "At Play in the Bush of Ghosts," 1–16, para. 5ff.

³⁶ Published in English as Domosławski, *Ryszard Kapuściński: A Life*. Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones. Polish scholars and critics received the biography (originally titled: *Kapuściński non-fiction*) as controversial, not only because it raised heated discussions on fictional elements in literary reportage, but also due to the way in which Domosławski presented intimate details of Kapuściński's family life and alleged relationship with the Communist regime. See, for example: Zajas, "Wokół *Kapuściński non-fiction*."

³⁷ Bauer, "Dziennikarstwo 'gonzo,'" 81 (translation by Krystyna Warchał).

³⁸ See Bauer, 88–92.

³⁹ Kuprel, "Literary Reportage," 385. The allegorization strategies developed by Polish reporters (with special emphasis on the use of the so-called Aesopian language) are also discussed by Susan Greenberg. See Greenberg, "Kapuściński and

Beyond," 123–40.

⁴⁰ Gazda, "Mały realizm," 278 (translation by Krystyna Warchał).

⁴¹ An in-depth analysis of the analogies between the mechanisms of Ethiopian dictatorship described in the book and the Edward Gierek regime can be found in Tighe, "Ryszard Kapuściński and *The Emperor*," 922–38.

⁴² See Wolfe, "The New Journalism," 28–29.

⁴³ Durczak, "Nowe Dziennikarstwo," 2:330 (translation mine).

⁴⁴ In mid-August 1980, thousands of shipyard workers led by Lech Wałęsa went on strike in Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk. They demanded labor reforms and the reinstatement of a crane operator, Anna Walentynowicz, who was dismissed due to her engagement in trade union activities. The strike quickly transformed into a massive wave of antigovernment demonstrations in other cities located along Poland's Baltic coast. Those events resulted, among other things, in the formation of Solidarity. See, for example: Ash, *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity 1980–82*.

⁴⁵ This is demonstrated by the telling titles of some contemporary publications. See, for example: Goldbergowa, "Jak odrodzić reportaż?" [How to revive reportage?], 3–8; Sidorski, "Czy agonia reportażu?" [Is reportage in agony?], 40–41; Branach, "Pogrzeb bez nieboszczyka" [A funeral without a corpse], 37–38.

⁴⁶ See Nagroda im.

⁴⁷ Ziątek, "Autentyzm rozpoznai społecznych," 701 (translation by Krystyna Warchał).

⁴⁸ Biliński, *Zarys rozwoju ruchu wydawniczego w Polsce Ludowej*, 14 (translation by Krystyna Warchał).

⁴⁹ Biliński reports that "the publishing output in the field of sociopolitical literature in the years 1945–1951 amounted to about 3,500 titles, with the total printed copies of 50 million copies." Biliński, 23 (translation by Krystyna Warchał).

⁵⁰ Jarosz, "Władza a książka społeczno-polityczna w PRL 1956–1989," 136 (translation mine).

⁵¹ A considerable part of the underground publishing in Poland comprised reprints of emigrant publications (press articles, books, excerpts from diaries, poems, etc.), especially the ones previously published in the Paris-based monthly *Kultura* [Culture], edited by Jerzy Giedroyc. See Siekierski, "Wydawnictwa drugiego obiegu 1976–1986," 24.

⁵² Tatarowski, "Enclaves of freedom," 201–202.

⁵³ Siekierski, "Wydawnictwa drugiego," 26 (translation mine).

⁵⁴ See Siekierski, 26.

⁵⁵ See, for example, books published by Independent Publishing House 'NOWA': *Wspomnienia starobielskie* [Memories of Starobielsk] by Józef Czapski—re-edited memoirs of the author's stay in a Soviet prison camp (1979); *Niezłomny z Londynu i inne eseje (lektury więzienne)* [The indomitable Londoner and other essays (prison readings)] by journalist and former dissident Adam Michnik (1984); *Szczecin: Grudzień—Sierpień—Grudzień* [Szczecin: December—August—December] by reporters Małgorzata Szejnert and Tomasz Zalewski (1984)—a reportage on anti-Communist workers' strikes along Poland's Baltic coast in 1980. Among other

uncensored prints, particularly worth mentioning is the collection of interviews with Solidarity activists by Maciej Łopiński, Marcin Moskit (real name: Zbigniew Gach), and Mariusz Wilk, entitled *Konspira: Rzecz o podziemnej "Solidarności"* [lit. Conspiracy: On the underground "Solidarity"]. The book was first published in 1984 in Warsaw (by the independent publishing house Przedświt [Dawn]) and in Paris (by the Polish emigrant publishing house Editions Spotkania [Encounters]). See also the 1990 English edition of the book entitled *Konspira: Solidarity Underground*, translated by Jane Cave.

⁵⁶ Mikołajczyk, *Jak się pisało o historii . . . Problemy polityczne*, 25 (translation mine).

⁵⁷ See, for example, Krall, *Trudności ze ustawianiem* [Difficulties in getting up]. The book contains various pieces of reportage depicting everyday life in Communist Poland, including texts concerning workers' strikes (e.g., a portrait of trade union activist Anna Walentynowicz).

⁵⁸ Ciemiński, "Literatura faktu drugiego obiegu—próba rejestru," 20 (translation by Krystyna Warchał).

⁵⁹ Jarosz, "Władza a książka" 145 (translation mine).

⁶⁰ See Jarosz, 133–34.

⁶¹ See, for example: Kemp-Welch, "Dethroning Stalin," 1261–84; Rowiński, *The Polish October 1956*.

⁶² Kowalewska, "Profil wydawniczy Państwowego Wydawnictwa 'Iskry' w latach 1952–1992," 269 (translation by Krystyna Warchał). Iskry also published reportage prose addressed to an older readership, which fell outside the adventure-travel form. It brought out book debuts by Krzysztof Kąkolowski, Hanna Krall, and selected works of other well-known reportage writers, including Jerzy Lovell, Jerzy Ambroziewicz, Olgierd Budrewicz, and Kazimierz Dziewanowski.

⁶³ For more details, see, for example: Kott, "Cold War Internationalism," 340–62.

⁶⁴ See Zubel, "Black Stars, Red Stars," 131–49. Zubel broadens the analysis of Kapuściński's engagement with socialist internationalism in her PhD dissertation, "Literary Reportage and the Poetics of Cold War Internationalism."

⁶⁵ The *Naokoło świata* book series was renamed to *Dookoła świata* and continued in the 1990s by MUZA, one of the biggest publishing houses in Poland (see Kowalewska, "Rola polskich serii książkowych na przykładzie serii Państwowego Wydawnictwa 'Iskry' w latach 1956–1992," 106). Travel reportage belongs now to the most frequently published kinds of Polish reportage books. Travel reportage pieces are also published in the illustrated travel journal *Kontynenty* [Continents] (<https://magazynekontynenty.pl/>).

⁶⁶ Niedzielski, "Reportaż," 2:99 (translation by Krystyna Warchał).

⁶⁷ Jeziorska-Haładaj, "Literacenie?" 18.

⁶⁸ Jeziorska-Haładaj, 21.

⁶⁹ Goldbergowa, "Kryzys reportażu?" 4 (translation by Krystyna Warchał).

⁷⁰ Wolny, *O poetyce współczesnego reportażu polskiego 1945–1985*, 85 (translation by Krystyna Warchał).

⁷¹ See Borski, "Bez pary," 128.

⁷² Chamera-Nowak, "Reportaż jako produkt," 132 (translation by Krystyna Warchał).

⁷³ Ziątek, *Wiek dokumentu*, 15 (translation by Krystyna Warchał).

⁷⁴ Ziątek, "Dwa dwudziestolecia," 358 (translation by Krystyna Warchał).

⁷⁵ Kwiatkowski, "O reportażu raz jeszcze," 1 (translation by Krystyna Warchał).

⁷⁶ Urbaniak, "Reportaż jako źródło wiedzy o społeczeństwie," 45 (translation mine). See also Westley and MacLean, "A Conceptual Model for Communications Research," 31–38.

⁷⁷ Chamera-Nowak, 132.

⁷⁸ Wyszynska, "Życie zwielokrotnione," 42 (translation mine).

⁷⁹ Szady, "Kondycja współczesnego polskiego reportażu," 79.

⁸⁰ Ziątek, "Dwa dwudziestolecia," 360 (translation by Krystyna Warchał).

⁸¹ Rychlewski, *Książka jako towar*, 188 (translation by Krystyna Warchał).

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Illustration of Miguel Barnet (left) and Oscar Lewis by Karl Litz.

Rewriting *La vida*: Miguel Barnet and Oscar Lewis on the Culture of Poverty

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Abstract: This analysis explores a literary and cultural tug-of-war between Cuban writer Miguel Barnet—one of the founding fathers of *testimonio*, the Latin American form of literary journalism—and U.S. anthropologist Oscar Lewis. By the late 1960s, Lewis was already a well-known authority, most famous for developing the *culture of poverty* theory based on his ethnographic family studies in Mexico and Puerto Rico. Lewis's work was controversial in both the United States and abroad, and Latin American responses to it deserve consideration for the ways in which they questioned the role of narrative in nonfiction depictions of poverty. In his 1986 book *La vida real (A True Story)*—the title of which playfully responds to Lewis's 1965 *La vida*—Barnet resituates the émigré population in the United States as intricately bound to historical processes and distinctively tied to the construction of national identity. The narrative styles of each text create different relationships between poverty and historical progress. In explicitly invoking Lewis's work, Barnet recapitulates Cold War-era antagonisms surrounding U.S. efforts to gain knowledge about the Third World in order to develop it according to capitalist principles and to thus halt the spread of Communism. By doing so, Barnet reminds readers that his own method of writing is indeed reactionary, and in self-consciously formulating a new literary nonfiction genre he contributes to the construction of Caribbean history on its own terms.

Keywords: poverty – *testimonio* – ethnography – family study

Beginning in the late 1940s, the United States government invested millions of dollars to develop Puerto Rico's economy from an agricultural economy based on sugarcane production into an industrial system. This process—known as Operation Bootstrap¹—ultimately resulted in skyrocketing unemployment rates and the destruction of the agricultural economy, leading to a massive migration of workers to the United States, primarily New York City. As historian Laura Briggs puts it, “Puerto Rican migrants were the casualties of this process, unwilling and unwelcome expatriates.”² Beginning in 1947, U.S. media coverage of New York's “Puerto Rican problem”³ spiked sharply. Despite the popularity of the 1957 Broadway musical *West Side Story* and its 1961 film adaptation,⁴ media representations in the decades following World War II illustrated national anxiety about how to incorporate this largely impoverished, ethnically, and linguistically diverse population. According to Briggs, “For the newspapers and magazines—and hence a significant number of New Yorkers and other readers—Puerto Rican migrants were always already inserted into the idiom of policy, problems, and poverty.”⁵ The focus on Puerto Rican poverty—whether in New York or on the island—reflected a national crisis about how to study and represent domestic poverty while still maintaining the media image of American prosperity central to U.S. national identity.

The Cold War-era United States, while strongly committed to a capitalist economy, nonetheless found it necessary to address the presence of persistent inequality on its own soil. Rather than turning their gaze inward to their own economy, policy makers instead looked outward to the Third World as a way to externalize the problem. By describing poverty as a result of underdevelopment rather than a feature inherent in capitalism, the federal government could fund social scientific research into the problem of inequality without compromising its commitment to maintaining a capitalist economic structure. Puerto Rico's status as a commonwealth territory—not fully incorporated into statehood, yet still offering U.S. citizenship for its residents—offered a perfect location for such inquiry. In the 1940s and early 1950s, social scientists worked to counteract the sensationalistic depictions of Puerto Ricans promulgated by the media, defending the reputation of workers and families and insisting upon their assimilability to mainstream U.S. society. However, a shift occurred in the early 1960s, when social scientists more broadly began to locate poverty as a central problem and to more thoroughly racialize it. As Briggs notes: “It is in the sixties, really, that one encounters a fully developed, productive, and culturally saturating *social science* of Puerto Rican difference, specifically the culture of poverty.”⁶ The pinnacle of this trend is inarguably the publication of anthropologist Oscar Lewis's *La vida: A Puerto Rican Fam-*

ily in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York, recipient of the National Book award for nonfiction.⁷

Of course, the people of Puerto Rico are not simply symbols, objects upon which the U.S. public projected their own anxieties about the contradictions of the capitalist economy. Scholars in Puerto Rico actively debated the claims made in *La vida*—some criticizing Lewis for his emphasis on the most sordid qualities of poverty, others praising him for exposing the ravages of inequality that were often whitewashed in contemporary politics.⁸ Lewis's claims were also challenged by Caribbean and Latin American writers who crafted their own body of nonfiction literature, often grappling with similar themes of poverty and inequality. While Puerto Rico was unique in its political status as a territory, the implications of Lewis's narrative strategies in *La vida* drew a line in the sand between the United States and other nations of the Americas. This study focuses on how Cuban ethnographer Miguel Barnet's testimonial novel *La vida real* (*A True Story*) offers a literary approach capable of countering Lewis and the U.S., state-funded scholarly community he purported to represent. In *La vida real*, Barnet resituates the émigré population in the United States as intricately bound to historical processes and distinctively tied to the construction of national identity.⁹

At first blush, pairing Lewis with Barnet seems an incongruous move. While Lewis is often cast as an enemy of the impoverished and a scholar who was instrumental in blaming poverty on the poor, Barnet is widely acknowledged by literary scholars to be one of the foundational authors of the *testimonio* genre, a form that includes works such as Rigoberta Menchú's 1969 *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (*I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*), and Elena Poniatowska's 1983 *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (*Here's to You, Jesusa!*).¹⁰ In their influential framing of the genre, John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman write:

The general form of the *testimonio* is a novel or novella-length narrative, told in the first-person by a narrator who is also the actual protagonist or witness of the events she or he recounts. The unit of narration is usually a life or a significant life episode. . . . Since in many cases the narrator is someone who is either functionally illiterate or, if literate, not a professional writer or intellectual, the production of a *testimonio* generally involves the recording and/or transcription and editing of an oral account by an interlocutor who is a journalist, writer, or social activist.¹¹

A socially conscious form of literary journalism, *testimonio* is defined by its commitment to uncovering silenced and marginalized voices in history, be they Indigenous farmworkers, rural immigrants to the city, or former runaway slaves, as in Barnet's first and most famous testimonial novel,¹² *Biografía*

de un cimarrón (*Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, also published as *Biography of a Runaway Slave*), first published in 1966.¹³ Barnet's corpus of four testimonial novels¹⁴ focuses on documenting Cuban national history through individual life stories of those who have witnessed and participated in key events. While his subjects are often poor, their poverty is not the subject of these books per se.

Despite these differences, the comparison of Barnet and Lewis is not incidental: Their work has often been linked in critical and popular reception. In a 2007 interview, Barnet asserts that he has read Lewis's books closely, including his work on Cuba, and while Barnet admires Lewis's contribution, he does not completely agree with his approach or support all aspects of the culture of poverty theory.¹⁵ Although Barnet said in an interview that it bothers him that others say he is an heir of Lewis, he nonetheless reinforces this connection by repeatedly referring to Lewis's work.¹⁶ In fact, the title of his testimonial novel, the 1986 *La vida real*—translated by Regina Galasso into English and published in 2010 as *A True Story*—playfully responds to Lewis's *La vida*.¹⁷

The following analysis explores how the narrative styles of each text, including the interplay between informant and ethnographer, create a different relationship between poverty and historical progress. By bringing a testimonial novel and a literary ethnography together under the rubric of literary journalism studies, this study contributes to a growing body of research on the intersection between literary journalism and the social sciences. The fields of literary journalism, anthropology, and sociology commonly use similar methods, including ethnography, immersive reportage, and life history. Isabel Soares has insightfully explored the shared origins of both the New Journalism of the nineteenth century and the field of sociology, arguing that both grew out of a response to “the perils of a society at grips with the finding of symbols and meanings to give it a sense of order and purpose.”¹⁸ By contrast, the present research explores literary journalism's connection to mid-twentieth century ethnography, responding to Bruce Gillespie's call for increased attention to the overlap between literary journalism and ethnographic forms such as autoethnography and public ethnography.¹⁹

An outline of the influential culture of poverty theory, and critical responses to it, follows. Next, a comparison of Lewis's *La vida* and Barnet's *La vida real* focuses on narrative strategy and the thematic treatment of two topics: history and family studies. This study concludes with reflections on how this comparison illustrates the challenges facing poverty reporting and research in an international context.

The Culture of Poverty

By the time *La vida* was published, Lewis was already a well-known authority on poverty studies, most famous for developing the notion of the “culture of poverty,” which he first outlined in his 1959 ethnography *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*.²⁰ In the introduction to *La vida*, Lewis explains that the culture of poverty is an adaptation to exploitative living conditions—in many ways, the only method the desperately poor have to survive.

The culture of poverty is both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class-stratified, highly individuated, capitalistic society. It represents an effort to cope with feelings of hopelessness and despair which develop from the realization of the improbability of achieving success in terms of the values and goals of the larger society.²¹

Traits of the culture of poverty include a lack of engagement in institutions of the larger society; a lack of organization beyond the nuclear family (in fact, Lewis remarks that the formation of gangs are an improvement in these terms); and the absence of childhood as it is understood by the middle and upper classes. Lewis views the culture of poverty as largely self-perpetuating. He writes: “By the time slum children are age six or seven they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunity which may occur in their lifetime.”²² According to Lewis, although the poor cannot be blamed for this “culture,” it is ultimately what keeps them mired in poverty even when they are afforded opportunities to better their lot.

His concept was later popularized by Michael Harrington’s influential *The Other America*, published in 1962.²³ The theory achieved notoriety as a tagline in Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty, eventually serving the interests of neoconservatives who wished to claim that government intervention could not solve poverty and the welfare system should be dismantled. In a review of *La vida* that appeared on the first page of the *New York Times Book Review*, Harrington proclaimed the book to be “unquestionably one of the most important books published in the United States this year.”²⁴ Another reviewer, Madeline Engel, described *La vida* as “one of the most significant books published in 1966—and one of the most controversial.”²⁵ Even in the midst of its great success, *La vida* was met with debate and considerable scholarly reservations, both in the United States and in Puerto Rico.

And, indeed, without exaggeration one could say that Oscar Lewis’s culture of poverty theory was one of the most widely maligned ideas about the poor of the twentieth century. While Lewis coined the *culture of poverty* term,

his ideas were not completely novel. In fact, his invocation of intergenerational culture connected his theory to well-worn tropes in poverty representation. As Edwin Eames and Judith Granich Goode note:

In using the word culture, Lewis was claiming that the behavioral responses of the poor were systematically related and passed down from generation to generation. . . . This view can easily be misread to reinforce the already strong American belief that the poor are to blame for their own poverty because of their impulsive, immoral and indolent behavior.²⁶

This idea echoed social Darwinism, which holds that poverty results from hereditary traits and that, through competition, these traits will eventually be weeded out. Thus, the suffering of the poor is a natural part of the improvement of the human race and requires no intervention.²⁷ Even then-contemporary reviewers of *La vida*, including Jack Roach, expressed worry that its theory and contents would be used against Lewis's aims of assuaging poverty.²⁸ Frank Cordasco, in his review, prophetically remarked that *La vida* would be "widely read, misinterpreted and misused."²⁹

This anxiety stems in part from the fact—openly acknowledged by reviewers of the period—that the academic framing of the culture of poverty contained in Lewis's introduction carried a far different message than the subsequent 660 pages of life history. In his introduction Lewis points more toward structural inequality, implying a Marxist critique. However, the bulk of *La vida* contains material that contradicts and often simply overpowers the claims made in the introduction.³⁰ Susan M. Rigdon points out the fact that the innovative family studies Lewis was conducting did not provide materials to support the theory.³¹ She notes, "The validity of the culture of poverty thesis depended on establishing cause-and-effect relationships between economic, cultural, and personality processes. But Lewis's research was not designed to explore these relationships, and the family study method as he employed it was inadequate to explain them."³² Rather, it fit within larger trends of pathologizing traits associated with poverty, making them more psychologically based and capable of being transmitted through dysfunctional family dynamics.

Understanding this disjuncture between Lewis's theory and practice is essential for pinpointing the precise nature of Barnet's critique. At face value, it seems as if Barnet sets up the culture of poverty theory as a straw-man argument. In the introduction to *A True Story*, Barnet writes: "I hope this book illustrates that the lives of men of the so-called culture of poverty don't always lack a will to live, a historical consciousness. Even when they are anchored in a feeling of marginality, the flame of life flickers toward the future."³³ But, in all fairness, the characters that Barnet chooses to document would be ex-

cluded from Lewis's formulation of the culture of poverty. In his introduction to *La vida*, Lewis writes: "When the poor become class-conscious or active members of trade-union organizations, or when they adopt an internationalist outlook on the world, they are no longer part of the culture of poverty, although they may still be desperately poor."³⁴ As depicted in *La vida real (A True Story)*, protagonist Julián Mesa is such a figure. In the later years of his life, he becomes increasingly active politically, even forming his own activist group to address the problems facing other immigrants in New York. He helps form a committee to "stop people from getting evicted or having their electricity and telephone service cut off" when they lose their jobs.³⁵ Rather than claiming that poverty leads to political disengagement, Mesa describes how it has contributed to his political involvement: "I didn't come from a very politically active family, but I do come from a very poor background and that's something you don't forget. I can't overlook injustices."³⁶ In this example, poverty is a condition of social activism, rather an impediment to it.

Rather than critiquing Barnet's understanding of Lewis's theory, this study highlights this rupture in logic to suggest that Barnet reacts to Lewis's literary construction of poverty in *La vida* instead of to the culture of poverty theory per se. Exploring how social scientific family studies as a genre—to which the last, roughly six hundred pages of *La vida* belong—are imbedded within a Cold War–U.S. expansionist context makes it possible to better understand how Barnet's testimonial novel *La vida real (A True Story)* critiques Lewis's representative strategies.

Narrative Strategies for Representing the Poor

This study argues that Lewis purposefully arranges the text so as to highlight discordant views and dysfunctional relationships; however, his own description of his methods differs greatly. He writes that *La vida*:

is the much broader canvas of the family portrait, the intensification of the technique whereby individuals and incidents are seen from multiple points of view, and the combination of multiple biographies with observed typical days. The biographies provide a subjective view of each of the characters, whereas the days give us a more objective account of their actual behavior. The two types of data supplement each other and set up a counterpoint which makes for a more balanced picture. On the whole, the observed days give a greater sense of vividness and warmer glimpses of these people than do their own autobiographies. And because the days include a description not only of the people but also of the setting, of the domestic routines and material possessions, the reader gets a more integrated view of their lives.³⁷

The vocabulary of Lewis's description—"objective," "balanced," and "integrated"—implies a greater sense of cohesion than his text really offers. This

passage especially masks the power relationships at play when juxtaposing “objective” accounts from a field worker with first-hand autobiographical accounts from marginalized subjects. Even though the first-person, tape-recorded autobiographies of Fernanda Ríos and her four children—Soledad, Felícita, Simplicio, and Cruz—are the focus of the book, Lewis introduces them through an “observed typical day,” a reconstruction of a day or several days in the life of the family member compiled by field workers. In the first chapter of each of the book’s five parts,³⁸ which are purported to be the most objective depiction of the family within the book, the presence of the field-worker Rosa is described in ways that enhance her ethnographic authority.

Each sketch includes moments that illustrate how open the family is with Rosa: They ask her to watch their children, they sleep in her presence, and they make frank sexual advances in front of her, among other things. Following each of these “slice-of-life” sketches is a collection of tape-recorded autobiography, highly edited by Lewis and organized into chapters according to family or sexual relationships. The autobiographical narratives are overwhelmingly preoccupied with their romantic entanglements, children, and perspectives on prostitution. For example, the titles include “I’ll Do Anything for My Children,” “My Husbands Fidel and Erasmo,” and “My Mother Was a Prostitute.”³⁹ Between these chapters, Lewis interjects shorter accounts from children, aunts, and ex-spouses, among others, containing information that often contradicts the autobiography of the principal characters, revealing them to be unreliable narrators. On the whole, rather than creating an “integrated view” as Lewis claims, this narrative structure systematically erodes the authority of the Ríos family to narrate their own life experiences.

This structure, rather than creating a polyphonic depiction of culture, makes the Ríos family appear more inwardly focused than they perhaps really were. In a revealing review of *La vida*, Gary Schwartz points out that:

. . . this social universe lacks one of the conventional elements of fiction: a plot. In this community, social experience and action are unrelentingly episodic. . . . Moreover, the members of this community do not share sustaining images of the future. The absence of ideologies and organizations which promise to transform or transcend the present adds to the despair which often afflicts their lives.⁴⁰

Rather than reading the chaotic nature of the book as a plotting device, Schwartz uses the notion of plot as a metaphor to illustrate the deviant nature of informants’ lives. For Schwartz, and likely many other readers of the text, representation is indicative of the factual content, not the other way around.

In Barnet’s three single-protagonist testimonial novels⁴¹—and in the genre of testimonio in general—the focus shifts away from the family, to the

point that most informants live without family (many of whom have died or live elsewhere). This is an important feature of the genre because it implies that the informant speaks for the collective.⁴² This also serves the important function of breaking away from traditional expectations of autobiographical writing. In this respect, Fredric Jameson's observation about the difference between testimonio and its bourgeois counterpart, autobiography, is instructive. The autobiography—which bears close likeness to Lewis's approach to the family study—is absorbed with the childhood as the site of the formation of the individual. Testimonio writes against this tendency by focusing on the individual as representative of the collective and placing the narrative within a moment of historical rupture.⁴³ Likewise, Beverley and Zimmerman point to the contrast between testimonio and autobiography as key to understanding how testimonio challenges unspoken norms: "Testimonio, by contrast, always signifies the need for a general social change in which the stability and complacency of the reader's world must be brought into question."⁴⁴ Both interpretations assume that autobiography supports the status quo by idealizing apolitical aspects of life such as the development of the individual personality. In contrast to Barnet, Lewis focuses on the traditional stomping grounds of autobiography—childhood, love, family relationships—invoking an accepted bourgeois norm of family structure and thus making the Ríos family seem all the more dysfunctional in their deviation from this norm.

The family study and the autobiography are so ideologically charged that representing the poor within them inevitably makes them appear deviant through difference from the norms implicit in each genre. The scholarly reception surrounding testimonio, on the other hand, insists on reading these texts as part of a new literary movement. Through self-conscious genre fashioning, writers of Latin American testimonial literature thus shook off some of the shackles of the autobiographical form. Barnet accomplishes this by taking literary license in retelling his informant's stories. In an article describing his approach to testimonial novels, Barnet explains that the narrative:

. . . must be a recreated spoken language, not a mere reproduction of what was on tape. From the recording I take the tone, the anecdotes, the inflexions; the rest, the style and fine points, I add myself. A book like Oscar Lewis' *La vida* is a great contribution to the psychology and sociology of the marginalized masses. It is, simply and plainly: *I write what you tell me and in the way you tell me*. Lewis' approach has little to do with the documentary novels I write. To my way of thinking, literary imagination should go hand in hand with sociological imagination. A documentary novelist should give free rein to his or her imagination, so long as it does not distort the protagonist's character or betray his or her language. Imagination, invention

within a realistic essence, is the only way a writer can get the most out of a given phenomenon.⁴⁵

In actively mediating his informants' histories, Barnet's main goal is to bolster their credibility and to articulate clearly their position within a changing national history. While it is impossible to precisely ascertain the degree to which Barnet and Lewis edited the autobiographical material in their respective texts, their goals when doing so were quite different. Barnet purposely reshaped the narratives to reflect a coherent image of history and character; Lewis, on the other hand, emphasized conflicting elements of the text.

History and the Poor

While Barnet sought to thoroughly research the historical context of his protagonists' autobiographies, Lewis showed less compunction about accurately representing Puerto Rican history. In fact, the ideas Lewis expressed in the introduction to *La vida* reflect skewed notions about Puerto Rican nationalism in comparison to his more thorough understanding of Mexican history. As historian Steven Dike points out, even despite objections to Lewis's view of Puerto Rican history by Muna Muñoz Lee (the daughter of Luis Muñoz Marín, the first governor of Puerto Rico), Lewis included misrepresentations of Puerto Rican history in his introduction to *La vida*, including an insistence that Puerto Rico's history of slavery was proof that Puerto Ricans were "gradualists rather than revolutionaries."⁴⁶ Lewis interpreted this lack of revolutionary spirit as evidence that they had been severed from their Indigenous and African roots and subsequently damaged by colonialism.

Although Muñoz Lee challenged Lewis's grasp of Puerto Rican history—especially through her own knowledgeable comparisons to U.S. history—Lewis printed his ideas largely unchanged in the book.⁴⁷ As Dike puts it, Lewis "saw Puerto Rico as having a failed nationalism, and Puerto Ricans as having a flawed historical consciousness," which was both a cause and a result of the culture of poverty.⁴⁸ Focusing on one of the features of Lewis's culture of poverty, namely a lack of participation "in the major institutions of the larger society"⁴⁹ will illustrate this point. Lewis writes: "People with a culture of poverty are provincially and locally oriented and have very little sense of history."⁵⁰ Emphasizing the insularity of the Ríos family has political implications. In many ways, Lewis's thinking on the relationship between revolution and the culture of poverty was tautological. In the introduction to *La vida*, he points to a lack of revolutionary involvement as one of the necessary conditions for the development of the culture of poverty. However, after meeting with Fidel Castro after the Cuban Revolution, Lewis "theorized that personality traits, such as those identified by his case studies of families, might

determine the formation of revolutionary potential in individuals.”⁵¹ Therefore, we might surmise that *La vida* sets out to explore not only a facet of impoverished existence, but also the capacity for revolutionary change itself. To a Latin American readership dedicated to the possibility of revolutionary potential, the focus on family and personality traits served as a blinder to the role of the poor in enacting historical change.

In contrast, Barnet’s *La vida real* actively incorporates the protagonists’ life stories into a historical framework. In fact, a large part of Barnet’s role as mediator is smoothing away the contradictions in narrative and articulating the connection between his protagonists’ experience and the national history with which they are engaging. About his approach to the testimonial novel, Barnet writes:

One should first know the period well, its critical moments, its changes, and atmosphere so that one can analyze its actors. Otherwise there will be a sharp contradiction between what the protagonist says, the way he or she says it, and the fact or event itself. The reciprocal play of language between period and protagonist must be faithful and accurate. It must never betray.⁵²

Barnet believes that the contradictions inherent in oral autobiography are ultimately damaging for the final product. In a move very different from Lewis’s, Barnet seeks to erase these contradictory moments—whether historical or stylistic—that may ultimately compromise his informants’ ability to serve as authoritative witnesses to the events their life histories illuminate.

Throughout *La vida real* there are consistent references to prominent political events, which serve to unite Mesa’s life story with larger historical processes. For example, when Mesa is describing and showing a picture of his and Celia’s wedding: “We were both so happy! It’s obvious in the pictures that we took at Battery Place, with all those little flowers in the background. Especially in this one, the date’s on the back: March 12, 1953. Batista was already doing his thing.” And earlier in the narrative: “I promised Emerlina I’d marry her on the same day the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.”⁵³ The fact that both of these events are deeply personal and familial can be seen as a challenge to Lewis’s emphasis on dysfunctional families divorced from their historical context.

La vida as a Family Study

Although the culture of poverty became a catchphrase in U.S. discussions of inequality, the most damaging effects of *La vida* have less to do with Lewis’s theory itself, but rather his engagement with the family study, a subject fraught with controversy in the mid-1960s. In the year preceding publication of *La vida*, Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s report, *The*

Negro Family: A Case for National Action, was leaked to the public, sparking vociferous debate about the nature of urban poverty.⁵⁴ The document was meant to address how to move forward after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Instead of engaging with the ensuing discussions about ensuring equal economic opportunity regardless of race, the report shifted attention to the “tangle of pathology” of the Black family.⁵⁵ The report focused on the prevalence of matriarchal family structures, which Moynihan argued was a vestige of the ravages of slavery.⁵⁶ Like Lewis, Moynihan argued that simply changing economic conditions would not solve alienation and underachievement without a change of culture and values. Despite being refuted by social scientists and scholars alike, the Moynihan Report, as it came to be known, would leave an indelible impression on the U.S. public’s perception of the Black family.

Both the Moynihan Report and *La vida* were situated within a nationwide discourse that emphasized the norm of a two-parent family. During the 1950s and 1960s, when Lewis was conducting his research, the middle-class family was an ideologically infused unit of study.⁵⁷ Within the United States, middle-class values were equated with national character and more specifically, anti-communism.⁵⁸ During this period, state-funded anthropological missions that were meant to further development in areas of U.S. interest, including Latin America, had the unspoken goal of promoting middle-class values as well.⁵⁹ The popularity of this kind of behavioral science coincided with massive funding given to Cold War-era projects that offered the promise of helping to understand the lack of modernization in the Third World, a sphere in which the United States had a vested interest in establishing a capitalist market economy.

In terms of social scientific frameworks for understanding the poor, family studies served to shift attention away from the economic and political causes of poverty in both the United States and Puerto Rico. Even while Lewis posited a structural explanation for poverty in the introduction to his *La vida*, his depiction of a dysfunctional, matrilineal family and nearly exclusive focus on women’s reproductive roles offered “a distorting framework for understanding the nature of poverty and the lives of the poor.”⁶⁰ This reflects the broader debate on Puerto Rico that was occurring across media outlets. As Briggs notes: “In multiple kinds of sources, from newspapers to activist writings to social science works, one can find a coherently articulated dispute over whether a narrative of bad mothering and disorderly sexuality can be made to stand in for the problem of Puerto Rican poverty, or whether it of necessity had to be construed in relation to social structural causes.”⁶¹ By positing a normative, middle-class family unit as the center of democracy, Lewis was

part of a social scientific movement that focused on behavior and psychology as the fundamental causes of poverty; an underlying premise that shifted reform strategies away from drastic economic restructuring.⁶²

This alone, however, cannot account for the remarkable resilience of the stereotypes that family studies like *La vida* and the Moynihan Report inspired. For example, Briggs tellingly refers to the Moynihan Report as having become a “Ur-text of gender, race, and poverty.”⁶³ Despite the efforts of many social scientists, the persistence of the myth of dysfunctional families can be attributed in part to its literary appeal. Reviewer Madeline Engel describes this as one of *La vida*’s greatest dangers, noting that “the style of writing employed in the case history, the artful blend of science and literature which has made Lewis famous, makes it probable that many readers will either skip the introduction entirely or read it and forget about it.”⁶⁴ And it is easy to see how, in creating an award-winning ethnography, the very factors that make for an interesting narrative conspire to yoke poverty to timeless literary themes of family dysfunction, sexual relationships, violence, and jealousy. These elements have been a part of storytelling for millennia; in creating such a readable text, Lewis slips into exaggerating them. In fact, Laura Briggs argues that Lewis appears to have chosen “the most chaotic family of those he studied to portray at any length in the book.”⁶⁵

At other points in *La vida*, Lewis inserts authorial notes to contradict the testimony of members of the Ríos family. For example, Fernanda describes her relationship with the eighteen-year-old Pedro, whom she marries. She says: “I was embarrassed because he was so young and I was about twenty-five or twenty-six.” Lewis inserts an asterisk after this statement with the note: “Actually, Fernanda was about thirty-three.”⁶⁶ This note casts doubt on Fernanda’s reliability as a narrator, and also delegitimizes her marriage to Pedro, which, despite their age difference, led her to give up prostitution and was one of the more stable unions in the book, as the marriage lasted for several years.

The text of *La vida* contains occasionally graphic accounts that contribute to the image of dysfunctional motherhood typical of family studies. Soledad, for example, uses her reproductive capacities to mete out revenge on her boyfriend Benedicto rather than to build a family:

When I started living with Benedicto he told me that he didn’t want to have any children with me. Now he says he wants a child. So now I’m taking revenge on him. I tell him I’m pregnant and he believes it. Then when he comes back from a trip I say, “Oh, I had an abortion. I stuck the rubber tube in me and that did it.” I really have had three abortions and he knows it, so he believes that too. . . . I never told him about my operation. He

thinks the scar is from something else. That just goes to show you that men aren't nearly as clever as they think they are.⁶⁷

Soledad's fertility becomes a battleground with which to create more relationship dysfunction. Her complacent attitude about sterilization and abortion both support the dominant image of matrifocal families as dysfunctional, but also seems to justify policies imposing curtailment of reproductive freedom. The fact that Soledad reduces her reproductive capabilities to nothing more than a tool to attract attention or to cause anger or jealousy helps to justify such medical intervention.

This emphasis on Soledad's reproduction is further complicated by Lewis's organization of testimonies. Benedicto's commentary follows directly after Soledad's, and in it he confirms the fact that her body is a battlefield on which she enacts jealousy. His words, however, cast doubt on whether Soledad is actually capable of bearing children, or whether she was ever sterilized at all. Benedicto asserts that when he returned from a trip, Soledad fell ill after an attempted abortion and had to go to the hospital for treatment. Despite this, Benedicto remarks: "I look at it this way, where six can eat, so can seven, and where seven eat, eight can eat. The doctor told Soledad she couldn't have any more children. But I think she's about three months pregnant right now. I surely would like to have a child with Soledad."⁶⁸

It is important to note that this narrative discrepancy is not addressed or corrected by Lewis. Although it is much more important to the narrative than his correction about Fernanda's age, Lewis offers no clues as to the nature of Soledad's hospitalization—whether it was true that she was sick because of a botched abortion and whether she had actually been sterilized. By keeping Soledad's reproductive capacities shrouded in mystery, Lewis manages to make them seem almost mythical. Despite sterilization, numerous successful abortions, and a (possible) botched abortion with a prognosis of infertility, Soledad still appears to be capable of producing children *ad infinitum*. Her body thus becomes symbolic of the mystery of poverty: scientific intervention has failed to stop her from reproducing, and the reason for this senseless reproduction stems from dysfunctional interpersonal interactions.

Benedicto's response to this behavior would be equally alarming to Lewis's middle-class U.S. readers. He imagines a family growing incrementally: first six, then seven, then eight. By his logic, the number of children a family could support is infinite. And, despite Soledad's behavior and lack of regard for the lives of her children, Benedicto still wishes to have a child with her. Lewis-as-compiler ends the chapter on this note and thereby leaves readers with the impression that Soledad and Benedicto—and by assumption, all of the other members of the culture of poverty which Lewis purports they

represent—use reproduction as part of a vicious cycle, learning nothing from previous mistakes and simply repeating, beyond what should even be medically possible or even knowable through scientific knowledge.

Moments in Barnet's *La vida real* can be read as direct responses to the relationship between family and poverty in Lewis's *La vida*, in which Barnet's protagonist Julián Mesa, whose wife is Puerto Rican, frequently compares the Puerto Rican community to the Cuban community in New York. Mesa directly acknowledges the fact that far more Puerto Ricans are mired in poverty, and he attributes this to discrimination rather than cultural characteristics:

There was a time during the 50s, when they were treated worse than any other national group even though they were [U.S.] citizens. When an American from Oklahoma got to New York, he was well received; but when a Boricua got there, they slammed the door in his face. They could only get jobs as servants, and that was only in some places. It was like a big filter and very few made it through.⁶⁹

While condemning discrimination, Mesa also calls attention to the salutary forms of family support, rather than placing blame on unstable family structures. The narrative reads: "What saves Puerto Ricans is the support from their families, solidarity. My wife taught me that. . . . Puerto Rican families are like Cuban families and then some. The most distant cousin is considered a relative, and if they can, they'll help you out."⁷⁰ He even goes so far as to praise the matriarchal nature of these families:

A Puerto Rican grandmother is a saint. The world could end, but they still respect her. That's why in El Barrio, despite everything, it's pretty safe for Boricuas. Who's going to rob your house if your grandmother lives there? Who's going to get your grandmother involved with drugs or a crime? No one. Grandmothers are like fortresses.⁷¹

This description is worlds away from the assumption promulgated by Lewis and Moynihan that matrifocal families are the ultimate cause of violence, poverty, and underachievement in Black and Puerto Rican communities. It bears closer resemblance to ethnographies written in opposition to Lewis's work, such as Carol Stack's *All Our Kin*, which documents "extensive networks of kin and friends supporting, reinforcing each other—devising schemes for self-help, strategies for survival in a community of severe economic deprivation."⁷²

Conclusion

Widespread fascination with Puerto Rican poverty reflects the ambiguous status of the territory within the U.S. imaginary. Amy Kaplan's analysis of the 1901 Insular Cases—in which Supreme Court justices grappled with whether

to treat Puerto Rico as a foreign or domestic territory for taxation purposes—is illuminating here. In their influential decision, the justices named Puerto Rico an unincorporated territory, “foreign to the United States in a domestic sense.”⁷³ As Kaplan argues, this seemingly contradictory statement reflects anxieties about incorporating a racially and ethnically diverse territory within the United States, threatening the dominant image of the United States as a white nation. In addition, this cultural anxiety was mixed with an ideological one: the status of Puerto Rico as a territory challenged U.S. identity as a republic rather than an imperial power.⁷⁴

Kaplan’s analysis of the Insular Cases helps to clarify contradictory impulses in Lewis’s attitudes toward persistent poverty in the U.S. and abroad. On the surface, Lewis claims that the culture of poverty does not apply to the U.S. context, for reasons that bolster U.S. national identity as a developed nation: “Because of the advanced technology, high level of literacy, the development of mass media and the relatively high aspiration level of all sectors of the population, especially when compared with underdeveloped nations, I believe that although there is still a great deal of poverty in the United States . . . there is relatively little of what I would call the culture of poverty.”⁷⁵ However, at the end of his introduction, Lewis still asserts that his analysis helps us to understand the problem of poverty within the United States. He writes:

The concept of a cross-societal subculture of poverty enables us to see that many of the problems we think of as distinctively our own or distinctively Negro problems (or that of any other special racial or ethnic group), also exist in countries where there are no distinct ethnic minority groups. This suggests that the elimination of physical poverty *per se* may not be enough to eliminate the culture of poverty which is a whole way of life.⁷⁶

The contrast between these two statements—that poverty is both a foreign problem and an internal, though racialized, one—illustrates the ambivalence about representations of poverty during the Cold War. The United States was obliged to address poverty and racial inequality in its midst; however, radical economic restructuring was not an option. Puerto Rico’s status as a commonwealth, “foreign . . . in a domestic sense” thus makes the territory the perfect vehicle to express these ambivalent attitudes. Alice O’Connor notes that *La vida* “reflected an important recent shift in social scientific thinking about postwar Puerto Rico. Rather than an exciting ‘social laboratory’ for economic planning and modernization, the island was increasingly seen as a laboratory for studying the social pathologies associated with ‘underdevelopment,’ and for understanding why social intervention had not worked.”⁷⁷ The conclusions gleaned from this laboratory—though fraught with contradic-

tion—were then applied to the United States, often in dissimilar contexts such as rural Appalachia.⁷⁸

This context helps clarify how Lewis's depiction of poor people in the Caribbean was refracted through the lens of U.S. ideology. It also clarifies the stakes of Caribbean engagement with Lewis's legacy. The incorporation and disavowal of Lewis's work by scholars within the United States speak to its divisive claims and subject matter, but these scholarly responses are ultimately half measures when compared to the ways in which Barnet rebuts Lewis's claims. By naming his testimonial novel *La vida real*, Miguel Barnet invokes this epistemological framework that disempowers poor people and families. His book offers an alternate narrative strategy for representing the poor, not as an "other," but as an integral and integrated actor in their history.

This literary tug-of-war offers several important lessons for the field of literary journalism studies. First, it contributes to scholarship that explores the relationship between two genres adjacent to literary journalism: testimonio and literary ethnography. Second, it contributes to international literature on the continuing relevance of poverty as a subject of interest to both scholars and practitioners of literary journalism. Third, by focusing on the political implications of knowledge construction through nonfiction narrative, it illuminates the ideological nature of different methods of reporting and narrating. Barnet's playful invocation of Lewis's text exposes structures of power inherent in the narrative construction of life histories and points the way toward opportunities for resistance and empowerment of marginalized groups.

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Notes

¹ Briggs, “*La vida*, Moynihan, and Other Libels,” 77.

² Briggs, 79.

³ Briggs, 77.

⁴ *West Side Story* [musical], music by Leonard Bernstein, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, Jerome Robbins, dir., Winter Garden and Broadway Theatres, New York, NY, September 26, 1957 through June 27, 1959. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/west-side-story-2639>; *West Side Story*, 1961 [film], Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise, dirs. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0055614/>

⁵ Briggs, “*La vida*, Moynihan, and Other Libels,” 80.

⁶ Briggs, 78 (emphasis in original).

⁷ Lewis, *La vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty*. See also, National Book Awards. Science, Philosophy and Religion, 1967. Lewis’s *La vida* is an atypical anthropological text because of its accessibility and literary style, its marketing to a popular audience, and its social impact on policy and popular culture. The present analysis does not, therefore, take it to be emblematic of all ethnography or social scientific family studies, but rather as a genre-crossing text that can benefit from comparative analysis with other works of literary journalism.

⁸ For a detailed description of the political and scholarly reception of *La vida* in Puerto Rico, see Dike, “*La vida* en La Colonia,” 172–91.

⁹ Barnet, *La vida real*.

¹⁰ Menchú, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*; Poniatowska, *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*.

¹¹ Beverley and Zimmerman, *Literature and Politics*, 173.

¹² In this article, the term “testimonial novel” is used to refer to novel-like works within the testimonio tradition. The term “novel” refers to aspects of plotting and characterization rather than fictional/nonfictional status.

¹³ Barnet, *Biografía de un cimarrón*. See Segura-Rico, “*Biografía de un cimarrón*,” 161n1. Georg Gugelberger, a foundational critic of testimonial literature, singles out Barnet’s *Biografía de un cimarrón* as the first testimonio, emphasizing its connection to the Cuban Revolution, and going so far as to claim that “The genre came into existence due to the Cuban Revolution.” Gugelberger, “Introduction: Institutionalization of Transgression,” 8.

¹⁴ Barnet, *Biografía de un cimarrón*; Barnet, *Canción de Rachel*; Barnet, *Gallejo*; Barnet, *La vida real*.

¹⁵ Barnet, “Ni epígono de Oscar Lewis ni de Truman Capote,” interview by González, 99.

¹⁶ “*Así que me molesta mucho que me digan que soy un seguidor de Oscar Lewis o de Truman Capote* [So it bothers me a lot that they tell me that I’m a follower of Oscar Lewis or Truman Capote].” Barnet, “Ni epígono,” 102. The triangulation of Oscar Lewis (literary ethnographer), Truman Capote (novelist turned investigative reporter best known for his foundational work of literary journalism, *In Cold Blood*), and Miguel Barnet (poet-ethnographer) speaks to the ways in which the literary establishment insists on making ties between authors that employ the techniques of literature in their nonfiction writing.

¹⁷ Barnet, *A True Story*. All subsequent quotations from *La vida real* are taken from the 2010 English translation, *A True Story*.

¹⁸ Soares, "At the Intersection of Risk," 67.

¹⁹ Gillespie, "Building Bridges," 67–79.

²⁰ Lewis, *Five Families*.

²¹ Lewis, *La vida*, xlv.

²² Lewis, xlv.

²³ Harrington, *The Other America*.

²⁴ Harrington, "Everyday Hell," 1.

²⁵ Engel, Review of *La vida*, 69.

²⁶ Eames and Goode, *Urban Poverty*, 9.

²⁷ Eames and Goode, 73.

²⁸ Roach, "*La vida*: A Chronicle of Misery," 108–11. From the perspective of social work, reviewer Jack Roach warns that *La vida* might contribute to a growing trend of uncritically applying social scientific research to the field. He argues that, although the culture of poverty as conceived by Lewis cannot be adequately addressed through social work, the presentation of material invites treating it as a casebook of sorts.

²⁹ Cordasco, "Review Article: The Puerto Rican Family and the Anthropologist," 37.

³⁰ In his review of *La vida*, David Caplovitz notes the discrepancy between Lewis's theoretical aims and the ability of the evidence to support them. Caplovitz, Review of *La vida*, 141. See also O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 119.

³¹ Rigdon, *Culture Facade*, 110. In fact, by his own admission, the culture of poverty theory was inadequate to express the tremendous diversity of experience among the urban poor. Lewis was fonder of fieldwork than theory, and he only offered the theory of poverty as an organizing trope—a hypothesis in its purest sense. Toward the end of his career, Lewis would express frustration that critics focused exclusively on his theory of poverty rather than the content of his ethnographies. For example, in a letter to Todd Gitlin, he writes: "The more urban slum families I study, the more I am convinced of the wide range of adaptations, reaction patterns, values, etc. that are found. I am sure that if we had a sufficient number of detailed studies . . . we could classify this range. However, to condense it all within a single abstract model like the subculture of poverty is inevitably to distort the lives of these people. Incidentally, I never intended the model of a subculture of poverty as a summary of the substantive data presented in my recent books. If only commentators would go to the trouble of doing their own homework and analyzing the biographies instead of relying upon my theoretical model, a great deal of misunderstanding would be avoided and a great deal of light would be shed," Oscar Lewis in letter to Todd Gitlin, August 8, 1968, quoted in Rigdon, *Culture Facade*, 94; 106n13.

³² Rigdon, 110.

³³ Barnet, *A True Story*, xx.

³⁴ Lewis, *La vida*, xlviii. Although he claims little experience on the subject—

just his work in Cuba—Lewis offers a tentative hypothesis that “the culture of poverty does not exist in the socialist countries.” After Castro’s revolution, Lewis observed: “The slum itself was now highly organized, with block committees, educational committees, party committees. The people had a new sense of power and importance. They were armed and were given a doctrine which glorified the lower class as the hope of humanity,” Lewis, *La vida*, xlix.

³⁵ Barnet, *A True Story*, 210.

³⁶ Barnet, 210–11.

³⁷ Lewis, *La vida*, xxv.

³⁸ Lewis, *La vida*, “A Day with Fernanda in San Juan,” 3–25, “Days with Soledad in New York,” 127–46, “A Day with Felícita in San Juan,” 271–98, “Days with Simplicio in New York,” 413–43, “A Day with Cruz in San Juan,” 533–68.

³⁹ Lewis, *La vida*, 350–60, 60–72, 299–308.

⁴⁰ Schwartz, Review of *La vida*, 358.

⁴¹ Barnet, *Biografía de un cimarrón*; Barnet, *Gallego*; Barnet, *La vida real*.

⁴² The most paradigmatic example of this is the opening lines of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* [*Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*]: “My name is Rigoberta Menchú. I am twenty three years old. . . . my story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people.” Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, 1.

⁴³ Jameson, “On Literary and Cultural Import-Substitution in the Third World,” 185, 187.

⁴⁴ Beverley and Zimmerman, *Literature and Politics*, 178.

⁴⁵ Barnet, “The Documentary Novel,” 25 (emphasis in original).

⁴⁶ Dike, “*La vida en La Colonia*,” 176.

⁴⁷ Dike, 177.

⁴⁸ Dike, 174.

⁴⁹ Lewis, *La vida*, xlv.

⁵⁰ Lewis, *La vida*, xlv, xlviii. There are moments in the text that contradict this broad statement—showing that the Ríos women do engage with history in their own manner. Soledad, for example, describes her response to John F. Kennedy’s assassination. She spent thirty-five dollars to travel to Washington, D.C. with a co-worker to attend the funeral. She responds: “I still feel it. You know, a President like that . . . I had a lot of faith in him because he did many things to end racial prejudice which neither President Eisenhower nor Roosevelt was able to do. He helped Puerto Rico get ahead and he helped us *hispanos* get the same minimum wage as other workers. So far, this Johnson doesn’t make a good impression on me.” Lewis’s multivocal ethnography is rich enough to incorporate moments like this—showing that members of the Ríos family do indeed feel connected to national politics. However, the vast majority of the text is designed to support the contention that the Ríos family cares little for political or institutional involvement. Lewis, *La vida*, 237.

⁵¹ Dike, “*La vida en La Colonia*,” 179–80.

⁵² Barnet, “Documentary Novel,” 24.

⁵³ Barnet, *A True Story*, 171, 64.

⁵⁴ [Moynihan], *The Negro Family*.

⁵⁵ [Moynihan], 29–30.

⁵⁶ [Moynihan], 15–17.

⁵⁷ Susan Rigdon points out that Lewis often relied on an unspoken idealization of middle-class life—rather than national values specific to Puerto Rico or Mexico—as a foil to the culture of poverty. Rigdon, *Culture Facade*, 120.

⁵⁸ Anthropologists such as Margaret Mead and Erik Erickson wrote works on the “national character,” arguing that a bi-parent, middle-class, nuclear family was at the heart of the U.S. national character. Lower classes were seen as un-American, racist, and the source of fascist ideals. O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 105–106.

⁵⁹ O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 113–17.

⁶⁰ O’Connor, 121.

⁶¹ Briggs, “*La vida*, Moynihan, and Other Libels,” 76.

⁶² O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 122.

⁶³ Briggs, “*La vida*, Moynihan, and Other Libels,” 87.

⁶⁴ Engel, “Review,” 70.

⁶⁵ Briggs, “*La vida*, Moynihan, and Other Libels,” 90.

⁶⁶ Lewis, *La vida*, 87.

⁶⁷ Lewis, 217.

⁶⁸ Lewis, 234.

⁶⁹ Barnet, *A True Story*, 164.

⁷⁰ Barnet, 184.

⁷¹ Barnet, 174.

⁷² Stack, *All Our Kin*, 28.

⁷³ Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire*, 2.

⁷⁴ Kaplan, 1–12.

⁷⁵ Lewis, *La vida*, li.

⁷⁶ Lewis, lii.

⁷⁷ O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 120.

⁷⁸ O’Connor, 121–22.

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The cameraman is shooting a picture of (left to right): the German-born, American journalist Karl von Wiegand; the British journalist Grace Marguerite, Lady Drummond-Hay; journalist and author Rolf Brandt; and Robert Hartmann, Chief of Fox Movietone News, September 1928. Wikimedia Commons.

Rolf Brandt and a Conservative Literary Journalism

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Abstract: Rolf Brandt (1886–1953) was a German journalist, author, and political commentator. His first work was as a war reporter on the Eastern Front during the opening months of the Great War (World War I). His reports appeared in several important German newspapers (*Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Frankfurter Zeitung*) and were compiled and published in 1915 as *Fünf Monate an der Ostfront: Kriegsberichte* (Five months on the Eastern Front: War reports). Brandt's reports were more than just army-approved press releases. He wrote in a way that constructed a bridge between the home front and the front lines. In the process he employed techniques now associated with literary journalism. With a clear point of view, he told his story through a sequence of scenes, instead of a simple historical narrative, and included genuine dialogue and status details. While scholars of German literary journalism point to Egon Erwin Kisch as the originator of German literary journalism, this study suggests Brandt should be considered an early practitioner of literary journalism in the German language. More interestingly, Brandt's particular brand of literary journalism had an unmistakably conservative nationalist perspective, thus suggesting that it is possible to have a conservative form of literary journalism.

Keywords: Rolf Brandt – Germany – Russia — World War I – propaganda – conservative literary journalism

Our small Serbian horses step on the planks of the mighty bridge. The guard gives us back our war reporter credentials, the iron gate opens, and we travel across the summery, calm stream. Through the heavy metal lattice work we see the small Prussian town that will give us quarter. The red brick buildings with their resemblance to the Marienburger style stretch themselves out in the late-summer sun.

In ten minutes, we have traveled over the bridge that has one of the largest spans in Europe; on its top is a powerful wire entanglement that will be reinforced. A flower bed of tall, pointed iron rods which are interconnected in all directions by strong barbed wire: Flower beds that would blossom full of bloody red roses, if the Russians should try to enter here.¹

With those opening lines from his first war report, Rolf Brandt (1886–1953) set the stage for his audience. He was going to take his readers into a different world. The iron gate and bridge separated Brandt’s readers from the war, and it was his task to cross that divide by relaying back to the reading public his experiences in this harsh and different world. This world was not just different because of the fighting; it was different because of who they were fighting and how their opponents conducted themselves. His reports were carried in several important German newspapers and were compiled in a small book published in 1915, *Fünf Monate an der Ostfront: Kriegsberichte* (Five months on the Eastern Front: War reports).² Brandt’s reports were more than simple army-approved press releases about German victories. Rather, he constructed a narrative that builds a bridge between the battle front and the home front. If, as David Eason suggests, the New Journalism consciously conceives of reporting “as a linguistic and cultural act” that uses language to mediate understanding of an event for both writer and audience,³ then the writings of German author and journalist Brandt suggest he deserves consideration as an early figure in German literary journalism.

German Literary Journalism, the Public Sphere, and War

Caterina Kostenzer argues that the beginning of the twentieth century was a particularly important time in the history of German literary journalism, because that was when the genre might be considered to have become an independent form of writing.⁴ In her history on the origins of German literary journalism, Kostenzer identifies the travelogue as the precursor to modern literary journalism and points to the early sixteenth century as an important period in the evolution of travelogues. Kostenzer notes that Vespucci’s and Columbus’s negative depictions of Native American Indians and “barbarians” could be used to justify future rule over the New World and its people.⁵

Kostenzer writes that, since the seventeenth century,

. . .there is a lively exchange between many newspaper writers and travelogue authors, and that they influence each other by telling newspapers about various travelers and their experiences, while in turn serving the newspapers as sources of information. These developments are particularly important because the newspapers—as well as the literature and thus also the travel reports of the time—are put into service of the Enlightenment.⁶

Jürgen Habermas identifies the literary processing of bourgeois travel as an indication of the structural change of the public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*).⁷ Kostenzer argues that the creation of the public sphere would increase the politicization of travelogues, with the work of Heinrich Heine serving as the pinnacle of the genre. “In his *Reisenbildern* Heine takes a very erratic and associative approach, renouncing a linear narrative style and instead, in a hitherto unusual attention to detail, puts a critical examination of the politics of the past in the foreground.”⁸ Heine’s method would help set the stage of the “expressionistic travel reports” that emerge in the feuilletons at the end of the nineteenth century that characterizes what Kostenzer identified as a “marked politicization or cosmopolitanization of literature.”⁹ The Austrian writer Max Winter was the first German writer to produce an investigative example of social reportage with the publication of *Das schwarze Wienerherz*.¹⁰

Kostenzer argues that theories of *radical constructivism* could be employed to establish literary reportage as something different from both literature and journalism. The crucial point here is the idea that “the reproduction of reality without exception always includes its construction. Thus, the traditional idea that literature can mimic the reality is finally rejected and instead the character of the construction is deliberately emphasized.”¹¹ The implications for this position are far reaching. From this perspective absolute objectivity cannot be achieved, and any claim of objectivity means that the writer’s words “reflect the reality experiences and beliefs of the largest possible number of readers.”¹² Siegfried Kracauer identifies the importance, as well as the limitations, of this approach:

One hundred reports from a factory cannot be added to the reality of the factory, but remain a hundred factory views for all eternity. Reality is a construction. Certainly life has to be observed to begin. By no means, however, is it contained in the more or less accidental observation of the reportage; rather, it lies solely in the mosaic which is formed from the individual observations on the basis of the knowledge of their content. The reporter photographed life; such a mosaic would be his picture.¹³

The mosaic that Kracauer spoke of is what helped give literary journalism a modernist aesthetic. Instead of claiming to write about an objective

reality, writers conveyed the truth of an event through a cultural lens that frames the kinds of choices the author can make. David Eason observes that New Journalism derives its energy from the shifting relationship between the individual and society, where meaning was created in the various subcultures of a fragmented society.¹⁴ The phenomenon known as literary journalism as it continued to emerge in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s was associated with writers on the left, such as Egon Erwin Kisch and John Reed.¹⁵ In the German context, Kisch (1885–1948) is credited with having developed literary reportage and is generally regarded as the most prominent German-language practitioner of literary journalism in the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁶

There are two important points to take away from this introduction to the evolution of the German literary journalism. First is the observation that travelogues could be used for political purposes, notably to justify imperial conquests. On this point, Edward Said's notion of Orientalism is useful to illuminate Brandt's views of Russia. Said identifies three mutually supporting levels of Orientalism, with the first one pertaining to individuals whose academic specialties dealt with the Orient. The second level is "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) the 'Occident'."¹⁷ The institutions, corporate or governmental, that claimed the ability or authority to describe, teach, colonize, or rule over the Orient comprise the third form of Orientalism. In short, Orientalism is a Western style of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. For some German thinkers, the Orient extended to their eastern border in the form of the Empire of the Slavs. This brand of German Orientalism was an intellectual authority that enabled Germans to pass judgment on Russia.¹⁸

The second takeaway from the introduction is that the method of delivery of literary reportage highlights the power of the genre. Newspapers were founded as a method of relaying information to the public quickly and cheaply. In Germany before the Great War, also known as World War I, most major papers had both morning and evening editions, and that did not include the numerous *Sonderausgaben* (special editions) designed to get information out before competitors. The relaying of information is crucial for an informed public wishing to participate in the public sphere. Here Habermas's definition of the public sphere as a place where private persons' (people not involved with ruling or the state) concerns and interests can challenge public officials is useful.¹⁹ Peter Fritzsche has suggested that the Great War was the event that actually completed the process of German unification.²⁰ One consequence of this unification was a citizenry that was more involved in public affairs, and the war was an important topic of discussion in the public sphere.

The German government could censor sensitive military information, but it could not stop all discussion of the war. Newspapers were the most important source of information for the public regarding the war and could become an important battleground for debate on how to frame the war.

The conditions of war alter the nature of the public sphere and restrict public discourse. As a result, Habermas's understanding of the public sphere as the place where individuals could challenge officials and force them to legitimize their power and policies becomes problematic due to the increase in government authority that usually accompanies armed conflict. Once a state of war was declared in Imperial Germany, in accordance with the *Gesetz über den Belagerungszustand vom 4. Juni 1851* (Law on the State of Siege, June 4, 1851), the government had the right to censor the press in the interest of national security.²¹ The government exercised this right freely, shutting down the *Vorwärts* (the newspaper of the SPD [*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*], the German Social Democratic Party) twice in September 1914. During a war, it might be more useful to think of Oskar Negt's understanding of the public sphere, where "Öffentlichkeit is the creation of a communication and action core in which a consciousness of interest is formed and barriers to the exchange of information and the comparison of experience can be broken."²² While this definition of the public sphere is employed to discuss the literary journalistic efforts of the left (e.g., Kisch and Günter Wallraff), it can also apply to an endeavor with more conservative intentions. Brandt's reporting could break down the barriers that existed between the home front and the front lines in order to maintain support for the troops and, by extension, the war.

The present study argues Brandt's war reportage should be included among the early examples of the literary journalism form in Germany. Brandt's work is absent from discussions about German literary journalism. Neither does his name appear in any of the German or English language literature on the subject. Moreover, the lack of prior work on Brandt requires a different method in assessing whether or not his war writings should be included in discussions of German literary journalism. One approach—which is taken here—is to compare Brandt's techniques with characteristics of literary journalism and with the work of Kisch, a contemporary writer who is included in other studies of the practitioners of literary journalism.

Matthias Harder, placing Kisch's work within the discussion of 1930s reportage, draws on Walter Benjamin's use of the oppositional, that is, contrasting concepts of *erzählen* vs. *informieren* (narrating vs. informing). Benjamin wrote, "The information has its reward at the moment in which it was new. It lives only at this moment, it has to surrender itself to the moment

completely and must clarify itself immediately. The story is different; it does not exhaust itself. It preserves its strength and is still capable of development for a long time.”²³

Georg Lukács considered reportage to be an illustrative form of information,²⁴ but in Kisch’s work reportage attained a quality that mere information lacked. Harder continued, noting that Kisch’s reportage did not simply represent a “hybrid” of its historical-social constellation.²⁵ The special feature of the literary report appeared to be how it dealt with the opposition narrative versus informing. Kisch uses the report as a representation form of the information, in order to get the communicability of various experiences.²⁶

So, while Benjamin may lament that “the art of the narrative is coming to an end,”²⁷ Kisch preserved its inner power by imbuing reportage with literary quality by developing literary reportage. In this way he succeeded in portraying the experiences of everyday life in such a way that they did not remain in a formal plane, but rather brought out their epic quality. Kisch himself was therefore no less than a raging reporter.²⁸

Brandt similarly used his reports to more fully communicate various experiences to his readers. The serial nature of Brandt’s reports also made them an ideal platform to practice literary journalism. Wallraff, a later practitioner of the form, talked about the importance of “agitation through facts.”²⁹ In an important sense, that is what Brandt was attempting. Drawing from the past to support the present, he was agitating for support in an epic struggle that would shape Germany’s future and employing techniques that Tom Wolfe would later identify as crucial to the New Journalism.³⁰ According to Wolfe, the writer needed to tell a story “through a sequence of scenes rather than simple historical narration.”³¹ The writer also needed to use genuine dialogue and include status details (i.e., information that indicated the subjects were aware of their place in society). Finally, the author had to have a clear point of view, setting the scene through a particular set of eyes.³² This last characteristic was particularly important for German literary journalism. Beate Josephi and Christine Müller, citing Klaus, maintain that the point of view had to be authentic, which meant lived experience.³³ So in order to write about the war, one needed to have lived through it. This study argues that Brandt’s reports met those criteria. Brandt wove together various reports covering a variety of experiences that promoted the virtues of the German army, German culture, and the German monarchy into a vivid picture defending the German cause. In the process, Brandt created a conservative form of literary journalism, meaning that his literary efforts were directed towards supporting what would be considered more conservative political goals.

Brandt wrote in the foreword to his collected reports, “My heart stood

silent at what I saw and I promised myself I would not write if I did not feel it.”³⁴ Brandt’s emphasis on the authenticity of feeling and fact in his reports made him one of the earliest German practitioners of what came to be called literary journalism, though his politics and perspective may have led to his being overlooked as an early practitioner of the genre. His war reports were a montage of scenes that implicitly juxtaposed Germany and Russia. German soldiers, conduct, and culture were presented as clearly superior to their Russian counterparts. Brandt’s closing observations on a series of reports that were grouped together as “Tannenberg” in his compilation illustrate his approach to his task:

[The reader] expects, for instance, a detailed description of the Battle of Tannenberg. That is completely out of the question. A battlefield that spans over eighty kilometers, a battle composed of hundreds of individual battles, skirmishes on the scale of a “previous” battle, can hardly be depicted a year later by correctly bringing together [accounts] from hundreds of individual reports, in such a way that one gets a true picture of the giant battle. Untrue images from the mouth of a fellow fighter hastily thrown together can, of course, be disseminated further. But all my effort and work will be aimed at avoiding the war gossip. One should see in these pages a reflection of . . . how exceedingly wonderfully our German army lives and triumphs. Those who cannot be there should not believe the dust of rumors, but rather that they are seeing from a distance the silent splendor of our eastern army.³⁵

Brandt’s request revealed that he was conscious of his audience and he was putting thought into how he presented his material to his readers. In a deft rhetorical move, Brandt asked for the reader’s trust while simultaneously framing his reports with a cultural perspective on the war that had political implications. Brandt’s accounts are a reminder of Evelyn Copley’s observation about First World War narratives and the difficulty of conceiving “an objective world entirely divorced from a socio-historically situated subject.”³⁶ Brandt employed language that was intended to move his audience.

Throughout his reports, Brandt constantly compared German and Russian soldiers in a variety of fashions: how they fought, how they handled civilians, how they treated animals, and how they tended their surroundings. Brandt used his platform to create a conservative narrative that extolled the virtues of the German military, government, and culture, and by extension, the war effort.

The Russian Foe

For Brandt, the Russian army was a reflection of Russian culture. In spite of great natural advantages, in terms of both manpower and natural resources, the army was unable to employ these to their benefit due to the

backwardness of Russian culture. This backwardness was clear when observing how the Russian army operated. The (mis)conduct of Russian troops is a recurring theme in Brandt's reports. His report dated September 8, 1914, contrasted the conduct of the two occupying armies, Russian and German. Brandt began the report with the observation that the small city (Rössel) that was currently filled with German soldiers had, as recently as eight days ago, been occupied by Russian soldiers. According to residents, the first visit by the reconnaissance troops had been positive. The Russians paid for part of what they took and did not demand to be quartered by the residents. The second visit was a different story. Within two hours the commander had demanded a 30,000-mark contribution from the residents to the military. A vicar scrambled from door to door of the remaining residents and scraped together the sum demanded, and reported, "the majority gave the last that they had."³⁷ "The Commander raked in the money and gave back a thousand marks, 'because you had taken good care of our wounded'."³⁸ Brandt was certain the Russian government would see little of this contribution.

The viciousness of Russian soldiers towards civilians was a recurring topic in Brandt's reports:

Everywhere one hears stories of innocent civilians shot dead. It raises a chilling hatred that threatens to suffocate. When armies battle armies the horror is great, but the battle of men carries in its grisliness somewhat of a feeling of something larger that makes every little thing silent. The battle against women and old men that the Russian lead gives rise to a hate that only wants to destroy. Vermin must be eradicated. It will happen.³⁹

Brandt's account frames the war as a moral struggle as well as a military conflict.

Brandt took pains to recognize that rumors and exaggerations were a part of war. He therefore related only incidents that he himself had witnessed or came from what he considered to be unimpeachable sources. By making this claim, Brandt reinforced his own legitimacy as a source as well as the credibility of his reports. In one instance a well-known minister verified that the Russians had "stood ten men against a wall and shot them without reason; they had killed nurses in a barbaric manner; they had the ablest and cleverest artisans in the area and shot them in their cellars like a mad dog. They have put civil servants in the field and used them for shooting practice."⁴⁰ In a later report, Brandt related what a retired customs official told him about his wife's murder.⁴¹

For Brandt, the misconduct of Russian troops did not stop at the abuse of civilians. He noted that the Russian cavalry did not treat their horses properly—they simply rode them into the ground. Brandt related an adage,

“The Russians say: First comes the soldier, the horse comes not at all; for us [Germans], the first concern of the soldier is that his horse will be fed.”⁴² “The Russians say: ‘First comes the soldier, the horse comes not at all’; for us, the first concern of the soldier is that his horse will be fed.” Brandt continued, asserting that care of the horses was something unknown to horses ridden by Cossacks. They were treated so poorly that it was impossible for a cavalry that handles horse in such a fashion to achieve military success. Brandt observed that the Russians were apparently complaining about the lack of horses. “Initially, the material was partly good, although the treatment was bad. Now both are evenly inferior: material and treatment.”⁴³

The mistreatment of horses was, for Brandt, just one example of what he judged as a common characteristic in the Russian army: a mistreatment or misuse of resources. Brandt could not resist pointing out the shortcomings of Russian actions. Russian tactics always seemed to misfire. For example, the Russian artillery did not get the cover fire during a withdrawal quite right. “The withdrawal cover fire by the artillery does not always seem to be correct, even though the Russians are so adept at the planned withdrawal.”⁴⁴ The idea that the Russians had to beat a hasty retreat was also a recurring theme for Brandt. In another report he noted that a finely constructed trench, complete with stuffed hay bags for mattresses, had to be abandoned before anyone could sleep in it.⁴⁵ Brandt was not the only reporter to note Russia’s technical mishaps. On August 20, 1914, “the *Berliner Tageblatt* published a report of a Russian pilot who threw bombs from his airplane that did not explode.”⁴⁶

The Russians could not seem to take advantage of military opportunities. Brandt observed that a Russian airplane was overhead, above a German battery. The pilot could see clearly that the German battery was under a small cloud, and the Russians had the good fortune to be able to use that as a marker. “But he makes no use of this target marker.”⁴⁷ The Russians continued to fire into the woods at the infantry. The commander took this opportunity to relate to Brandt a story of how the Russians had once shot down three of their own planes.⁴⁸ A later report would also note that it was astonishing the Russians did not do a good job of making use of natural markers to help direct military fire. In this particular case, it was a mill that the Germans themselves were using for marking. Brandt could not understand why the Russians did not fire on the mill. Fearing that he had perhaps spoken too soon, he noted, “Now the Russian shrapnel clouds, that for a long time, with almost comical regularity, were landing a few hundred meters behind the mill—always in the same spot where there was a small orchard—appear suddenly in front of the mill.”⁴⁹ Fortunately for Brandt, the Russians were not able to take advantage of the adjustment because the German infantry had intervened.

The occasional mocking of the Russians did not diminish the brutality of battle. Brandt noted that the Russian dead lay in heaps on the battle field. One soldier was hit in the skull with shrapnel; his brain was swelling and oozing out, but his hand continued to shake. A German soldier was hit by gun fire and had "his face buried in the earth."⁵⁰ Brandt came across another scene where two soldiers lay dead; one apparently had been trying to help the other.⁵¹

The German Soldiers

In Brandt's reports, the depiction of German soldiers in battle demonstrated their superiority. It was after the Battle of Tannenberg that Brandt first met up with the German army. He began his report: "Hohenstein burned; the glowing gables of shattered homes threatened to plunge into the street; in the smoldering rubble lay Russian corpses, charred and still smoldering. . . . There we met up with the Army. It was already moving on. 'We have certainly attacked the scum here,' said to me a brave Sergeant, with his thumb pointing to the flaming city."⁵² Brandt's visit was met with approval by the officials. "It is appropriate that you visit once the *Landwehr*," said his Excellency. "The people deserve that one speaks of them. Now four days here at the bivouac on alert, from time to time Russian grenades. Damn cold nights. Ah, and Hohenstein . . .'"⁵³ The voice trailing off after mentioning the devastated town reflected both the official's sadness and signified another hardship the soldiers faced: the destruction of their culture and the deaths of their compatriots. The task facing the *Landwehr* was a literal one. The German Army (*landwehr*) had to defend (*wehren*) their country (*land*).

Brandt fulfilled his duty to speak well of the soldiers. No matter how brutal the fighting was (and it was unimaginably brutal), the German soldiers were never shown in anything but a positive light, and their humanity was always present. More than once Brandt reported on troops singing as they marched in a way that transformed a familiar and sometimes worn-out song. He noted that when the soldiers sang "Deutschland, Deutschland über alles," it became fresh and bright, regaining a lost authenticity as the troops marched into the evening.⁵⁴ The humor of the soldiers was also present. In order to get Russian prisoners to move faster, one soldier advised that they run the way they did the day before (when they were trying to get away). That would be acceptable.

Brandt saw a truck with wounded German soldiers, and he remarked, "They are quiet and seem above all else disgusted that they cannot continue to pound the Russians until the end of the battle."⁵⁵ The fortitude of the German soldiers was a constant theme in the reports; but this fortitude exacted a price. The war was hard for the soldiers. Brandt observed: "In the faces,

including those of the officers, one saw the hardships. The field beard did not cover all [the] sharp lines around their mouths that were the result of pursing their lips together.”⁵⁶ Even in death, the soldiers maintained their dignity. Brandt encountered a German soldier and his Russian counterpart lying dead in a trench, having killed each other with bayonets. He remarked that the German boy still had his gun held tightly thrusting forward and that his face turned to the side, but it had “a still and peaceful expression.”⁵⁷ The fallen boy’s expression gave Brandt the feeling the soldier knew he was in a victorious battle and that even in death he was still part of the victory.

Brandt’s depictions did not attempt to soften the horrors of war. In fact, he often went into great detail about the conditions of war (the noise, smoke, and confusion) and the grotesque impact of modern technology on the human body. What distinguishes Brandt’s accounts was that he did not see the suffering and sacrifice of the soldiers as pointless. Brandt’s soldiers were fighting to defend their fatherland from the Russian peril and did so willingly. His eyewitness account poses an interesting challenge to scholars of the Great War. It is tempting to side with Erich Maria Remarque’s view of war as expressed in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, but Brandt’s account suggests that Ernst Jünger’s *Storm of Steel*⁵⁸ was more representative than generally acknowledged. One has to wonder if time has had an impact on post-war memoirs. What in hindsight is judged as a waste does not necessarily seem so at the time. Brandt presented a conservative nationalist case for the war.

The bravery and the humility of the soldiers were always present in Brandt’s depictions of encounters. His retelling of an exchange between an officer and some soldiers was a way to highlight these positive traits:

From the bag he [the Lieutenant Colonel] takes two small little packages [wrapped] in tissue paper and carefully unwraps them. Three Iron Crosses. In the other case are the bands. The people enter. Two soldiers and a reservist. They know what this is about. Their wan faces are a little embarrassed. The Lieutenant Colonel gives them a short speech. “Boys, because you recently did the patrol so well, because of Lyck, because of Bialla . . . I hope you continue to do your duty so well. . . .”⁵⁹

The captain instructed the three to write their mothers, and the sergeant noted that the reservist, a brash young man, “lit up like a Christmas tree.”⁶⁰ Brandt’s writing style underlines the scene he was setting. The simplicity of the sentences reinforces the authenticity of the scene, and of the soldiers. They were simple, earnest men who were just doing their duty. The scene was a sharp contrast to a Finnish soldier who had said a gun was constantly being pointing at him. Brandt’s respect for the German soldiers was always present. Brandt ended the report of his first encounter outside of Tannenberg,

remarking, "It is good luck to see the troops in the field, a gift to be permitted to report their victories and deeds. There is not a Russian army that can withstand them in the long run."⁶¹ The emphasis here is on *Russian*. The Russians were thought not capable of defeating Germany. It is a sentiment that would carry through all of his reports.

Brandt conveyed the humanity of the German soldiers in a number of ways. It was often the sharing of a drink, cigarette, or meal that enabled the author to get more insight into the thoughts and lives of the soldiers. He noted that the soldiers had no idea what was going on at home and were clamoring for information. Such a statement could easily be interpreted as implying that people needed to write to the men doing their duty. The weather was also a way to create a bond with the fighting men. Brandt wrote:

The icy wind cuts the face when driving. At first you feel every muscle, but soon feel nothing at all. With great satisfaction, I decide that the woolen cap that covers the whole head, with only a section cut out for the face, does an excellent job. A cavalry patrol that just rode into the market of Filipowo, has the same disguise. The leader points to the cap and says to me briefly: "Good, no?" I nod with the most possible animation, because the wind takes my words away."⁶²

In another instance, he mentioned a soldier who entered the room where Brandt was sleeping. Both were surprised to see the other. Brandt remarked, "We got along of course, and I still had some brandy in the field bottle; we warmed ourselves. The first frost had set in, and the situation of the furnace [in the room] seemed to have a catch. It burned, but the room did not get warmer."⁶³ Brandt used these anecdotes to remind readers of the conditions that the soldiers endured and to solidify his own credibility because he was also enduring them. His use of dialogue drives his narrative in a particular direction, thus suggesting it was a conscious decision. This technique is a characteristic of literary journalism.

Brandt's report on how one group of soldiers commemorated the Empress's birthday was another example of his efforts to build a bridge between the home front and the front lines. The brief report described a church service attended by soldiers and citizens of all stations. Brandt claimed there was such a joyous atmosphere that it felt like Christmas, so much so that he expected to hear Christmas carols. These same services had, of course, occurred throughout Germany on the *Geburtstag der Landesmutter* (birthday of the nation's mother).⁶⁴

Brandt's discussion of the Christmas packages that were distributed to the soldiers is another attempt to create a bond between the two fronts:

"The great effort and love in these thousand six hundred packets," says the Lieutenant. "You cannot believe how the poor and poorest toil to send the troops something. Poor hard hands knit the finest soft scarves, tired, anxious fingers bind such painstaking and pretty bundles together and wrap their thoughts and all their great feminine bravery with them. Now they also all have the feeling at the front that you care about them and care for them. Grog warms well; but every love warms here in the field, where not only the body freezes in dirt and wetness and deprivation. It is so: This time, the women fight our battles with us."⁶⁵

It was clear that Brandt was hoping his reports would help raise the morale and efforts of the people at home while also providing sustenance to an information-starved civilian population.

Entering Russia

Once in Russia, Brandt constantly compared what he saw there with the way things were just beyond the border (in Germany). Entering into Russian territory confirmed Brandt's preconceptions of Russia. As soon as he crossed the border, he noticed the difference. Even the smell was different in Russia. Travel was difficult in Russian-controlled Poland. In one report, entitled simply "The Russian Street," Brandt noted with annoyance that the road to the train station was three times as long as it needed to be and was in such poor condition that it was even hard on horses. Finally, under the supervision of engineers, a new road was built. "On the one side white wood pillars and drainage and every ten meters was a lamppost. Traveling to the station was shortened by two thirds. The people were happy about their new road. 'Now the war has brought something good,' I said to an old woman, who shook her head in wonder. 'Yes, but—it is for the time being the only thing!' she reckoned."⁶⁶

For Brandt, the above anecdote was emblematic of the general state of things on the Russian side of the border. Brandt noted that traveling from Filipowo to Przerosl fourteen days earlier would not have been possible by car. There was no proper path, but rather a stretch of land that was not being tilled at the time. It is worth pointing out that Brandt did not use the German word for street (*Strasse*), but instead used the word path (*Weg*) to identify the travel route. He credited German engineers for creating a passable street. "It is amazing how quickly the Russian paths can be improved by the German Army Command."⁶⁷ Noting that he had traveled quite a few kilometers over the course of the past few days, he saw the results of German improvements everywhere. New roads were being built with proper drainage, and countless holes had been filled to make car travel possible. The improved roads took the author to new experiences that confirmed old prejudices. The drive allowed

him to observe long stretches of Russian land that he described as “dismal” (*trostlos*).⁶⁸ Areas that were difficult to till were simply abandoned and even the areas that were worked defied description. It was the same kind of land that lay a few miles beyond the border, but instead of grain, these fields appeared to be sown with stones. Brandt remarked,

It is not about a stretch [of land] that was not worked because of the war; one can clearly see the work, but the slovenliness with which it was handled is also clearly visible. The paltry and neglected impression of this field is almost depressing, [it] gives the landscape this remarkable, strange expression, which one a few kilometers beyond the border at first cannot fathom.⁶⁹

For Brandt, this stretch of land summed up his view of Russia: “This is Russia, as it is always presented in primitive fantasies. I know that there is another and magnificent Russia. I know that you cannot easily conceive the great country under a typical image. Nevertheless, this poor, neglected landscape with the North wind about it, with the wooden huts, with the residents who hold their caps on their chests when that car passes by, is to me, Russia.”⁷⁰ Brandt’s Eastern Front experience represented the essence of Russia: simple, poor, neglected, and harsh. The brutality of the Russian army was the martial manifestation of these traits.

While in Russia, Brandt was never quite at home. Brandt’s description of a house in which he was quartered was vivid enough to make the reader feel part of the group. Brandt noted that some soldiers had lit the room properly, but it would have been better had it remained in the dark:

The whole dwelling, in its arrangement and décor, spoke for the taste and sense of its proprietors, was a kind of garbage heap [*müllhaufen*]. In the dining room stood a table filled with precious porcelain plates on which were the remains of a variety of meals; some pictures were cut out of their frames, other papers, manuscripts, letters filled up the majority of the salon. The doors to the buffet were smashed, vomit on the desk. A few bronze figures were vilely mutilated. A strange smell was all about.⁷¹

Brandt suggested that this was typical of his lodgings in abandoned homes and cities. He and other Germans attempted to order things and to make things as livable as possible in alien surroundings. Brandt remarked that it was an eerie feeling to get insights into the private life of a family without wanting or trying to. Brandt and his companions had access to things that this family might not have revealed to their best friends, never mind to complete strangers.⁷² Trying to create order in a strange environment allowed Brandt to employ an interesting device to add a different dimension to his reportage: describing the discovery of half-written or old letters or damaged documents.

The first time Brandt used this technique he was in a small rectory, where he found a document dated 1656, “*aus der Tatarenzeit*” (from the time of the Tatars).⁷³ He did not know if it was an original or just an excerpt from a book. What struck him, and what he may have hoped would strike his readers, were the similarities between then and now. After the Battle of Prostken (now Prostki, Poland), on October 8, 1656, a group of Poles and Tatars had invaded East Prussia.

The city of Lyck was completely and totally destroyed so that not one stone remained next to the other. In the district Lyck sixty-seven villages, a small town (*Flecken*), three churches, and three hospitals were reduced to ashes. Two thousand eight hundred people [were] hauled off and over two hundred killed. In Kalinowen eight hundred men were struck down or dragged off. The town of Oletzko was completely in ashes. In the district of Polommen the Tatars stole everything, Bialla they destroyed, Drigallen went up in flames. In Neuhoof the bodies of the murdered inhabitants infected the air for a month. In Gilgenburg the entire population was massacred in the church. In East Prussia thirteen cities, two hundred forty-eight towns and villages, seven hundred thirty churches were burned to the ground, 23,000 people killed, four thousand abducted.⁷⁴

Brandt’s use of this document “*aus der Tatarenzeit*” was an attempt to link the past to the present. Kisch has called this technique “logical fantasy”⁷⁵ and it was an attempt to inspire action through the dissemination of truth. For Brandt, this document confirmed the barbaric nature of Germany’s eastern foe. More than 250 years had passed, but the truth was that at the same place the Tatars still acted in the same barbaric manner.

At the previously mentioned inn, Brandt read a letter that a young girl wrote to her father, and a locket of hair fell out of a packet that was still partially tied with a blue ribbon. Written on the packet were the words “*Briefe aus der Brautzeit*” (Letters from the engagement period).⁷⁶ There was no other trace of this family. There was a picture of a young blond girl, possibly the aforementioned bride when she was a child. The lives of the family that ran this inn would have been permanently changed by the war. Brandt’s inclusion of these details reminds the audience of the impact of the war on civilians in the East, perhaps hoping to evoke sympathy from his audience for the plight of cultural comrades. The letter was written in German.

Brandt discovered a guest book and concluded from the various signatures that this must have been a lively inn. The book’s last entry mentioned the quartering of Russians, who had made their presence known on the furniture and the cash boxes. In the same inn the reporter noted traces of the Russian *guests* that were even clearer. In one small *nest* (a pile of papers), he came

across Russian dispatches and an unfinished letter. Brandt wrote, “The typical phrases that the Russians used on first arrival in the East Prussian city were the same in the beginning of the line of the unfinished letter. . . . ‘It is not far from Berlin, Darling (*Liebling*), and there I will send you more beautiful things than from here. The campaign is almost over. . . . Before Christmas, we will see each other again’.”⁷⁷ Returning to his theme of hasty departures, Brandt wryly noted, “Meanwhile, the roar of German guns must have driven out the letter writer.”⁷⁸ The letter writer’s statement to his girlfriend or wife was not the only case of misinformation (or perhaps just misguided optimism) about the war that was passed on to the Russian home front. Brandt used this incomplete letter to reinforce themes from his earlier narratives. His assumption that German guns were the reason the letter was unfinished served to reinforce the message to the home front that German troops were winning the war in the East.

While staying in another place, Brandt discovered a satchel that contained newspaper clippings, a report, and a picture, all of which contributed to the picture that Brandt was trying to paint about the war and Germany’s adversaries. He observed that the official report was fairly circumspect, but the newspaper report was anything but. Similar to the reports Brandt himself was sending back to Germany, the report told Brandt what information their Russian counterparts had received about the war. Brandt considered it fortunate that he had found an article about a battle for which the outcome had already been determined. He reproduced a large portion of the Russian report, “Battle at Njemen bei Sredniki” (Lithuania) that had appeared in a Russian paper.

The Germans shoot without aiming. Their artillery shoots too far and has dealt us no harm, since the projectiles explode far behind. Actually they have not saved ammunition, humming in the air and howling incessantly, as with a metallic bass voice. Toward morning the Germans fled with all their might, without looking back, leaving on the battlefield mountains of dead, grenades, smashed carts, automobiles, motor bikes. In this fateful night they lost three flags, lots of guns, and five regiments were completely dissolved.⁷⁹

The report claimed there were so many German corpses that they could not be buried in three days.

Brandt was astonished at the falseness of the report that compared the German loss here, in Njemen bei Sredniki, with the loss at Tannenberg. Brandt then recounted an article from a Russian newspaper out of Minsk, the *Litovskaja Russija*, titled, “The German Animals.” The article included, as an example of German barbarism and stupidity, a report of a German soldier

cutting off the leg of a Russian soldier and having to carry him along on their retreat.⁸⁰ Brandt noted that this false report made it into the pages of the Russian newspaper, but that it was very unlikely that a copy of the report that he found in the same satchel that documented Russian atrocities would even be seen in print in the same paper. Brandt seemed oblivious to the possibility that if his own reports fell into the hands of his Russian counterparts, they might accuse him of the same.

In the same package of documents Brandt found a mass-produced drawing from Thomas Eyre Macklin called *The Angel of Peace* (Der Friedensengel). The drawing showed a wide-eyed, winged Kaiser with a bloody sword in one hand and a torch in the other. "His blood-stained boot stands on a heap of corpses and crushes the white page of a treaty. In the distance under bursting shrapnel and wafting smoke, armies storm one another. One sees the flags of England, France, Serbia, and Russia waving nobly next to each other."⁸¹ Brandt remembered the night in front of the Royal Palace when he heard the Kaiser say, "Pray to God for our German army."⁸² Brandt was outraged by the drawing. "The blood-red picture, the English help for Russia! A lie, wickedness that is all they have for their allies."⁸³ In his report, Brandt juxtaposed his description of the British caricature of a blood-thirsty Kaiser with his memory of Wilhelm II on the balcony asking people to pray for the soldiers. Brandt knew that the world only saw the caricature of the Kaiser and not the man he saw on the balcony. He hoped that if the world could somehow see the man on the balcony that he saw, then perhaps people might have a better understanding of Germany's position.

Brandt's war reports (*Kriegsberichten*) were an attempt to relay to the German home front and the wider world a vision and version of the war. He employed the techniques that have come to be recognized as characteristic of German literary journalism in reports that were dramatic and well written and included both a sense of humor and an eye for detail. He told a story through a sequence of scenes. For example, in a six-day period, October 20 through 25, Brandt submitted three reports that are representative of his technique. On October 20 he filed "In Reconquered Lyck" ("Im wiedereroberten Lyck"), which describes the devastation that fighting had brought to a small town that he was familiar with before the war. The next report, dated October 22, "The Empress's Birthday on the Border" ("Kaiserin-Geburtstag an der Grenze") was discussed earlier. The third report, from October 25, was "Observations about the Russian Army" ("Beobachtungen über die russische Armee").⁸⁴ It was an analysis of the state of the Russia military after about twelve weeks of battle. Included in this report was the Russian cavalry's treatment of horses that was also recounted earlier. Each report could (and did) stand

on its own. Writing one after the other produced a clear comparison that permitted Brandt to make his point of view more effectively than any direct statement he might have made. Whether it was conversing with a German soldier about the merits of woolen caps or an old Russian woman about a new road, Brandt's use of dialogue confirmed the authenticity of his reports. Brandt certainly had a clear point of view and set the scene through his own eyes, although the lens through which he witnessed the action was certainly colored by cultural and political preconceptions. For Brandt, Germany was protecting its homeland from a ruthless Russian invasion. Brandt described a litany of abuses heaped upon civilians and animals, and the destruction of property that occurred during the brief period of Russian occupation of German soil. In the face of such a barbaric adversary, the German soldiers had maintained their bravery and humanity and had done their duty. In Brandt's mind, there was no doubt about the justness of Germany's cause.

Brandt and a Conservative Literary Journalism

In her 2009 Theodor-Herzl Lectures, Antonia Rados provided a brief history of modern war reporting. She divided it into three phases. The first phase began with the Crimean War and the reports of William Howard Russell for the *Times* of London. The reporters of that period were individualists and adventurers who might not have fully appreciated the risks that they were taking.⁸⁵ The First World War marked the second phase of modern war reporting, the era of the "war critics"⁸⁶ due to the scale and proximity (both personal and geographical) of the war. Rados wrote, "Who does not know Ernest Hemingway's impressive books, which are based mainly on real figures and events from the First World War or the Spanish Civil War? Hemingway, Reed, Orwell (*My Catalonia*), all war reporters or more precisely: all anti-war reporters."⁸⁷ Within this schema, Brandt's reports from the Eastern Front present an interesting dilemma. He vividly describes the carnage of the war, but he is not anti-war.

Brandt's reports cannot be simply dismissed as mere propaganda. His wartime experience was limited to the few opening few months of the war, and his reports included much more than accounts of German victories. What should be remembered is that while Brandt was in the field, the German army was very successful; but though the Battles of Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes were decisive German victories, they were not the product of German propaganda. The praise that Brandt showered on the military in the autumn and winter of 1914 was not entirely unwarranted. Perhaps if he had stayed longer or had gone to the front later, he might have had a different experience. But such musing must be speculative at best, and Brandt's subsequent career

suggests otherwise. Brandt's work can be characterized as a conservative example of literary journalism.

As Cogley noted, efforts at objective recounting of the war were limited by sociohistorical context and Brandt's context was no different. *Fünf Monate* was the first publication of what would be a fairly prolific literary career. Brandt's novels are not part of the German literary canon, but he was well enough regarded that at least three of his novels—*Um die Welt mit Dir* (Around the World with You), published in 1933; *Christine von Milotti*, in 1935; and *Abschied von Mariampol* (Departure from Mariampol), 1936—were reviewed in *Books Abroad*, an English language journal.⁸⁸

After the war, Brandt's nonfiction remained sharply political and reflected the values that he espoused during the war, e.g., *So sieht die Weltgeschichte aus . . . Aufzeichnungen eines Zuschauers* (So Appears the History of the World . . . Notes from an Observer), published in 1926. There would be a second edition of this book in 1934 called *Europe without Masks*, in the preface of which Brandt announces his support for Hitler. Brandt also wrote a book about the Treaty of Versailles geared for children, *Versailles: The Story of a Historical Betrayal, Presented for the German Youth*, published in 1934, that denounced the treaty as a betrayal of the efforts he had witnessed on the Eastern front.⁸⁹

Brandt's disillusionment with the result of the war and the peace was certainly a factor in his decision to support Hitler. In October 1933, Brandt was one of eighty-eight writers, including Gottfried Benn, who signed the *Gelöbnis treuester Gefolgschaft* (Vow of most faithful allegiance) pledge of loyal followers pledging to support the German chancellor. Misguided as Brandt's decision was, Peter Fritzsche does offer an explanation that may apply to Brandt. As noted earlier, Fritzsche suggested that summer 1914 may have represented the real unification of Germany with the support of the war. Germany's loss created a strong sense of disillusionment among many Germans, especially those with conservative leanings. In this context, what Hitler offered was the opportunity to regain that feeling of unity, pride, and a sense of purpose. Considering Brandt's support from this perspective does not absolve him in any fashion. But it does offer an explanation for his transformation from a German citizen into Nazi supporter.

Brandt's later work and political choices should not diminish the importance of *Fünf Monate*. As he promised in the foreword, Brandt put into words what he felt in his heart. In the process, he developed a style of reportage that this study argues can be included among the early examples of German literary journalism.⁹⁰

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Notes

¹ Brandt, *Fünf Monate an der Ostfront*, 1 (translation mine). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

² Brandt, *Fünf Monate an der Ostfront: Kriegsberichte* [Five months on the Eastern Front: War reports].

³ Eason, "Telling Stories and Making Sense," 125.

⁴ Kostenzer, *Die literarische Reportage*, 13.

⁵ Kostenzer, 15.

⁶ Kostenzer, 18.

⁷ See Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 31–42.

⁸ Kostenzer, 20.

⁹ Kostenzer, 21.

¹⁰ Kostenzer, 23; see also Winter, *Das schwarze Wienerherz*.

¹¹ Kostenzer, 50.

¹² Kostenzer, 52.

¹³ Kracauer, "Unbekanntes Gebiet," 222, as quoted in Kostenzer, 67.

¹⁴ Eason, "The New Journalism," 51–65.

¹⁵ Reed, *Ten Days*.

¹⁶ See Josephi and Müller. "Differently Drawn Boundaries," 67–78; Segel, *Egon Erwin Kisch*, Kostenzer also identifies Kisch as the seminal figure in the creation of German literary journalism, Kostenzer, 68–72.

¹⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, 2.

¹⁸ For a thorough discussion of the German perceptions of Russia at this time, see Paddock, *Creating the Russian Peril*, 1–21 and 60–101.

¹⁹ Habermas, 27.

²⁰ Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis*, 11–82.

²¹ Koszyk, *Deutsche Pressepolitik im Ersten Weltkrieg*, 20–21.

²² Negt, *Keine Demokratie ohne Sozialismus*, 318, quoted in Camigliano, "Günter Wallraff," 406, 417n6 (translation Camigliano's).

²³ Benjamin, "Der Erzähler: Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows," 445–46, quoted in Harder, "Reporter und Erzähler," 159.

²⁴ Lukács, *Meister der Reportage*. 40f, quoted in Harder, 159.

²⁵ Harder, 159.

²⁶ Harder, 159–60.

²⁷ Benjamin, *Der Erzähler*, a.a.O., S. 439, quoted in Harder, 160.

²⁸ Harder, 160, 160n17.

²⁹ Camigliano, “Günter Wallraff,” 407.

³⁰ The applicability of Wolfe to a German context is open to discussion. Tobias Eberwein notes that research on U.S. New Journalism has become almost a “leit-motif” in the German literature. While Eberwein notes that there is a recent trend toward examining German New Journalism, the relationship between the New Journalism and literary journalism is an open question. See Eberwein, *Literarischer Journalismus*, 83–84.

³¹ Kaplan, “Tom Wolfe on How to Write New Journalism,” para. 12. See also Poerksen, “The Milieu of a Magazine,” 9–29, 18.

³² Kaplan, para. 12; Poerksen, 18.

³³ Klaus, “Jenseits der Grenzen,” 107, quoted in Josephi and Müller, 70.

³⁴ Brandt, Vorwort to *Fünf Monate an der Ostfront*, iii.

³⁵ Brandt, 20.

³⁶ Cogley, *Representing War*, 21.

³⁷ Brandt, 17.

³⁸ Brandt, 17.

³⁹ Brandt 18.

⁴⁰ Brandt, 18.

⁴¹ Brandt, 41.

⁴² Brandt, 15.

⁴³ Brandt, 80.

⁴⁴ Brandt, 81.

⁴⁵ Brandt, 71.

⁴⁶ Paddock, “Creating an Oriental *Feindbild*,” 242. The story appeared in the morning edition of the August 20, 1914, *Berliner Tageblatt*, on page one.

⁴⁷ Brandt, 85.

⁴⁸ Brandt, 85.

⁴⁹ Brandt, 103.

⁵⁰ Brandt, 104.

⁵¹ Brandt, 104.

⁵² Brandt, 33.

⁵³ Brandt, 34.

⁵⁴ Brandt, 27.

⁵⁵ Brandt, 24.

⁵⁶ Brandt, 56.

⁵⁷ Brandt, 107.

⁵⁸ Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*; Jünger, *Storm of Steel*.

⁵⁹ Brandt, 118.

⁶⁰ Brandt, 119.

⁶¹ Brandt, 12.

⁶² Brandt, 86–87.

⁶³ Brandt, 60.

⁶⁴ Brandt, 79.

⁶⁵ Brandt, 131.

⁶⁶ Brandt, 92.

⁶⁷ Brandt, 87.

⁶⁸ Brandt, 87.

⁶⁹ Brandt, 87–88.

⁷⁰ Brandt, 88.

⁷¹ Brandt, 61.

⁷² Brandt, 61.

⁷³ Brandt, 62.

⁷⁴ Brandt, 63.

⁷⁵ Camigliano, 407, quoting Hahn and Töteberg, *Günter Wallraff*, 49. See also Robeck, *Egon Erwin Kisch Beim Bochumer Verein* [Egon Erwin Kisch at the Bochum Club], 15ff.

⁷⁶ Brandt, 61.

⁷⁷ Brandt, 62.

⁷⁸ Brandt, 62.

⁷⁹ Brandt, 112, quoting from “Battle at Njemen bei Sredniki” (Lithuania). Brandt did not include the name of the newspaper in his account.

⁸⁰ Brandt, 113, quoting “The German Animals,” *Litowskaja Russija*, no. 823. Brandt gave no additional publication information for the newspaper.

⁸¹ Brandt, 114.

⁸² Brandt, 114.

⁸³ Brandt, 114.

⁸⁴ Brandt, “Im wiedereroberten Lyck” [“In reconquered Lyck”], October 20, 76–78; “Kaiserin-Geburtstag an der Grenze” [“The Empress’s Birthday on the Border”] October 22, 78–79; “Beobachtungen über die russische Armee” [“Observations about the Russian Army”], October 25, 79–82.

⁸⁵ Rados, *Die Fronten sind überall*, 43.

⁸⁶ Rados, 45.

⁸⁷ Rados, 45.

⁸⁸ Trenckner, Review of *Um die Welt mit Dir* [Around the World with You]; Morgan, Review of *Christine von Milotti* Brandt, *Christine von Milotti*; Eisenbrown, Review of *Abschied von Mariampol* [Departure from Mariampol].

⁸⁹ Brandt, *So sieht die Weltgeschichte aus . . .*; Brandt, *Europa ohne Maske*; Brandt, *Versailles*.

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Digital LJ . . .

Digital Literary Journalism in Opposition: Meena Kandasamy and the Dalit Online Movement in India

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Abstract: In recent years, several marginalized groups in the Global South, including Dalits or “Untouchables” in India, have embraced web-based literary journalism as a mode of protest against the establishment. The Dalit protest movement, which advocates for the rights and protection of India’s 230 million outcastes, has gained momentum largely due to its combined use of digital media and literary journalism. The work of Dalit feminist author Meena Kandasamy illustrates how literary perspectives are integral to and coextensive with the advocacy journalism of digital news platforms and social media in online protest movements. In protest poetry, song, and memoir the personal bleeds into the political, as it does in activist journalism, fueling the social movement. Kandasamy’s literary journalism articulates Dalit literature’s anticaste political aesthetic, particularly through her strategic use of digital media. India’s activist digital media are currently propelled by the nation’s literary culture and its creative and imaginative modes of expression, bearing important implications for digital literary journalism studies.

Keywords: digital longform journalism – Dalit social movements – digital protest – activist journalism – Meena Kandasamy

In a longform narrative article published in the society section of *Outlook* magazine, feminist writer and journalist Meena Kandasamy attested, “my skin has seen enough hurt to tell its own story.”¹ Her nonfictional testimony formed the basis of her autobiographical novel, *When I Hit You: Or, a Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*. In it, the power of digital media takes center stage when the author’s husband withdraws her online access. “What I find impossible to fathom,” she writes, “is how I now find myself in the position of having my online freedom curtailed. I never thought that it would be so important to me until it was.”² His chief means of control is through digital communication. Tension escalates when her deadline for a story on gender inequality for *Outlook* nears. After badgering her with “suggestions that I have slept with the entire editorial team at *Outlook*, . . . he takes my laptop out of my travel bag” prior to their departure to visit his family “and leaves it on the table. . . . ‘This is going to stay here,’ he says, . . . ‘Should I remind Writer Madam that she is also a wife?’ ” Undeterred, she resolves “to compose whole sentences and paragraphs at a stretch in my mind. It is an article that I entirely key in on my phone, a clunky Nokia E63.”³ However, “the new Mangalore SIM card that my husband has got for me does not have a data plan, and there is no way I can transmit my article. At some point, I want to call the editor at *Outlook* and read out what I have written for someone on his team to take down.”⁴ But she hesitates to do so for her fear of being discovered during the half hour she would need to complete the task. Now anxious,

My fear of him gives way to my fear of missing the deadline. In desperation, I come up with the riskiest of strategies. I remember my husband and the USB dongle that allows us to connect to the internet are never parted. What makes the dongle an internet-ready device is the data-powered SIM card inside it. When he has gone off to have his evening bath, I rummage through the pockets of his clothes and find the dongle. I quickly remove the SIM card, hide it in the side seams of my *kurta*, and leave everything looking as untouched as before. When my turn to use the bathroom comes, I hurry inside, my phone well hidden in a towel, replace the SIM card, and send the article across a very slow Opera browser, with no formatting, no italics. . . . I hurriedly put the SIM card back in the dongle so that there’s no trace of the crime.⁵

Upon her return, she checks her email from her *Outlook* editor: “Three words: *Got it. Brilliant.*”⁶

In this narrative account drawn from her own abuse at the hands of her husband in protest of the brutal treatment of women, Kandasamy recalls how the restriction of her access to digital media, and thus her capacity to meet her editor’s deadline for the magazine *Outlook*, wounded her more deeply than she expected. Her story is a metonym for digital media’s instrumental role



Writer and journalist Meena Kandasamy
at the 2016 Kerala Literature Festival.
Wikimedia Commons

in the current Dalit social movement, in which India's lowest caste has refused to be silenced. The factual foundation of "this novel is shamelessly informed by my own experience . . . of marital violence," Kandasamy affirmed, particularly in the context of pursuing her career as an author and literary journalist.⁷ It should be noted that similar novels based closely on their authors' own journalism—as with Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, the topic of the inaugural conference of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies in 2006⁸—qualify as literary journalism.⁹

When asked about the scene, Kandasamy mentions that her "husband's hatred of Facebook/email/cellphones/MacBook [is] not because they are capitalist icons, but rather because they enable her a freedom that he cannot sufficiently control." She is careful to disavow media determinism, noting that com-

munication technology can be both a tool for women's liberation and for "possessive idiots [to] track their partner's movements by installing spyware."¹⁰ In her *Outlook* piece, her husband's use of "twisted computer power-cords" to lash her suggests the vicious affordances of digital technology.¹¹ But the narrative structure of the earlier scene—captured in her dramatic scramble for a technological means to compose and submit her story on behalf of



Meena Kandasamy's early work on UltraViolet (October 2008) is one of the activist online platforms where she developed the political aesthetic of her literary journalism.

women's suffering—attests to the subversive power of digital technologies to circumvent censorious conditions for the production of literary journalism.

An outdated flip phone, a slow Opera browser, a smuggled and transplanted SIM card, all function as “weapons of storytelling” or key props in this “theatre of reality,” Roberto Herrscher’s concept that Isabel Soares describes as “the crossing of a threshold separating a source-only based journalism from a journalism of scenes and characters.”¹² The scene is part of the narrative’s larger message that resourceful and inventive use of available digital technologies, no matter how antiquated or disconnected, give voice to the untold stories of abuse in the struggle against patriarchal violence. Digital media for literary journalism, as the scene showcases, are the tools of liberation voiced through finely crafted narrative built on lived first-hand experience.

Digital Tools for Intimate Storytelling

Literary journalists typically project themselves into their own work. But most pointedly in the cases of Indigenous and Dalit literary journalism, it is done to cast attention on mass suffering. A recent study by Maier, Slovic, and Mayorga spotlighted in *Literary Journalism Studies* revealed that conventional news accounts written according to the inverted pyramid style, and attempting a level of objectivity associated with hard and breaking news, fail to engage audiences when reporting on mass suffering because they lack the personal voice of the subjective narrator and tools of storytelling associated with fiction.¹³ By contrast, the present study argues that literary journalism—and by extension, the poetry so integral to India’s online social protest movement that emerges from literary journalism—allow, as Lindsay Morton observes, for imagining, in Lorraine Code’s words, “one’s way into the situations of differently situated Others, including . . . the marginalized.”¹⁴ Dalits suffering a wide range of injustices that include murder and rape represent the sort of mass suffering to which Maier and his colleagues allude. The literary journalism of Kandasamy exhibits a way to imagine that suffering because the genre is effective in carrying out its primary purpose, in John Hartsock’s words, “to narrow the distance between subjectivity and the object.”¹⁵ Contemporary social movements are rooted in the innovative use of new media and distrust of mainstream communication channels to unleash what Nick Couldry calls the capacity for voice and “the need to *narrate* our lives” on current issues.¹⁶

Oppositional voices resonate through Indian protest poetry, which is inextricably bound to its advocacy journalism. Kandasamy’s poetry bears a deep connection to journalism, a blending of the forms to which Thomas B. Connery pointed when he drew on Archibald MacLeish’s insightful exploration of poetry and journalism.¹⁷ MacLeish argues that



Dalit Camera's main page, pictured here, also produces a YouTube channel featuring Dalit narratives of struggle and resistance that blend journalism with artistic expression.

... an examination of actual poems and actual journalisms would lead any reader to the conclusion that the difference between them, wide though it is, cannot be stated in terms of "creation." Both are re-creations, different in degree but not different in kind, for the material in each case is our human experience of the world and of ourselves; . . .¹⁸

Dalit poetry, music, visual art, and longform narrative journalistic accounts are now featured on websites such as *Dalit Camera*.¹⁹

The Dalit movement's diverse use of genres and media to report on the Dalit culture and political condition is exhibited in Kandasamy's multimedia project (with visuals by Samita Chatterjee) in the *Illustrated PEN*, a weekly digital publication "that aspires to be at the intersection of literature, journalism, and visual storytelling, where images and words come together in an ever-emerging and essential creative form."²⁰ Kandasamy's contribution is a nonfiction graphic narrative that combines comics journalism and illustrated reportage. Like the rest of her journalism, the piece is focused on social justice through personal narrative. Through this multimedia narrative, she recounts the forms of retaliation she endured after "her defense of the organizers of the 2012 Hyderabad Beef Festival" and voices "her condemnation of the subsequent violence."²¹ The final frame of the piece depicts Kandasamy surrounded by faceless men converging on her, captioned with a tweet she received threatening gang rape.²² The images haunt the reader; the writing captures the violence of the multiple rhetorical tactics used to silence her.



Final frame of Meena Kandasamy's multimedia digital journalism with graphic art by Samita Chatterjee in the *Illustrated PEN* weekly online magazine, June 25, 2015.

The piece narrates the multiple forms of backlash Kandasamy endured after voicing her political views on the beef controversy in India.

As with *When I Hit You*, she renders her experience through moving narrative on behalf of the plight of India's women.

Kandasamy's work can be understood as an important development extending from digital literary journalism, "the genre [that] has experienced an extended renaissance over the last decade," according to Josh Roiland.²³ Digital longform's politically efficacious content online has moved intellectuals and activists. But as Roiland notes, the movement fell prey to news organizations intent on associating their brands with the trend in a "shortsighted and ahistorical" manner.²⁴ Unlike digital longform produced by mainstream publishers in slick, multimedia packages driven by marketing protocols, online Dalit protest appears in both intense, short bursts and longer videos of speeches

that are often transcribed and translated into English. Kandasamy's poetry, like her literary journalism, is neither florid nor self-consciously aesthetic. Even her digital graphic-art journalism bears this viscerally unpretentious quality. For her writing, less is more. Given the urgency of the feminist anti-caste struggle, she says, "It is a long time since I wrote anything merely for it to look beautiful." Instead, she is driven by "Dissent. Protest. Rebellion. [and] The need to speak out": a political imperative that overrides the hyper-professional and self-conscious posturing of the literary market. In this regard, she said, "I never looked at writing as a 'career,' " which we suggest is anathema to the self-promotional approach that drives the Western sociology of authorship. She underscores this point in her claim that "I learnt that one had to fight for things much bigger than oneself, that one had to speak up when it mattered."²⁵

Kandasamy's features and columns focusing on digital media as tools on behalf of Dalits and Indian women build on her longform, deeply researched, scene-driven work in *Outlook*, *Newsweek Middle East*, *India Today*, the *Hindu*, the *Hoot*, and *Communalism Combat*. In these outlets, Kandasamy es-

establishes a set of principles for the larger digital protest expressed in unsentimental language delivering an irreverent and pragmatic punch, as in “my fear of him gives way to my fear of missing the deadline.”²⁶ India’s online protest movement attests to Ziccardi’s point that although “technologies can certainly be a facilitating factor in revolution,” they can only achieve their goals “when guided by the hearts, brains, and concrete actions of the activists who put them to use.”²⁷

Indeed, one can find a correlation between the rise of social awareness of women's rights online and the rise of physical self-defense training for girls, a movement gaining momentum in India and recently covered in the *New York Times* under the headline "Indian Girls Learn to Fight Back."²⁸ Twitter and

other social media can also function as channels to marshal collective strength against misogynistic online targeting of Indian feminists. Kandasamy's digital piece titled "Good Indian Girl's Guide to Online Misogyny"²⁹ is the online extension of the embodied self-defense guidelines taught in practical self-defense training sessions to Indian girls.

Integral to activist digital culture is journalism by and about Indigenous populations that draws on literary techniques to “perform the important news function of providing a voice to those who are marginalized,”



Meena Kandasamy at *The Fifth Estate: Hindu Nationalism in India*, hosted by Sashi Tharoor and Sally Warhaft of the Wheeler Center for Books, Writing, and Ideas, September 25, 2017.



Meena Kandasamy on Twitter.

as Jennifer Martin has noted.³⁰ As with aboriginal cultures in North America and Australia, the Dalits of India can be characterized as another marginalized population, “who,” as Duncan McCue has observed of the Canadian aboriginal peoples, “have certainly been *underrepresented* in journalism,” given the lack of stories about them and their communities. In addition, “they have also been *misrepresented*,” McCue argues, so that their suffering is made to seem natural.³¹ The Dalit digital movement has seized online channels to tell their own stories of oppression and, crucially, to share strategies for dissent.

Inspiring that online movement is Kandasamy’s journalism in *Outlook*. Its defiance of retrograde gender politics recalls the writing of literary journalist Fanny Fern for the *New-York Ledger* in the 1850s.³² The murder of citizens in India for consuming beef prompted Kandasamy to advocate for tolerance and depoliticization of dietary preference in her *Outlook* articles.³³ She has also used that publication to voice her dissent for India’s crimes (“mass graves in Kashmir . . . mass rapes in Bastar,” and “a caste society that massacres an entire Dalit village in one night”) and censorship of literature, transgressions that led to her migration to England.³⁴ This subversive bent in her career traces back to the development of her web presence through digital publications in the early 2000s, a time when she assembled her first WordPress site to make her poems and journalism more accessible, and thus more powerful as activist media, in one place online.

The Dalit Movement’s Literary Origins

“The Untouchables have no Press,” wrote Babasaheb Ambedkar, founder of the Dalit protest movement he spearheaded during the 1920s.³⁵ In an article on caste bias in obituaries,³⁶ Kandasamy corroborated his claim with evidence from contemporary media’s failure to cover the death of the man responsible for ensuring Ambedkar’s legacy lived on.³⁷



B.R. Ambedkar, social reformer and leader of the Dalit protest movement. Wikimedia Commons.

As an alternative to mainstream media’s censorship of reporting on Dalit deaths, the internet circumvented such barriers for the publication of Dalit news. Kandasamy elsewhere noted Chandra Bhan’s question, when he wrote in his journal the question of “why from a population of over 200 million Dalits (more than the combined population

of France, the U.K., and Germany) . . . the caste intelligentsia was not prepared to explain why . . . there was not a single Dalit columnist in the English language press,”³⁸ Kandasamy identified the root of the problem, which applies across media through Bollywood and radio, when she wrote, “Not only do the mainstream media refuse to give prominence to incidents of Dalit atrocities (treating them as space-filler events like the regular crime beat) but it also effectively denies space to grass-root Dalit movements.”³⁹ The internet now provides that space for personal stories of social consequence.

Dalit literature and journalism originally arose as mutually reinforcing tools of protest, as the founders of the Dalit Panthers, a radical Dalit group formed in 1972, were all writers for the periodical press.⁴⁰ Sparking the movement were two texts, “Dalit Panthers’ Manifesto” and the poem “The Dalits Are Here,” whose genres illustrate India’s long history of convergence and continuity between political and literary modes of expression at the crucible of activism and aesthetics.



Babasaheb Ambedkar, jurist, reformer, and founder of the Dalit protest movement.



Cover of the Dalit Panther Manifesto, 1972. The Dalit Panthers were a militant group founded in Bombay, India and modeled after the Black Panther Party in the U.S. The group consisted of journalists and writers associated with the Dalit literary renaissance.

The personal and political serve similar functions in this case, as literary production from the onset of Dalit literature also included autobiographies, which should “not [be regarded] as individual literary texts, but as life stories written in the context of a movement to bring about change.”⁴¹ Although several Dalit texts can be identified from earlier times, the real force and originality of Dalit writing traces back to the 1970s. Fueled by Ambedkar’s principles, the writers who established the Dalit Panthers affirmed and expanded his critique of Gandhian Indian nationalism to launch a new social movement that rapidly became a pan-Indian phenomenon.⁴²

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Notes

- ¹ Kandasamy, "I Singe the Body Electric," para. 1.
- ² Kandasamy, *When I Hit You*, 59.
- ³ Kandasamy, 76–77.
- ⁴ Kandasamy, 77.
- ⁵ Kandasamy, 77–78.
- ⁶ Kandasamy, 78.
- ⁷ Kandasamy, "Interview: Meena Kandasamy on Writing about Marital Violence," para. 7, 4.
- ⁸ IALJS, "Celebrating *The Jungle*."
- ⁹ Connery, "Fiction/Nonfiction and Sinclair's *The Jungle*: Drinking from the Same Well," 167.
- ¹⁰ Kandasamy, "Interview: Meena Kandasamy on Writing about Marital Violence," para. 15.

- ¹¹ Kandasamy, "I Singe the Body Electric," para. 5.
- ¹² Soares, "A Global Context," 131; Herrscher, *Periodismo narrative*, 48–49.
- ¹³ Maier, Slovic, and Mayorga, "Reader Reaction to News of Mass Suffering," 1011–29.
- ¹⁴ Morton, "The Role of Imagination in Literary Journalism," 106; Code, *Ecological Thinking*, 207.
- ¹⁵ Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism*, 132.
- ¹⁶ Couldry, *Why Voice Matters*, 106.
- ¹⁷ Connery, *Journalism and Realism*, xix.
- ¹⁸ MacLeish, "Poetry and Journalism," 7.
- ¹⁹ Dalit Camera, para. 1, 5f.
- ²⁰ Kandasamy and Chatterjee, "How to Make a Bitch Give Up Beef," para. 1.
- ²¹ Kandasamy and Chatterjee, graphic 1. First published in "The *Obliterary Journal*, an anthology of comics and artwork centered around the theme of meat-eating, published by Blaft Publications in Chennai, India," Kandasamy and Chatterjee, para. 2.
- ²² Kandasamy and Chatterjee, graphic 13.
- ²³ Roiland, "Derivative Sport," 184.
- ²⁴ Roiland, 185.
- ²⁵ Kandasamy, "Meena Kandasamy on the Pursuit of Writing," para. 11, 10, 5.
- ²⁶ Kandasamy, *When I Hit You*, 77.
- ²⁷ Ziccardi, *Resistance, Liberation Technology*, 163.
- ²⁸ Abi-Habib, " 'Men Treat Us Like We Aren't Human.' "
- ²⁹ Kandasamy, "Good Indian Girl's Guide to Online Misogyny."
- ³⁰ Martin, "Writing Aboriginality," 19.
- ³¹ McCue, "Seeking *Debwewin*," 23.
- ³² Dowling, *The Business of Literary Circles*, 70–71.
- ³³ See, for example, Kandasamy, "A Cowed-Down Nation."
- ³⁴ Kandasamy, "I Am an Anti-National . . . Count Me Out," para. 2, 1, 3.
- ³⁵ Ambedkar, "What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to Untouchables," 440.
- ³⁶ Kandasamy, "Mourning and the Media's Bias," para. 5.
- ³⁷ Kandasamy, "Dalits and the Press in India," 126–27.
- ³⁸ Bhan Prasad, *Dalit Diary, 1999–2003: Reflections on Apartheid in India*, April 4, 1999, 1, quoted in Kandasamy, "Dalits and the Press in India," 126.
- ³⁹ Kandasamy, "Dalits and the Press in India," 127.
- ⁴⁰ Satyanarayana and Tharu, "Dalit Writing: An Introduction," 20–21.
- ⁴¹ Satyanarayana and Tharu, 20.
- ⁴² Satyanarayana and Tharu, 20–21.

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The 2004 tsunami in Ao Nang, Krabi Province, Thailand.
Photo by David Rydevik. Wikimedia Commons.

Research Review . . .

Recent Trends and Topics in Literary Journalism Scholarship

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This survey of literary journalism scholarship published in print during 2018 is intended as a guide to recent trends and topics in the field rather than a comprehensive listing of all research and commentary. It focuses primarily on peer-reviewed journals. Some works may have appeared online before print publication, and some with earlier publication dates may not have appeared until 2018.

Digital Technology

The technology known as natural language generation may be on the verge of moving from basic descriptions to simple narratives based on events, raising the prospect of an eventual automation of advanced forms of journalistic writing, David Caswell and Konstantin Dörr say in *Journalistic Practice*. But economic and other limitations are likely to protect manual forms of writing when it comes to “the most complex, impactful, and valuable journalism for the foreseeable future.”¹

Three scholars writing in the *Journal of Magazine Media*, formerly the *Journal of Magazine & New Media Research*, evaluate multimedia news packages and their use of interactive elements. They found that maintaining the narrative flow was a key factor in attracting and retaining the interest of a millennial audience.²

The possibilities and the pitfalls associated with virtual reality reporting—along with its ties to literary journalism—are examined by Ben Stubbs in *Australian Journalism Review*.³ The article also looks at implications for journalism education.

Also in *Australian Journalism Review*, Jeanti St. Clair describes a new approach to place-based feature reporting: the locative audio documentary walk. Several examples are considered, and the form is proposed as a way of reaching marginalized communities and connecting audiences to locales.⁴

Ethics

An examination of the way that the technique of immersion is deployed in covering poverty is presented by Holly E. Schreiber in *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. She concludes that this approach can both distract attention from systemic causes and displace the voices of those living in poverty.⁵

Six researchers, from disciplines that include medicine, psychology, and journalism, published a study in *Health Communication* warning journalists about the use of narrative, particularly when writing about rare conditions or outcomes. Narrative has the ability to influence patient behavior, overwhelming a person's individual thinking style and degree of numerical sophistication, the researchers said.⁶

Writing in the *Journal of Media Ethics*, Jeffrey C. Neely argues for the use of narrative to foster conservation ethics. His study focuses on a book by Thomas French.⁷

Historical Development

Using historical analysis, Thomas A. Mascaro argues in *American Journalism* that certain examples of long-form television documentary should be recognized as a kind of *littérature engagée*, that is, part of the literature of engagement. He argues that previous scholarship has overlooked these works because of a bias toward print over broadcast journalism.⁸

Individual Author Studies

Writing in *Assay*, Michael W. Cox explores the development of a David Foster Wallace article for *Rolling Stone* from its earliest draft. Cox argues that by focusing on early changes to individual sentences one can see Wallace transforming himself from observer to witness.⁹

The writer and diplomat João Guimarães Rosa, who is best known as a novelist and short story writer, is the focus of a study in *Brazilian Journalism Research*. Four authors analyze his use of journalistic techniques, including interviewing and verification.¹⁰

Åsne Seierstad's *The Bookseller of Kabul* is considered in the light of the British tradition of "harem literature," that is, travel writing about the domestic lives of Muslim women. Writing in *Literary Journalism Studies*, Solveig Ragnhild Brandal underscores the difficulties of writing about encounters across cultures.¹¹

Also in *Literary Journalism Studies*, Matthew Ricketson traces the origin of Tom Wolfe's voice to writing for his high school and college newspapers.

The research is based on Wolfe's papers at the New York Public Library.¹²

Narrative Theory

The role of time and temporality is the focus of an essay by Christopher Wilson in *Literary Journalism Studies*. An essay by Calvin Trillin receives particular attention in this examination of the function of time in narrative.¹³

Chris Mays, writing in *College English*, argues for the use of genre theory to explore the construction of fact in creative nonfiction. He says authorial choices and genre rules play key roles in determining which facts are included and how they are developed.¹⁴

Cecilia Aare uses discourse narratology to explore narrative and rhetorical features of literary journalism. Writing in *Brazilian Journalism Research*, she highlights differences between literary journalism and realistic fiction.¹⁵

Another article in *Brazilian Journalism Research*, written by Fabiano Ormaneze, applies the techniques of discourse analysis to literary journalism. The analysis draws on the theory of language proposed by Michel Pêcheux.¹⁶

Also in *Brazilian Journalism Research*, Rogério Pereira Borges proposes a theoretical approach to biographical forms of literary journalism. Narrative and new historicist perspectives are brought to bear.¹⁷

National/Regional Studies

The role of narrative reporting in the coverage of survivors of Indonesian natural disasters such as the 2004 tsunami is explored by Budi Irawanto in *Pacific Journalism Review*. The study is focused on the magazine *Tempo* and its humanistic approach to news coverage.¹⁸

The influence of orality in the newspaper prose of Ghana's Kwesi Yankah is explored by Nathaniel Glover-Meni in *PentVars Business Journal*. He argues that techniques borrowed from the oral tradition can help to expose social tensions while elevating the quality of journalistic writing.¹⁹

Dolors Palau-Sampio and Antonio Cuartero-Naranjo compare Spanish-language literary journalism in Latin America and Europe in a study published in *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*. The authors report that topics and styles vary but that writers on both side of the Atlantic have much in common.²⁰

Pasquale Macaluso, writing in *Journal of Arabic Literature*, describes an example of reportage published in a Jaffa newspaper in 1936. Published in serial form, the work provided a positive view of rebel leaders, contrasting with the way they were depicted in the Western press.²¹

Aleksandra Katarzyna Wiktorowska, writing in *Brazilian Journalism Research*, presents a history of literary journalism in Poland.²² Her essay examines the popularity of literary journalism in that country as well as theoretical debates about the line between fact and fiction.

Practice

Writing in *Literary Journalism Studies*, Hendrik Michael examines the use of reportage, with its emphasis on personal experience, immersive research, and multiple perspectives, in the coverage of immigration to Western Europe. He argues that his approach is superior to traditional methods because of its effectiveness in dealing with complexity.²³

Also writing in *Literary Journalism Studies*, Lindsay Morton argues that imagination should not be equated with invention. In her view imagination in the context of literary journalism can be seen as a tool to help bridge the distance between author and subject.²⁴

Kobie van Krieken uses the *New York Times* article “Snow Fall” to explore how New Journalism techniques are translated from print to multimedia stories. The multimedia elements are shown to contribute to an intensely immersive experience.²⁵

In *Brazilian Journalism Research*, John C. Hartsock offers his perspective as a writer and as a scholar on the choices that confront a practitioner. The essay incorporates critical theory into the experience of creating a book-length work of literary journalism.²⁶

Also in *Brazilian Journalism Research*, Beatriz Guimarães de Carvalho and Rafael de Almeida Evangelista offer a theoretical perspective on the work of literary journalists and anthropologists. The authors explore the similarities and contrasts between the two fields.²⁷

Teaching

In *Literary Journalism Studies*, four researchers described their findings about student writing ability and the potential for using literary journalism to improve skills related to writing and critical thinking. Their analysis documents a widespread concern about declining skill levels while pointing to aspects of literary journalism that may be well suited to address this problem.²⁸

David Abrahamson, in *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator*, makes the case for allowing students to engage in first-person writing in certain assignments. He describes specific advantages and potential outcomes.²⁹

Mitzi Lewis and John Hanc summarize their findings from surveys conducted over five years into the teaching of literary journalism. In *Brazilian Journalism Research*, the authors also point to next steps, including the possibility of creating an international research hub to continue this work.³⁰

The teaching of literary journalism through the use of an online-multimedia platform is examined by Christopher Wilson in *Literary Journalism Studies*. While potential advantages can be found to this approach, pedagogical trade-offs are also encountered.³¹

Notes

- ¹ Caswell and Dörr, "Automated Journalism 2.0," 492.
- ² Jacobson, Marino, and Gutsche, "Should There Be an App?" 1–21.
- ³ Stubbs, "Virtual Reality Journalism," 81–90.
- ⁴ St. Clair, "Stories That Walk with You," 19–33.
- ⁵ Schreiber, "Passing for Poor," 455–67.
- ⁶ Shaffer et al., "What Is the Story with Narratives?" 1151–57.
- ⁷ Neely, "*Zoo Story*," 80–91.
- ⁸ Mascaro, "Blood of Others," 171–95.
- ⁹ Cox, "Privileging the Sentence," 1–29.
- ¹⁰ De Castro et al., "Literary Journalism, Transdisciplinarity and Complexity Field," 816–39.
- ¹¹ Brandal, "Literary Journalist as Woman Traveler," 114–37.
- ¹² Ricketson, " 'What inna namea christ is this?' " 138–61.
- ¹³ Wilson, "The Journalist Who Was Always Late," 112–39.
- ¹⁴ Mays, " 'You Can't Make This Stuff Up,' " 319–41.
- ¹⁵ Aare, "Narratological Investigation," 676–99.
- ¹⁶ Ormaneze, "(Dis)Encounters and (Re)Arrangements," 701–19.
- ¹⁷ Borges, "Writing on Self," 774–97.
- ¹⁸ Irawanto, "Narratives of Natural Disaster Survivors," 37–51.
- ¹⁹ Glover-Meni, "Orality in Ghanaian Newspaper Narratives," 73–82.
- ²⁰ Palau-Sampio and Cuartero-Naranjo, "Spanish and Latin American Narrative Journalism," 961–79.
- ²¹ Macaluso, "Claiming Modernity in Mandate Palestine," 355–85.
- ²² Wiktorowska, "Literary Journalism as a Discipline in Poland," 628–53.
- ²³ Michael, "Why We Fled from Grosny," 70–91.
- ²⁴ Morton, "The Role of Imagination," 92–111.
- ²⁵ Van Krieken, "Multimedia Storytelling," 123.
- ²⁶ Hartsock, "Exploring Literary Journalism and the Truth in Wine," 654–75.
- ²⁷ Guimarães de Carvalho and Evangelista, "Collectors of Daily Life," 798–815.
- ²⁸ Neely et al., "The Write Stuff," 140–59.
- ²⁹ Abrahamson, "There Be Dragons," 358–62.
- ³⁰ Lewis and Hanc, "Educators' Experiences," 740–73.
- ³¹ Wilson, "Reading in 4-D," 174–89.

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Scholar-Practitioner Q + A . . .

An Interview with Pascal Verbeken

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Keywords: Pascal Verbeken – Belgium – Flanders – Netherlands – reportage – literary journalism

On several occasions I have been asked by our community of literary journalism scholars about the specificities of the Belgian branch and which household names featured prominently in our national pantheon. The question always left me perplexed, if not flummoxed, because in our Belgian academic world we often look upon the Anglo-American, and increasingly French, heritage for inspiration, both at education and research levels. In a tiny country straddled between two main cultures—Flemish-speaking in the north, French-speaking in the south¹—and with a capital city that is a true Tower of Babel, a home for many Eurocrats and expatriates—identifying a homegrown literary journalistic tradition and commendable writers proved more complicated than expected. I was at a loss for names—until I came across Pascal Verbeken’s reportages.

His dedication to collect voices unjustly unheard, to bear witness to events we are unaware of, and to share heart-breaking testimonies from both survivors and dreamers, is inspirational. Verbeken tells stories of a country through its unsung heroes, be they Flemish, Walloons, or *Brusseleirs*.² His reportages are imbued with human substance. They are enlightening chapters on the history of Belgium nobody ever bothered to teach us, albeit vital to the understanding of who we are as a nation, with Brussels as its epicenter, the heart of the European project that is currently given a rough ride. Not only does Europe fear the seismic fallout from an impending Brexit, the United Nations Global Compact for Migration has also prompted a planetary com-

motion. And Belgium is not immune to the rise in populism and nationalism, which adds to its own political aggravations.

Pascal Verbeken was born in Ghent in 1965. He studied *germaanse filologie* (Germanic Philology, i.e., Dutch and English linguistics and literature) at Universiteit Gent, and later became a journalist. He has written and been part of the editorial teams of some of the greatest national papers publishing in Dutch, such as *De Standaard*, *De Morgen*, and *Humo*, and has also worked as a documentary filmmaker for the two national public channels, VRT (Vlaamse Radio-en Televisieomroeporganisatie) and rtbf (Radio Télévision Belge Francophone). He has been a freelance writer for several years and was a member of the jury of the *Stichting Verhalende Journalistiek* (Foundation for Narrative Journalism) in the Netherlands. Today he devotes most of his time to nonfiction and benefits from the official status of *nonfictie schrijver* (nonfiction writer), a unique initiative of the *Vlaams Fonds voor de Letteren* (Flemish Fund for Literature), which promotes literature in Dutch both at home and abroad.

Verbeken has penned several books, often shortlisted for prizes in nonfiction literature. While his first book also exists in French, the others do not exist in translation—a regrettable omission—which is why I take a few lines to present his work. Indeed, Verbeken deals with subjects that are of particular interest to an international audience. Albeit rooted in Belgium, his stories have a much wider appeal. All of them are the result of long hours spent crossing the country, in search of the lived experiences of common people. His first book, *Arm Wallonië: Een Reis door Het Beloofde Land* (Poor Wallonia: A Journey through the Promised Land), published in 2007, documents the massive Flemish exodus to French-speaking Wallonia in the early twentieth century.³ The contrast between the then-poverty-stricken northern part of the country and the rich south interrogates the clichés that are dying so hard in a country where the economic situation has been radically upended.

Walking in the footsteps of his predecessors, be they anonymous witnesses or well-known figures, has become Verbeken's signature. *Tranzyt Antwerpia: Reis in het Spoor van De Red Star Line* (Transit Antwerp: A Journey Following the Red Star Line),⁴ published in 2013, started with the memoirs of Benjamin Kopp, a Jewish adolescent who migrated to the United States in 1911 from his village of Nowe Miasto nad Pilica in Poland. The author reflects on the brave journey of one young man to reveal the story of millions of people en route to America aboard the Red Star Line ships. This testimony is Verbeken's conduit to documenting the migration of Jews from Eastern Europe, some of whom never made it to the New World. In *Grand Central Belge: Voetreis door Een Verdwijnend Land* (Grand Central Belge: Walking through a Disappearing Country), first published in 2012,⁵ the author crosses Belgium,

a land of promise and industrial power that ranked second only to Britain before the 1960s. Verbeken collects testimonies from the witnesses of Belgium's past glory and current decline.

Duistere Wegen: Reis naar Vincent Van Gogh in De Borinage (Dark Ways: A Journey to Vincent Van Gogh in the Borinage) is Verbeken's 2015 book⁶ that takes the form of a travelogue through the region, beautifully illustrated with sketches by the painter himself, as well as postcards and documents of the period. Verbeken writes about the life and times of Van Gogh, who ended up in the poor region of the Borinage. The darkness of this coal-mining territory is reflected in the artist's work and is featured prominently in the text. The narrative is a *tour de force*, which provides rich historical substance to understand a devastated region too often despised and ignored. As for *Brutopia: De Dromen van Brussel* (Brutopia: The Dreams of Brussels),⁷ the journalist's latest book is an invitation to discover the ambivalent and cosmopolitan European capital through its cultural, historical, and human patrimony.

Verbeken's narratives strike a sensitive—and sensible—chord. He looks at the few droplets that reveal the ocean. His micro-stories,⁸ the products of time well spent with sources, relentlessly walking the roads of the country, reflect a bigger picture and fill the cracks of grander narratives that ignore the plight of the disaffected and downtrodden. To help us navigate these turbulent waters, he generously offered his time to discuss his inspirations, epiphanies, tools, and techniques, his past and present projects, and his indefatigable wanderlust. The conversation was typically *à la belge*—multilingual—yet mostly in French, in which the author is highly proficient, with occasional questions, comments, and references in Dutch and English. The interview, transcribed in English, is complemented with additional notes from previous research and suggestions from the author himself.⁹

This moment of grace took place on March 13, 2019, at Monk Café in Brussels.

Isabelle Meuret: Literary journalism has often been labeled as an American genre. As a well-established Belgian journalist, what or who are your main influences? Has your writing been molded by the New Journalism and its stable of exceptional writers?

Pascal Verbeken: There has always been a particular distrust of the New Journalism in schools, but most people are clueless about what it really means. Tom Wolfe and his like were perceived as narcissistic dandies indulging in some sort of inchoate, non-rigorous journalism, with the author taking precedence over the text. Sure, Hunter S. Thompson and his guns, shooting at his typing machine,

that was part of the pizzazz, the glamour. But these guys were excellent writers.

Meuret: Thompson was indeed an outstanding political journalist.

Verbeken: Sure. Think of *Hell's Angels* [1967], for instance. That type of journalism was of great interest to me also due to its connection to music. One of Thompson's buddies was Warren Zevon, a fascinating American storyteller. My influences are not only writers and journalists, but significantly also musicians. Bruce Springsteen's "Youngstown" [1995],¹⁰ for example, is a song about an industrial town in Ohio, exactly as Seraing,¹¹ a central location in *Arm Wallonië*. "Youngstown" had itself been inspired by Dale Maharidge, this famous reporter, whose books I devoured, in particular *Journey to Nowhere* [1985] on hobos, and *Homeland* [2004], about a fast-changing America.¹² Stories told by ordinary people had a tremendous impact on me. Dale Maharidge has also written *And Their Children After Them* [1989], a sequel to James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.¹³ Maharidge returned to the very places visited by Agee and Evans back in the thirties to see what had changed. All this was an incredible revelation to me: It all started with "Youngstown" on my preferred album—*The Ghost of Tom Joad*—which itself hails from Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. You see, this journalistic genre does not come out of the blue, it does not rest upon the ego of some self-infatuated New Journalists. The genre is rooted in the societal substratum. At least that is clearly the case in the United States.

Meuret: What about European roots? Is there such a tradition of literary journalism in Europe?

Verbeken: The roots in Europe are to be found in literary works, fiction novels from the nineteenth and first part of the twentieth centuries. *Germinal* [1885] by Émile Zola, or *Down and Out in Paris and London* [1933] by George Orwell,¹⁴ one of my favorite books, to which we can add travel writing by Gustave Flaubert. So, I wouldn't say that the genre was invented by the Americans.

Meuret: In *Transyt Antwerpia*, you make numerous references to Ryszard Kapuściński and Joseph Roth, notably at critical moments, after your visits of Treblinka, Auschwitz, and the Warsaw ghetto.

Verbeken: At the time of *Transyt Antwerpia*, I was only discovering Roth. Besides being a novelist, he was an incredibly talented journalist. In my own work, the literary element is limited. What I am doing is first of all *reportage*, or *récit du réel* (literature of the real), which I prefer to the term *literature*. The latter immediately conjures up the imagination or some aesthetic effort to produce ornamental or affected effects, which I definitely resist. This is why I avoid the use of *literary* journalism, although of course style, composition, selection matter. The license to create in the nonfiction writing I'm doing now is indeed impossible in traditional or mainstream journalism. For instance, *Arm*

Wallonië starts with a letter addressed to Auguste de Winne,¹⁵ another journalist, who wrote in 1902, in whose footsteps I walked and worked. Similarly, *Brutopia* begins with angel Saint Michael, a statue adorning the top of the *Hôtel de Ville* (town hall) in Brussels, addressing the reader and then returning in the conclusive chapter. Such imaginative techniques, I admit, are literary.

Meuret: Can you elaborate on your tools and techniques? What can you tell us about your writing process?

Verbeken: *Transyt Antwerpia* differs from my other books because it was commissioned by the Red Star Line Museum.¹⁶ They had a coffee table book with the story of the museum, but they wanted a volume that would tell the stories of some two million refugees from Eastern Europe that transited through Antwerp with the hope to start a new life in the United States or Canada. I had access to some existing migrant stories and chose that of Benjamin Kopp, a young sixteen- or seventeen-year-old man, who left his village near Warsaw, Poland, and embarked on this long adventure to Antwerp, and then America.¹⁷ So I did Benjamin Kopp's journey again, through Europe, and took notes of the changes in all the places and villages he crossed. His past story is intertwined with and mirrored in the present. This journey took us—me and Hermann Selleslags, the photographer¹⁸—to Auschwitz, where the Red Star Line had a travel agency, believe it or not. The Red Star Line had agencies everywhere. Decades later, the trains that went from Auschwitz to Belgium took the opposite direction, this time from the so-called Kazerne Dossin (Dossin barracks) in Mechelen,¹⁹ to the death camps.

Meuret: It is such a well-researched story, substantiated with copious facts and detailed figures about deportation and executions. The documentation in *Transyt Antwerpia* is impressive: maps, photographs, official documents, register pages, illustrations. Paradoxically, visualizing the dry, factual data—the names on the passenger lists, leaving Antwerp or arriving at Ellis Island—makes the story all the more moving. And the sketches and posters drawn by artists at the time, as well as the photos by Herman Selleslags, are not merely aesthetic—they also bear witness to this tragic chapter in history. How do you organize your research, before traveling and writing?

Verbeken: It's a mixed approach. I do some prior research and also visit archives when I travel. In Warsaw I visited a Jewish records office. What struck me the most is that this whole Jewish story was an absolute taboo in the village where Benjamin Kopp was originally from, because the Jews who did not leave the village were stranded in a ghetto in 1942 and then all deported to Treblinka. On our visit to the village, we were alone. It was snowing. We took a taxi at the station in Treblinka, about eighty kilometers from Warsaw. Everything was closed in the camp. Nobody was there. No one.

Meuret: *Transyt Antwerpia* sheds light on devastatingly dark moments, which you document thoroughly, starting from only one human destiny but with a view to reveal the magnitude of the tragedy. It is the harrowing story of one young adolescent leaving his village in Poland, escaping a doomed future. At the same time, it is a universal narrative, the story of extermination.

Verbeken: Right, but there are always limitations to a story. My own journey had to come to an end, in Antwerp, and not, ideally, in New York, where obviously Benjamin Kopp still had a niece.

Meuret: On a very different account, *Arm Wallonië* also features the lives of ordinary people and the tragic moments they went through. Why was this chapter of Belgian history, with starving Flemish workers migrating to French-speaking Wallonia, . . . silenced for so long?

Verbeken: That story was an eye-opener for me too. When the documentary was shown on television,²⁰ the reactions were always the same: How come we did not know about this? My explanation is that every village has its secrets.

Meuret: The book is also a way to rediscover areas that are totally disregarded today, like the Borinage, a poor region in the Hainaut province of Belgium.

Verbeken: *Arm Wallonië*, and also *Grand Central Belge*, have deeply altered my perception of Belgium. The added value of reportage or nonfiction is precisely this: storytelling—*récit du réel*—makes it possible to show the ambiguities of a reality and to have access to the humanness of such realities. This is what I call an eye-opener. I'm thinking of this ninety-eight-year-old woman, Clarine Trossaert, probably deceased today, who arrived in 1918 with her parents from Scheldewindeke (a village in Flanders) in Marchienne-au-Pont, near Charleroi. For the first time in her life she had seen electric lighting. That was such a change from the poor village where she came from in Flanders. All her life she worked in industry. In her old age, while staying at a residential home, she saw on television that her home village had become the richest commune in the country. It was such a shock, as her new surroundings, where she had migrated, had gone through a completely different evolution and had notoriously one of the highest unemployment rates. This anecdote shows that everything changes so fast, in just one life, without people having any power to impact their realities. Such massive changes totally escape ordinary people. Politicians are speaking above common people; they are so far from the realities experienced in difficult milieus. It is too easy to blame ordinary people. In politics there is this myth that you can change society, but reality is a whirlwind and the real capacity of people to alter their environment is limited. In this café, we are now talking, but next week we may be in a different reality. We realize that Europe is going down a danger-

ous slope, but we do not know where it will end. At some point in the past we thought that thanks to social security, the welfare state, everything was safe, and would be safe forever.

Meuret: Your books are timely: They make us think about the consequences of migration.

Verbeken: Yes, they show the similarities and also the differences. Migration has always existed, but the social security is certainly a major difference. Getting back to my influences, beyond the literary sphere, I would certainly mention Alan Lomax. He crossed the United States to record old songs, like an anthropologist. His *American Recordings* constitute an enormous archive of blues music.²¹ This is a major influence: The old miners in their eighties or nineties whose voices I was collecting in the tradition of oral history were also the last witnesses of a certain reality. *Grand Central Belge* is a reservoir of incredible stories, and few people see the value of these stories.

Meuret: The final lines in *Transyt Antwerpia* read as follows: “Het bestaat. Het is verteld. Het is opgeschreven.” (“It exists. It is told. It is written.”) It reads like a promise held—a job accomplished. You are collecting an invaluable patrimony.

Verbeken: I was biking the other day and drove past the oldest oak tree in Liernu, Belgium. It is supported by a complex scaffolding. We are making all these efforts for this tree, but not for those who are wasting away in old people’s homes. In many of these places no one comes to visit them.

Meuret: You were also a member of a jury for nonfiction writing in the Netherlands [*Stichting Verhalende Journalistiek*]. Can you tell us more about nonfiction writing in Dutch, this time in the Netherlands?

Verbeken: I was a jury member until last year—I did it for three years, not just for writing, but also in radio, television. There is a difference between the Netherlands and Flanders. The “true” narrative reportages (with sketches, scenes, etc.) do not really exist, or are rare, in Flanders. In the Netherlands, Chris de Stoop or Lieve Joris are major authors.²² Joris lives in the Netherlands, but she is the *grande dame* of Flemish nonfiction. Sure, Flemish papers *De Standaard* and *De Morgen* certainly feature longform reportages, but you won’t find innovative narrative techniques, as in the Netherlands, where nonfiction prevails and is connected to the Anglo-American tradition. Reporters used to crisscross the country on foot for magazines such as *Vrij Nederland* in the ’90s and ’80s. In the heyday of such journalism in Flanders, of so-called *feuilletonists* (serial writers) in the ’50s and ’60s, Gaston Durnez [born 1928] followed Flemish workers in Wallonia. He published thirteen *grands reportages* on a daily basis in 1954. This would be unthinkable today.

Meuret: You write longform narratives in reaction to Twitter and fast news?

Verbeken: Not deliberately. It is just the rhythm I prefer. Some literary journalists may like to write in a “higher genre,” but I also appreciate short articles that are straight to the point. And that is rare today. What irritates me the most in journalism today is the mix of genres: opinions, or moral lessons, which you find in articles that are supposedly informative. I don’t get it. It is very much the case in the French-speaking press in Belgium, and much more in Belgium, paradoxically, than in the Netherlands, a Calvinist country. The Dutch would find moralizing in the newspapers not appropriate at all, not even serious. I don’t want to give lessons; I like to present an ambiguous reality. Talking to extremists or Islamists is a non-issue: If you write on reality, you need to talk to everyone.

Meuret: Your books are the results of long conversations, interviews.

Verbeken: Yes. The life lived by ordinary people. The problem of the current press is that opinion pages, both in Flanders and in the French-speaking part of Belgium, are written by academics and journalists. Universities, the media, are a subculture. To describe the changing reality in Cureghem or Sint-Joost,²³ citizens are the real experts. Newspapers and magazines make too few efforts on that account. When you see what happens in Europe today, there is this malaise, from Stockholm to Athens, where people do not feel they are being heard. It goes well beyond the *gilets jaunes*.²⁴ A large proportion of the characters in my books are common people, but it’s no dogma, because my books also feature people like Philippe van Parijs, an intelligent Belgian thinker and academic. Still, in the media, there is a glaring omission of testimonies by ordinary people.

Meuret: Local stories are also missing in the current press.

Verbeken: You’re absolutely right. They are too expensive. News articles about cities, towns, are increasingly the products of media circles. When I worked for *Humo*, as part of the editorial team, and until 2010, I was conducting interviews with politicians and ministers. I lost so much time, for three or four years. I regret that period of political interviewing that did not teach nor bring me anything. Increasingly interviews are made in advance. Most of the contents is pre-packaged. Politicians have a script, prepared by spin doctors and communicators who have their catchy sentences at the ready. Their sound bites hit the headlines. They know the content of the interviews before you do. As a journalist, I felt I was just a copywriter. That’s the reality of interviews in Belgian papers today.

Meuret: Hence the kind of narrative journalism you are doing now. Is “Charles Baudelaire à Bruxelles: Une Capitale de Singes” (“Charles Baudelaire in Brussels: A Capital of Monkeys”) published in *Wilfried*, a foretaste of *Brutopia*?²⁵

Verbeken: Yes. At the time I was writing that chapter on Baudelaire.

Meuret: You write that “Baudelaire was the spiritual father of *flânerie*. Wandering in the city with no aim, nor direction; observing from a distance; recording modern, kaleidoscopic urban life; breathing with your heels, as Chinese wisdom has it.”²⁶ Are you such a *flâneur*?

Verbeken: I don’t see myself as a *flâneur*, which evokes the image of a dandy pacing up and down the *grands boulevards*. I am a *promeneur* (stroller). When you walk you see the right scale of things; there is a slowness in wanderlust. That’s also a subgenre in nonfiction. I recommend the remarkable *Wanderlust*, by Rebecca Solnit.²⁷

Meuret: *Brutopia* is divided into ten chapters. Each chapter is devoted to one utopia?

Verbeken: Ten chapters, each devoted to a utopia invented in Brussels. Karl Marx wrote his *Manifesto of the Communist Party* here. Communism is a utopia. The *Quartier Nord* (northern district) was an architectural utopia. The *Forêt de Soignes* (Soignes Forest) was a magnet for all kinds of utopists, including a community of libertarian anarchists, called *l’Expérience* (The Experiment). Today Stokkel is a neighborhood of embassies, big villas, gated communities. Somehow it is also a community of anarchists, people who don’t pay taxes, avoid taxation altogether. At the time, libertarians wanted to establish a new society. *Expo 1958* (Brussels World Fair), the creation of the social security, these were other utopias. The red years, with their garden cities, *maisons du peuple* (people’s houses).²⁸

Meuret: The *Maison du Peuple* in Brussels, a jewel of Art Nouveau designed by Victor Horta, was destroyed in 1965.

Verbeken: Exactly, this precisely symbolizes the demise of a utopia. The chapter thesis is that socialism, which started developing in the second part of the century, stopped there, with the demolition of its own temple. Total nonsense. Nobody was under pressure, it was self-inflicted. So, yes, *Brutopia* presents ten utopias related to Brussels, including, of course, the European Union.

Meuret: Is *Brutopia* an attempt at rehabilitating Brussels?

Verbeken: Brussels is a city with enormous potential, and the utopias are evidence thereof. *Brutopia* is not anti-Brussels, but the book asks an implicit question: How come Brussels, a city that lived for so long at the forefront of cultural life in the nineteenth century, is now lagging behind, compared to Amsterdam, for instance. When you arrive by train from *Amsterdam Centraal* (the main station) to Brussels and get off at the North Station at night, you are in the Third World. The surroundings are totally derelict. The implicit question foregrounded in *Brutopia* is somehow a throwback to Antoine Wiertz’s *Bruxelles Capitale, Paris Province* (1840)²⁹: We are the capital city, but Brussels has lost it. Now the distinctive feature of utopias is precisely that they

are bound to die the moment they should be materializing. The social security is a good example. It is taken for granted today, and few people are aware of how hard it has been fought for.

Meuret: What are you working on now? What is your next project?

Verbeken: I've just started this project on Sabena³⁰ (for Canvas), a series of five documentaries to be completed in 2020, for the airline company's anniversary in 2021. It's a collective project, initiated by Margot Vanderstraeten for Diplodocus, a production company.³¹ The project is essentially oral history: We are talking with former pilots of Sabena. The story of the company is the mirror of Belgium. Congo is naturally very important in it, as well as sex cases, and how women were treated. Sabena is also a style, that of *la Belgique de papa*.³² For long, and until the 1970s, the company only had first-class travelers. I still have ideas for books, but I need time to read pieces by other journalists and learn more from their techniques. In Dutch, there exists an equivalent to Robert Boynton's *The New New Journalists*. In *Meer dan de feiten* [2007, 2019], edited by Han Ceelen and Jeroen Van Bergeijk, Dutch and Flemish writers talk about their works.³³ I'm now reading Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* [2005]. I'm also a fan of Dave Eggers and Svetlana Alexievich. In *Brutopia* my reportages are fairly simple. An analogy with music would be "three-chord songs." What I have not written yet is a more personal story. It's something I have in mind, to write about my grandparents' district in Ghent, and how much it has changed. In just seven years it has become a Bulgarian district. Through a personal point of entry—my office is in the street where my grandfather, a postman, used to live—I want to tell that story of a changing district. I'll see what I can discover from there. Maybe the main reason behind Brexit was the entry of Bulgaria and Romania in the European Union. It was estimated that 15,000 people per year would come. As a matter of fact, 1.5 million left for the U.K., above all to poor northern cities in England, the hotbeds of Brexit. There has been a dramatic change in populations in just a few years.

Meuret: Getting to know a Flemish writer is important. When can we read your books in English?

Verbeken: The London book fair is taking place right now [March 12–14, 2019]. *De Bezige Bij*, my publisher, is well represented, and they have a strong network overseas. They showcase writers such as David Van Reybrouck, Stefan Hertmans. I think the future will be specialized websites. PCs and tablets will become marginal. Only smartphones will survive, which will have an effect on longform and how youth may access the genre. In the Netherlands, *de Correspondent*, the equivalent of the French *Mediapart*, whose business model is based on membership with no advertising, is a huge success. They

have more than 50,000 members and are now starting their venture in New York. They publish instructive articles by journalists such as Arjen van Veelen or Rutger Bregman, who caused quite a stir at Davos when he addressed taxation and the fact that no one was confronting this contentious topic head on. His talk went viral on the web.

Meuret: Longform or creative writing is not taught at schools or universities over here.

Verbeken: We can certainly teach creative writing, and I regret I never attended such courses. Teachers in schools of journalism are rarely reporters; guests are invited for talks or conferences. There is some aversion towards the nonfiction genre in the academy. Investigative journalism is now the new fad, with investigations to unmask the powers that be. Unfortunately, narrative journalism has a false image, fashioned by people who are clueless, who do not know what they are talking about. Literary journalists do not necessarily write in an ornamental style or with overdone pathos. The American tradition simply rests on good writing. I had an opportunity two weeks ago to teach a class to sociology students at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven). It was part of a project in which students must cross the city, observe, and describe what they see, work in an organization. The border between journalism and sociology was tenuous in the 1930s, for instance, with the Mass Observation Movement in the U.K. Humphrey Jennings, Humphrey Spender, among others, documented life in Bolton, a small industrial town, using sociological tools, including photography. To me, this discovery of the genre also came with music. Back in the 1980s I bought the album *Love Not Money* by Everything but the Girl. The jacket of the disc was a photo by Humphrey Spender: Two kids peeing on an industrial site—such a revealing picture. Literature, music, photography—everything is connected. All this got me into writing.

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Notes

¹ Belgium's official languages are Dutch, French, and German, as the country has a little German-speaking enclave in the East of the country, a heritage of the Second World War. Dutch is mostly spoken in the northern part (Flanders) and French in the southern part (Wallonia). Most residents of Brussels, the capital city, are French speaking, even though it is located in Flanders. English is also a *lingua franca* in Brussels due to the presence of many European institutions and international organizations. Note also that Dutch, the official language in the Netherlands, is the generic term used for the language spoken in Flanders, although Flemish (or Flemish Dutch) is used to refer to the variation spoken and written in Belgium. Besides this official Dutch language, there exist a number of regional dialects.

² A *Brusseleir* is an original resident of Brussels. The term is in *Brusseleer*, a patois typical of the Marolles, a popular district in central Brussels. It is a mix of Flemish and French.

³ Verbeken, *Arm Wallonië*. The French version, translated by Anne-Laure Vignaux as *La Terre Promise (Flamands en Wallonie)*, was published by Le Castor Astral in 2010.

⁴ Verbeken and Selleslaghs, *Tranzyt Antwerpia*.

⁵ Verbeken, *Grand Central Belge*, first published in 2012.

⁶ Verbeken, *Duistere Wegen*.

⁷ *Brutopia: De Dromen van Brussel* [Brutopia: the dreams of Brussels]. The book, like most of the others by Verbeken, is published by De Bezige Bij, one of the main publishers of Flemish and Dutch authors (<https://www.debezigebij.nl/over-ons/over-de-bezige-bij/>).

⁸ I am using the term "micro-story" in the tradition of the Italian historiographic movement *microstoria*, popularized by its two leading figures, Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi. See, for instance, Ginzburg, "Microhistory, Two or Three Things That I Know about It," 10–35; and Levi, "On Microhistory," 93–113. It is equivalent to the German *Alltagsgeschichten* and English *History from Below*, i.e., stories about the common people, not prominent figures. See Krantz, *History from Below*; Lüdtke, *The History of Everyday Life*; Lüdtke, "Alltagsgeschichte—ein Bericht von unterwegs," 278–95.

⁹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations from this interview are mine.

¹⁰ "Youngstown" is a song by Bruce Springsteen, featured on the 1995 album *The Ghost of Tom Joad*. See Springsteen, "The Ghost of Tom Joad."

¹¹ Seraing is a small industrial town near Liège, in the eastern part of French-speaking Belgium, which was well known for its steel factories (first owned by Cockerill, later by Mittal, a.o.). Its dramatic decline is partly due to the closure of its blast furnaces. The town's past glory stands in sharp contrast to its economic hardship today.

¹² Dale Maharidge (born 1956) is a professor at Columbia University, where he teaches The Narrative Journalism of Social Fault Lines. Maharidge has also worked as a journalist for a number of newspapers and magazines, including the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, the *Sacramento Bee*, *Rolling Stone*, *George Magazine*, the

Nation, *Mother Jones*, and the *New York Times*. Maharidge is the author of *Journey to Nowhere* (1985), *And Their Children After Them* (1989), and *Homeland* (2004). For a complete bibliography, see Maharidge, Professor of Journalism.

¹³ Maharidge, with photos by Michael Williamson, *And Their Children After Them*; Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

¹⁴ *Germinal* (1885) by Émile Zola is a naturalistic novel documenting the harsh working and living conditions of miners in nineteenth century northern France. George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) is a novel documenting poverty, as experienced by the author himself.

¹⁵ Auguste de Winne (1861–1935) was a French-speaking writer, journalist, and politician, who wrote about the deep poverty of Flanders and the dire living conditions of its people at the turn of the twentieth century. He was a member of the *Parti Ouvrier Belge* (Belgian Worker's Party).

¹⁶ The Red Star Line Museum in Antwerp documents the story of millions of European migrants that transited through Antwerp, *en route* to the New World. The steamers carried people to the United States from 1873 to 1934 (<https://www.redstarline.be/en/page/red-star-line-museum-nutshell>).

¹⁷ Beware of the spoiler: Benjamin Kopp did sail to the United States. After arriving at Ellis Island, he quickly left for Paterson, New Jersey, where he reunited with his brother Simcha. See Verbeke, *Tranzit Antwerpië*, 274.

¹⁸ Herman Selleslages is a Flemish photographer born in 1938. He has worked for magazines such as *Humo*, *Knack*, *Vrij Nederland*, and *Die Zeit*.

¹⁹ Kazerne Dossin is a museum and memorial in Mechelen, Belgium. It commemorates the lives of 25,844 people, Holocaust victims, who were deported during the Second World War (<https://www.kazernedossin.eu/EN/>).

²⁰ In addition to the book, a documentary was made for both Canvas and RTBF, two Belgian channels.

²¹ Alan Lomax was a musicologist and ethnologist, who compiled an impressive audio archive of rural music, traveling through the United States. See Szwed, *Alan Lomax*, and Gorney, "How Alan Lomax Changed the Way We Hear American Music."

²² Chris de Stoop (born 1958) is an award-winning Dutch fiction and nonfiction writer, translated in a dozen languages (<http://www.chrisdestoop.be/>). Lieve Joris is a Belgian author, writing in Dutch, also translated in several languages. She came to prominence with such books as *Back to the Congo* (1992); *Terug naar Congo*, (1987), *The Gates of Damascus* (1996); *De poorten van Damascus* (1993); *The Rebel's Hour* (2008); and *Het uur van de rebellen* (2006).

²³ Cureghem and Sint-Joost are, respectively, a district and a commune of Brussels.

²⁴ The so-called *gilets jaunes* or "yellow vests" are a popular movement of protest that started in France in October 2018. The triggering factor was taxation on fuel, but their claims cover many other aspects, including the democratic process of consultation in France.

²⁵ See Verbeke, "Charles Baudelaire à Bruxelles," published in *Wilfried*,

52–59. *Wilfried* is a Belgian quarterly magazine of long-form or narrative journalism, essentially devoted to politics. Pascal Verbeken is a regular contributor. I take advantage of this note to thank François Brabant, *Wilfried*'s founding father and editor-in-chief, for having brought Pascal Verbeken's work to my attention.

²⁶ Verbeken, 58 (my translation).

²⁷ Solnit, *Wanderlust*.

²⁸ So-called *maisons du peuple*, literally "common people's houses," were meeting places for the working classes. They were recreational but also political hubs, where people were imagining and developing their class conscience and activities. They were particularly popular until the 1970s.

²⁹ Antoine-Joseph Wiertz (1806–1865) was a Belgian visionary artist (painter, sculptor, writer). *Bruxelles Capitale, Paris Province* is a pamphlet he wrote in 1840.

³⁰ Sabena stands for *Société Anonyme Belge d'Exploitation de la Navigation Aérienne* (Belgian Corporation for Air Navigation Services). Created in 1923, it failed financially in 2001 and was later replaced by SN Brussels Airlines.

³¹ Margot Vanderstraeten is also an excellent nonfiction writer. Her personal memoir, *Mazzel tov*, the story of her time as a private tutor in an Orthodox Jewish family, was a huge success. Translated into many languages, it sold 50,000 copies. See Vanderstraeten, *Mazzel tov*.

³² *La Belgique de papa*, literally "daddy's Belgium," is a pejorative expression to refer to old-school, elitist, outdated Belgium.

³³ Ceelen and Van Bergeijk, *Meer dan de feiten*.

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Book Reviews . . .

Nancy L. Roberts, Book Review Editor

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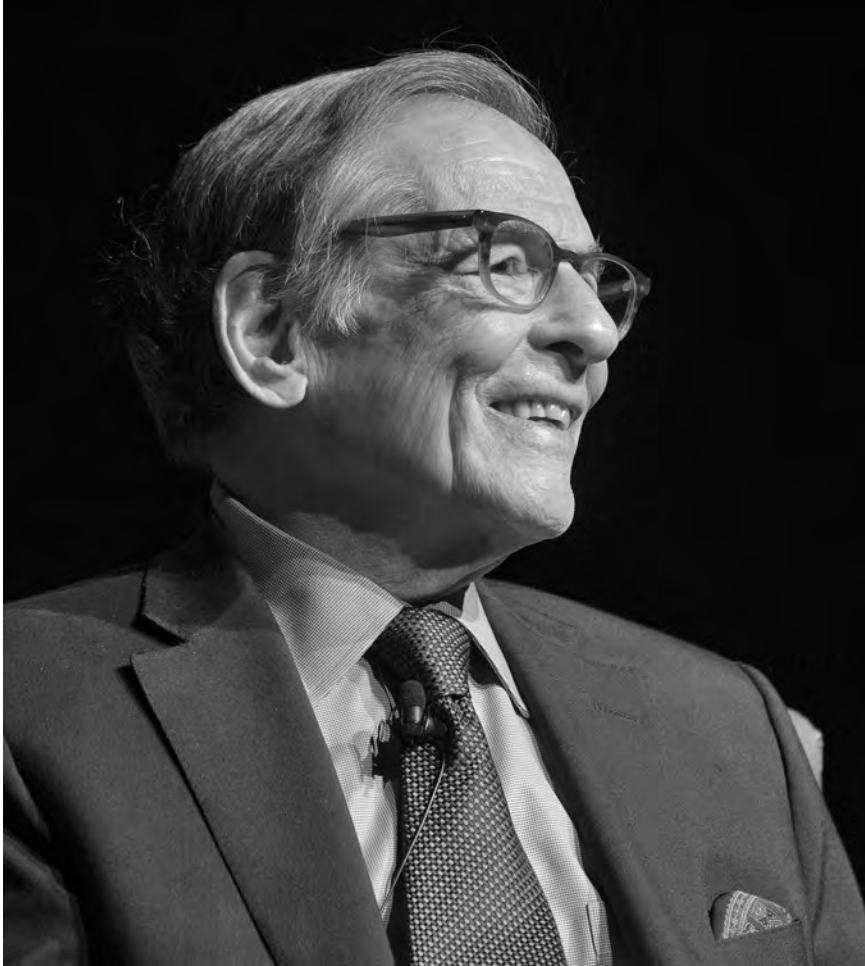
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Robert Caro, The LBJ Library, Austin, Texas, April 15, 2019 (Flickr.com/Jay Goodwin).

Feeling the Consequences of Power

Working: Researching, Interviewing, Writing

by Robert A. Caro. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019. Hardcover, 207 pp., USD\$25.

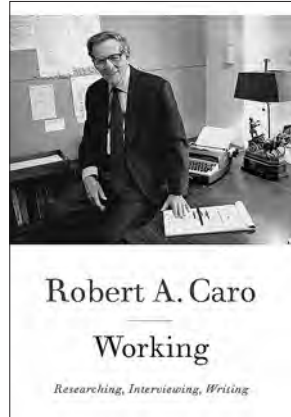
Reviewed by Bill Reynolds, Ryerson University, Canada

At the age of eighty-three, historian Robert Caro has written a book about methodology. Why Caro would set aside work on the fifth and final installment of his colossal study of Lyndon Johnson's life and career—and, not incidentally, Caro's history of twentieth-century America as seen through the prism of the thirty-sixth American president's life—at this juncture, in 2019, is explained this way: he says he has a lot to say about writing, in case anyone happened to be interested, and he “decided that, just in case, I'd put some of them down on paper now” (xxiv). Carpe diem, pick up the pace, time waits for no one, et cetera, et cetera.

Except, over his long and successful career, this is exactly what Caro has *not* done. To say his books are heavily researched is like saying Beethoven's compositions are well constructed. According to Caro, this was not simply part of the territory, it was the only trajectory his storytelling process could take. The truth takes time because the truth requires documentation, and, alas, finding those documents can take some doing.

After Caro became a freshly minted Princeton graduate (1957) and started to settle into his first long-term journalism job, junior reporter for Long Island's *Newsday*, he ran into a managing editor, Alan Hathway, who held a prejudice against Ivy League journalists. Hathway did not believe they were capable of working hard, or at least to his standard. Caro proved his boss wrong when he received some documents and pored over them, overnight and through the weekend, documents that, once understood and seen a certain way, proved that certain corporate executives who were on friendly terms with Federal Aviation Administration officials were more concerned about converting Mitchell Field, a former military base, into their own airstrip for getting in and out of Long Island, rather than watch Nassau County Community College, attended by low-income residents of Hempstead, receive a permanent home. It was then that Hathway, so cool toward the young reporter who had been hired while he had been away on vacation, realized that he might have a serious investigative journalist to mould. He advised Caro: “Turn every page. Never assume anything. Turn every goddamned page (11).”

This might explain why it took Caro seven years to write *The Power Broker* (1974), his first book, about the public servant Robert Moses, who oversaw the construction of the bridges and highways of modern New York and surrounding environs. And



it took another eight years to produce the first volume of his projected multi-book Johnson study, *The Path to Power* (1982). And another eight years to produce volume two, *Means of Ascent* (1990). And another twelve years to finish volume three, *Master of the Senate* (2002). And another ten years to complete volume four, *The Passage of Power*. That was where the tally stood in 2012. Four volumes down, one to go.

And now, seven years later, Caro is still four down, one to go, still working with the documents, still searching for the evidence, for that final, seemingly elusive book about Johnson's Vietnam years and subsequent downfall. As for time and the problem of its shortage, he responds this way to journalists who enquire about his pace and the ability to finish in, ahem, time: "Well, I *can* do that math" (xxiv).

In Spring 2012, the *New Yorker* published "The Transition," an excerpt from *The Passage of Power* that was engrossing not only as history, but also as a piece of literary journalism. Caro reconstructed the story of exactly what happened to Johnson after President Kennedy was shot in Dallas, placing the reader in the back seat of the second presidential limousine, relaying action almost as if in real time. In so doing, this microscopic tick-tock takes the reader, in excruciating and fascinating detail, through the nuances of the transfer of power—one man's lifeforce ebbing away as the other's status of feckless vice president is transformed, in a few hours, into steely commander-in-chief at the center of a maelstrom.

And so, as the lines of text for the final volume trickle out, its author soldiering on, almost magisterially, this little book has been made available so that readers may understand a little more about how the mind of this master storyteller works. Of course, Caro provides many other details, such as advice on how get make reluctant sources talk (listen, he volleys, in a few years no one will remember who you are if you are not in my book), and how to handle the fallout (don't worry, once the book is in print, he warns, the source and his allies will attack it). There are ironic stories about how Caro came to be represented by his agent, Lynn Nesbitt, and how he established his long working bond with his editor, Robert Gottlieb. And there are stories of pure writerly joy, such as being granted a space to work in the Frederick Lewis Allen Memorial Room at the New York Public Library. There, he ran into fellow historians who advised him that five years is not so long to be working on a book—which made him feel a lot better.

But do not be fooled by the deceptive plainness of the book's title, *Working*, because the many anecdotes and reminiscences offered here reinforce the tentative conclusion reached upon reading "The Transition": Caro may be thought of as an historian, but he thinks and works like a literary journalist.

How Power Works

Working is divided logically. The sixteen-page introduction lays out the case for the book, which is, as mentioned, over a long career he has learned a few things that he would like to share. The first section proper, "Turn Every Page," provides Caro's professional origin story, describing in some detail his first serious foray into research, centering on that weekend dig through the Mitchell Field files all those decades ago: "There are certain moments in your life when you suddenly understand

something about yourself. I loved going through those files, making them yield up their secrets to me" (10).

This chapter also describes how Caro came to work on *The Power Broker*. His reporting on state government took a crucial, fateful turn when he realized that one bureaucrat, Moses, exercised more power than all of the elected politicians combined. The story he had been reporting, on politicians and their voting records, was not the real story of how power worked, and explaining the true mechanism became his life's work. Caro realized that if he wanted to tell that, he had to find the right vehicle—the right character—through which to tell it. For local politics, Moses became that vehicle. When it came to national politics, Caro settled on Lyndon Johnson, who, as Senate Majority Leader in the 1950s, had figured out a way to make the Senate work. For instance, in 1957 Johnson had managed to push through the first civil rights bill in eighty-two years, despite the Senate itself being dominated by its "Southern Caucus," with all of the baggage that entails.

Feeling the Powerlessness

The next chapter, *The City-Shaper*, focuses on Robert Moses. Caro discusses a couple of instances of how Moses imposed his will on citizens, and how they related to his research and writing. One such instance occurred in the 1950s, when Moses's decision as to how exactly to route the Cross-Bronx Expressway would doom a neighborhood. East Tremont had been a working-class enclave consisting of mostly Jewish but also Irish and German people, most of whom were living a decent enough life in a vibrant community. Moses ordered the destruction of fifty-four six- and seven-storey apartment houses in a mile-long stretch, which displaced thousands of families and forced them to new and, inevitably, worse locations. Caro wanted to write about the vast political power of one man, of how radically he reshaped America's largest city, but he also wanted the reader to feel the effect of that power on the vulnerable. As he says of farmers whose fields were cleaved by one of Moses's Long Island highways, ". . . Robert Moses' pencil going one way instead of another, not because of engineering considerations but because of calculations in which the key factor was power—had had profound consequences on the lives of men and women like those farmers whose homes were just tiny dots on Moses' big maps" (60). Caro came to be convinced that "To really show political power, you had to show the effect of power on the powerless, and show it fully enough so the reader could feel it" (61).

And indeed, the reader does feel the pain of the powerless. Caro finds people who used to live in East Tremont, whose lives were made far worse by eviction notices and the impending arrival of an expressway—one that could have been plotted out two blocks away and affected far fewer people but for politicians' special interests there. And he finds farmers who struggled to clear land and build a decent working farm and then helplessly watch their hard work ploughed under, all because of Moses's line drawn on his map—a line that represented an odd-looking detour that could be explained only in terms of old money not willing to entertain the idea of a highway anywhere near their pieces of paradise.

When in Hill Country

In the lengthier Lyndon Johnson chapters, Caro details how his archival searches led him to understand the original source of LBJ's power back in 1940: oil money donations to the Democratic Party with the string attached that any politician who wanted to access the funds for campaign purposes had to go through Johnson first.

Beyond sifting through the endless boxes in the Johnson archives—so many documents that he and his wife, Ina, his lifelong research assistant, could not possibly read them all—Caro realized that he had to go to the place where Johnson grew up, the Hill Country in Texas, near San Antonio. Once there, he talked to as many people about LJB as he could. Unfortunately, the locals would repeat the same old stories about the local boy who became president and nothing more. Or they would say, “Well, that’s not quite what happened” (103) but never volunteer what really happened. Eventually, Caro and his wife made the not-insignificant decision to pick up and move to the Hill Country, where they resided for three years—now that’s immersion! Once people began to see the couple as neighbors, not parachutists from New York City, more details about LBJ’s life came forth. The Caros were no longer “portable journalists” (103) out for a quote and a story.

Caro wasn’t above creating scenes. He recounts the drama of how he set up Sam Houston Johnson, Lyndon’s alcoholic, tale-spinning younger brother, in the museum called Boyhood Home of LBJ, on Elm Street in Johnson City. Caro had Sam Houston sit at the dining room table, where he had sat as a child, and recreate those terrible fights between his older brother and Sam Ealy Johnson, his father. And he enticed Sam Houston to admit that the stories about the brothers as kids, the ones he had been telling for years and years, could not be recreated because, well, because they did not happen. And then, with more prompting, Sam Houston began to tell Caro stories that really happened. All the while, inside this nonfiction book about another nonfiction book, the reader is transported to the Johnson family dining room, feeling the intense animosity between Lyndon and Sam Ealy, almost viewing it as film footage.

Citizen Anxiety

Another example of Caro’s approach that demonstrates his fidelity to literary journalism is when he discusses Senate Majority Leader Johnson’s successful guidance of a civil rights bill in 1957, a bill that made it easier for Black citizens to vote. He says, “I wanted to briefly show in the opening pages of the book—and make the reader understand and *feel* right at the beginning—how hard it had been for a black person to register to vote, let alone to actually cast a vote, in the South before 1957. . .” (125). As with the Moses biography, Caro detailed the career of a most powerful man, but also wanted to show the impact of that power on ordinary people. In this case, Caro looked at the testimony of Black citizens who had been denied the right to register to vote. He found his character, a thirty-eight-year-old woman named Margaret Frost from Eufala, Alabama. Frost’s story resonated with Caro—she had been humiliated at a hearing in front of the Barbour County Board of Registrars, not once but twice, and been told, even though she was sure she had answered the questions correctly, “You all go home and study a little more” (125). Caro decided to telephone

Frost and ask a few specific questions. He was hoping to flesh out a scene, and he got one. The room was sparsely furnished. The applicants stood in front of the board. The three registrars stood as well, because the hearing was not going to take long. And he got Frost's amazing summation of the scene: "You could see in their eyes they were laughing at us" (126).

But then, as often happens, Caro wondered if there might be more. He decided to contact Frost's husband, David, and he was glad he did. David had managed to register to vote but once he had, white people soured on him. "And when whites heard what he was planning to actually cast a ballot on Election Day, he said, a car had pulled up in front of his house, and the men in it had shot out the lights on his porch. He had thought of calling the police, but as the car drove away, he saw that it was a police car" (127–28). David Frost also proved invaluable in explaining other tactics employed by whites to keep Blacks from voting.

And so, for Caro, and us, it has paid off handsomely to invest the time and do one more interview. But, like this review, there is only one hitch: when to stop. Caro tells so many excellent stories in *Working*, this review could go on and on. As for Caro and research and when to stop asking questions, he says: "Of course there was more. If you ask the right questions, there always is. That's the problem" (128).

Here's hoping Caro asks many more questions—but maybe not too many more.

Mark Twain's Legacy of Ambivalence toward the French

Mark Twain and France: The Making of a New American Identity

by Paula Harrington and Ronald Jenn. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2017. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Hardcover, 244 pp., USD\$50.

Reviewed by Karen Roggenkamp, Texas A&M University—Commerce, United States

Mark Twain and France, another title in the University of Missouri's sizeable Mark Twain and His Circle series, attempts to more fully answer the question of why Twain expressed, as some critics have said, a conspicuous level of "free floating" (111) disdain toward France throughout most of his career. Authors Paula Harrington and Ronald Jenn, U.S. and French scholars, respectively, do not deny this disdain existed, but they do temper it by unpacking Twain's numerous commentaries on his European antagonists in a study that combines biography with close reading of his fiction and nonfiction.

France served as a touchpoint in the development of Twain's authorial voice, and Harrington and Jenn trace a shifting, rather than fixed, relationship between the two, an interaction that has heretofore "lurked in the shadows of Twain scholarship" (3). Twain's attitude "softened" over the span of his career, Harrington and Jenn argue, as "he moved from using France" as an adversarial "foil" by which to establish his own—and "America's"—identity early in his career, to finding in France figures that seemed to resonate with U.S. values (5). Twain ultimately used the French as a "catalyst" or "cultural palimpsest" that allowed him to "build a modern American sense of cultural self" and establish his own voice in the process (7). As such, within the span of Twain's career, readers might see a "contradictory mix of interest, imitation, exasperation, mockery, scorn, influence, and denial of influence" (55).

The Missouri of Mark Twain's childhood held only vestigial remnants of its earlier status as a French colony, and the book's first chapter, which covers the period 1835–1860, explores the effect of that historical shift on Twain's education and early career as a newspaper reporter and steamboat pilot. Francis Parkman's view of U.S. history, which exuded antipathy toward the French, was particularly influential in Twain's early thinking and writing, especially in *Life on the Mississippi*, and the historian's perspective left Twain open "to articulate and validate" his own biases (26).

Harrington and Jenn move to the 1860s in chapter two, "Leaving the River," when Twain left Missouri and, like so many other young men of the era, went West.



During his sojourn in California as a reporter, he observed the wave of French immigrants to the West, byproducts of the French February Revolution of 1848 and the 1849 Gold Rush. His depictions of the French during this time feature their supposed immorality, but, as always, Twain uses their behavior as a foil to what he saw as more admirable U.S. qualities. After all, he would argue, the U.S. citizens were not responsible for Mardis Gras or the cancan. Twain's use of the French during this period is strategic, the authors note: He "inserts fake Frenchness when he wants to associate it with loose morals but removes real Frenchness when it connotes good character" (43). Similar attitudes appear in Twain's 1866 reporting from Hawaii (then called the Sandwich Islands) in 1866 as he contemplated the European colonial threat.

The third chapter focuses on 1867–1869, when Twain, then a reporter for the *Alta California* newspaper, first stepped foot in France during an expedition to Europe and the Middle East, a young writer out to prove himself just as the United States seemed set to prove itself to the Old World. The trip yielded material that would ultimately appear in *The Innocents Abroad*, the book that brought the author his first notable success and placed him face to face with his cultural foil. Part travel narrative, part imaginative work, *The Innocents Abroad* was influenced by a burgeoning wave of U.S. tourism, and the sometimes-opinionated guide books for travelers to Europe provided fodder for Twain's own commentary on French culture.

The fourth chapter, "Jumping the French," spans 1870–1878 and brings together a sharply-worded, mock "war report" on the Franco-Prussian War; a "Map of Paris" that was a parody of military maps published in newspapers (82–91); and "The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," whose insufficient translation into French spurred an ongoing "cultural skirmish" (15) after Twain published a parody of the translation and retranslation of his own work, remarkably titled "The 'Jumping Frog,'" in English, Then in French, Then Clawed Back into a Civilized Language Once More by Patient, Unremunerated Toil" (92).

The early months of 1879 are the focus of chapter five, "Paris from the Inside," a period during which the entire Clemens family resided in Paris while Twain worked on *A Tramp Abroad*. Harrington and Jenn highlight the compositional history of this narrative with an eye toward Twain's revisions of the manuscript and his unpublished chapters, which included some of his harshest words about the French. The most compelling addition to Twain scholarship here is an investigation of one of Twain's albums, a *carte de visite* featuring the images of well-known French figures with annotations in Twain's own hand. The published and unpublished narratives of this time period once more serve as "prompts" for Twain, a way to "elevate America and its culture" by using the foreign nation as a counterpoint (110). He creates "an inverted scale of civilization" in these writings, "with the French falling at the bottom" (127).

Chapter six, covering 1880–1892, argues that Twain's feelings about the French "softened as he became more famous and successful"—as stated in the Introduction—and as he established a successful reputation (139). An unpublished manuscript about a boat trip down the Rhône River, "The Innocents Adrift," the unfinished manuscript for which was titled, *Floating with the Current (Down the Rhône)* (14,

146)—exemplifies this shift, Harrington and Jenn contend, especially in comparison to a heavily edited recounting of the trip published by one of his trip companions. Here, too, readers see a relatively moderated attitude toward the French that would ultimately find fruition in his portrayals of Joan of Arc and Émile Zola. No longer did he instinctually regard the French as hopelessly inferior to U.S. citizens. Rather, he began to recognize nuance and complexity, a shift that “inaugurated his change of literary direction in the final decade of the nineteenth century” (158).

The final chapter, “Coming to Terms,” considers the Clemens family’s most extended period of residence in France between 1893 and 1895, during which Twain “unabashedly” immersed himself in French literature (163). Twain was witness to a riot following the assassination of the French President Marie François Sadi Carnot and, less violently, the participant in yet another cultural skirmish, this time with author Paul Bourget. However, his relationship with France found its final iterations in *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*, which “melds French and American identities” in its construction of the French heroine and which Twain regarded as his finest work (167). Joan emerges as a “‘rugged individualist’” of the Western U.S. character type, and Twain positions her as a kind of “‘Americanized’” woman “for his American audience” (16). Twain’s play *Is He Dead?* features French and U.S. characters acting “together as co-conspirators in an international campaign for justice,” which gives readers further evidence for Twain’s reconciliation with France (16).

Harrington and Jenn punctuate their stylistically accessible study with an array of illustrations, as well as a useful, annotated timeline detailing Twain’s numerous sojourns in France. Though Twain scholars are the most natural academic audience for this book, those who are interested in the history of European-U.S. cultural relationships will find value in the volume as well. The work is thoroughly researched and clearly the most detailed survey of Twain’s relationship with the French, but readers would have benefitted from a more detailed discussion of *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*, which is surprisingly brief. Additionally, a summarizing chapter or afterword that situates the study within the broader landscape of Twain scholarship would have provided fitting closure.

Nevertheless, *Mark Twain and France* leaves readers with a more comprehensive picture of how Twain constructed an image of the U.S. that resonated both at home and abroad, and how the French were instrumental in the “tricky process of American identity-construction” in the nineteenth century (13). Throughout his career, Twain’s “feelings about the French” proved “complex”; they “arose from a number of factors, and served a variety of purposes” (10). Ultimately, Harrington and Jenn untangle that complexity convincingly.

Lyric Essay versus Literary Journalism

The Shell Game: Writers Play with Borrowed Forms

edited by Kim Adrian. Omaha, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2018. Illustrations. Notes. Paperback, 252 pp., USD\$24.95

Reviewed by Betsy O'Donovan and Sheila Webb, Western Washington University, United States

To begin with a statement of the obvious, nonfiction is not always journalism. Every now and then, a book comes along to refresh that bright line where it has become scuffed. *The Shell Game*, a collection of thirty essays that play with borrowed forms—the alphabet, an online dating ad, a product description, a children's game—is the latest survey of that border.

The title refers to hermit crab essays, a subspecies of lyric essay that Brenda Miller introduced in *Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction* (McGraw Hill, 2004). Here, in her foreword to *The Shell Game*, Miller describes a 2001 trip to Desolation Sound, one of the most austere spots in the Pacific Northwest. Miller was seeking inspiration and noticed a soft, vulnerable hermit crab scuttling along the shore in search of a protective shell as it explored the world. The metaphor of borrowing a shell became shorthand for adapting an existing form to provide a structure, or cover, for the more vulnerable material within.

The Shell Game acts as a companion to *Tell It Slant*, providing examples of the hermit crab essay across a range of borrowed forms and subject matter. The selection of essays published over the past fifteen years in books, literary journals, magazines, and websites presents the broad range of the possibilities of the form. The authors themselves have found shelter in a range of places, from venerable publishing houses such as Knopf, to the twenty-first century's additions to publishing spaces, including the *Rumpus* and *Electric Literature*.

Kim Adrian's introduction demonstrates the potential and beauty of the hermit crab approach as she lays out the history of the metaphor using kingdom, phyla, species, etc., to identify the literary heritage and taxonomy of the hermit crab essay itself. Domain becomes Anima, Class becomes Litterae, Family is Lyrica, Diet is Omnivorous, etc. Adrian furthers the metaphor as she relates the types of stories in the anthology to crabs—some look funny, the charm of many resides in their imperfections, and they may take any form. But, in each case, the form is the vehicle to which meaning is married. Her introduction, as lyrical as it is, is often laugh-out-loud funny, especially when she acknowledges the risk of the form: When it becomes too

The screenshot shows a web form titled "The Shell Game". The fields are as follows:

- Title:** The Shell Game
- Author:** Edited and with an Introduction by Kim Adrian. Foreword by Brenda Miller. Postscript by Chyenne Nimes. (A dropdown menu is open showing options: "biology", "borrow", "binary", "Sip, a", "ad", "selection", "provoking", "a broad".)
- Summary:** *Writers Play with Borrowed Forms
- ISBN:** 978-0-8032-9670-3
- Genre:** Lyric Essays, Science Fiction, Fantasy, Western. (A dropdown menu is open showing options: "Select a genre for this book".)
- Language:** (A dropdown menu is open showing options: "Select a language for this book".)
- Submit:** A button at the bottom.

self-reflexive, it begins “to stink” (xiv).

This is where we begin to see the clear boundary between the lyric essays of the anthology and the disciplines of literary journalism. While the essays are often intriguing and sometimes illuminating, the focus of most pieces is squarely on the authorial self, rather than the other—and here is where we find the defining margin between the license of creative nonfiction and the ethical demands and rigorous reporting of literary journalism.

Many of the stories are told from the first-person point of view—the hermit crab allows authors to play with memoir and self-expression under the cover of, and in conversation with, their chosen borrowed form. While most of these essays entertain, they also diverge sharply (to a journalism educator’s or scholar’s eye) from examples of literary journalism in which reporters actively investigate the events of their own lives. Journalism’s shining example is David Carr’s *The Night of the Gun*, in which Carr wraps fierce, fact-checked reportage into literary craft. No personal essay in this collection suggests anything like that degree of shoe-leather rereporting of personal experiences.

But, although that is a useful benchmark for literary journalism, that is not what these essays attempt to accomplish. When addressed solely as examples of the lyric essay and an imaginative springboard, this collection is a pleasure. “Grand Theft Auto” by Joey Franklin, which uses the structure of a police report to describe the theft of the author’s worthless car, is an example of the collection’s stronger work. There’s genuine humor and candor in this approach, particularly when the author hopes his car will not be found, but there is also a flight of imagination in which he conjures the thief’s point of view, placing the reader in both the protagonist and antagonist roles. Likewise, “Ok, Cupid” by Sarah McColl plays on the dating profile to present a clever and poignant view of a selected life story that a dating profile would never disclose.

This is not to say that a “found” form is always effective. As with all experiments, some are primarily useful because they fail, and several pieces in the anthology seem more hobbled by form than freed by it. “Rubik’s Cube, Six Twisted Paragraphs,” by Kathryn A. Kopple, is perhaps best described as six micro essays that all begin in the same place and end in completely different lines of thought, depending on how the idea is manipulated. The problem is that (unlike the Rubik’s puzzle) there is no ultimate solution to the jumble of thoughts about Kopple’s relationships and health. Likewise, “Solving My Way to Grandma” by Laurie Easter is more cute than charming, offering a crossword puzzle and clues as Easter anticipates life as a grandparent. It reads as a form experiment rather than a story that could not be told without cover, as these essays are presented. And Michael Martone’s essay in the form of an author bio is cleverly placed in the contributors’ section, but is nearly lost because of its location, and does no particular service either as a biography or an attempt to reveal a difficult truth.

But the question at hand is whether *The Shell Game*, which certainly belongs in the nonfiction tent, should be invited into the special section reserved for literary journalism. On the whole, no. That said, there are a few essays within the collection

that might find a place in a literary journalism course, in particular those essays that demonstrate both an interest in reportage and, less common in the lyric essay, an interest in the world beyond the author's tender self-examination.

In "Falling in Love with a Glass House," Jennifer Metsker eschews the typical approach of either a biography of the architect, in this case Mies van der Rohe, or a descriptive tour through his famous glass house (the first ever designed, but not the first built, due to his lollygagging). Rather, she writes her essay in the descriptive text associated with architectural plans, with sections like "Figure 1: Preliminary Plan of the Glass House," and "Figure 15: A Page from Edith's Memoir." The essay weaves the history of the transparent house with the history of its client and first occupant Edith Farnsworth, a "bitter love story between her and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe" (49), and Metsker's own disappointments in marriage. This, more than any other piece in the collection, feels inflected with a journalist's reflex to be decentered as a subject, and to structure a story around precise, carefully reported details.

And ultimately, this is where we find the hermit crab scrambling along the border between lyric essay and literary journalism. With a few exceptions, this collection feels placed far from Carr's rigor and firmly on the side of the bad-boy lyric essayist John D'Agata, who told *Electric Literature* in July 2016 that "we do the literary essay a disservice . . . when we expect from it the same kind of verifiability as we would from a medical textbook" (para. 19).

As long as the reader is not confused about the terms of engagement, the world of letters is enriched when some forms of creative nonfiction explore ideas, moods, or memories without a journalist's devotion to verification. The tent of nonfiction is large enough to be inclusive, unless authors actively falsify information (as D'Agata did in *The Lifespan of the Fact*, arguing, for example, that he had every right to change the name of the very real Boston Saloon to the "The Bucket of Blood").

But what we observe in this collection is that the hermit crab essay is designed to protect ideas that are fragile and defenseless without a borrowed form to wrap around themselves. If we extend the metaphor, narrative and literary journalism are more akin to turtles or tortoises—creations whose defense is part of the whole structure, inherently muscular and tough.

So, although *The Shell Game* is of interest as a literary work, and will be of particular use in creative writing and creative nonfiction classrooms, its primary use in a literary journalism course would be as a boundary line or contrast, rather than a path to follow.

The Intricate Nature of Things

The Patch

by John McPhee. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018. Hardcover, 242 pp., USD\$26.

Reviewed by Katrina J. Quinn, Slippery Rock University, United States

Much like the altimeter that guided him to his destination in Manhattan's Fort Tryon Park, John McPhee's recent collection of stories, *The Patch*, draws readers through a defamiliarized territory in which traditional ways of experiencing and knowing fall short.

McPhee, a writer at the *New Yorker* with a titled professorship at Princeton, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning author and four times a finalist for that prestigious award. This newly published book ticks in as his thirty-third, published as were its predecessors by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

McPhee's latest work in a storied career, *The Patch*, at first glance, is easily described. Part I, "The Sporting Scene," contains six essays: one each on fishing, football, lacrosse, and bears, and two on golf. Part II, "An Album Quilt," contains fifty-seven curated fragments of varying length and disparate themes, in no immediately discernible order, beginning with thoughts on Cary Grant and ending with an essay on Alaska. These pieces were selected by the author, according to the book jacket, with a purpose "not merely to preserve things but to . . . entertain contemporary readers." They range from snapshots of a mere one or two paragraphs to longer articles, constituting an erratic narrative tempo.

Though it may initially strike the reader as simple—veering, perchance, toward *innocent* in its scrambled tales of fishing poles and Neil Simon's walk-up—one gradually senses a vortex of conflating meanings and connections. That is, while we ostensibly read about ping pong and McPhee's first drink, to cite just two disparate examples, *The Patch* is busy developing a number of metaphysical themes. It suggests that the visible world only hints at the intricate, true nature of things; that one can only really *know* things in their intricacy through intellectual or experiential intimacy; that this intimacy is acquired through alternate ways of knowing; and that the true thing is superior to the imitation, the superficial, or the apparent.

Take, for instance, the first selection, "The Patch," in which the reader discovers that the title of the book refers to a specific cluster of lily pads in New Hampshire's splendid Lake Winnepesaukee. Though the lake is bestrewn with dozens if not hundreds of these picturesque glades, McPhee knows *this* patch—he has fished there. He



knows it: its forms and gaps, its moods and seasons, its lurking pickerel—and thus it becomes The Patch, with its capital T and P, *sui generis* (6). Like The Patch, its stubborn resident, an elusive chain pickerel—the pickerel that would not be caught—is no mere fish but a universe of meaning and associations. In the hands of the master storyteller, it is a vehicle for study of the creature's responsive physiology, impetuous personality, and florid diet, but also, linked in like the fish's patterned coat, McPhee's childhood recollections of fishing and, framing the story, his father's devastating stroke (3–12).

At times, the book is laugh-out-loud funny. Another selection, "The Orange Trapper" (sounding perhaps like a mountain man or an exotic river fish—but McPhee and the woman at the company in Michigan know otherwise), is as humorous as it is thought-provoking (23–38). A perfect illustration of the book's takeaway—the *intricate nature of things*—a golf ball becomes a symbolic powerhouse, signifying the origins, personalities, and socioeconomic statuses of those who use it, as when the ball is found with a golfer's mark or is thoughtlessly abandoned in the woods. It can reveal invisible systems of ecological connectedness, as when a ball materializes miles downstream from its course. McPhee reads golf balls like hieroglyphics, intuiting from their dimpled surfaces a multidimensionality that embraces history, economics, relationships, self-discovery, and technological innovation.

As part of his metaphysical perambulation, McPhee grapples with origins and originals. Considering the question in the context of golf, McPhee visits St. Andrews, Scotland, widely recognized as the oldest golf course in the world, dating from the sixteenth century. But McPhee traces its history further, to primeval times, when coastal linkslands emerged after the contraction of the glaciers, "good for little else but the invention of public games . . ." (48). In its youth, the game was organic, he says, with Gaelic forefathers knocking the ball one direction and then turning around and knocking it back (44). More recently, golf in the age of mechanical reproduction is played on courses crafted not by geological forces but by landscape architects, upon "countless acres of artificial biosphere [that] have to be sustained on mined water and synthetic chemicals" (49). McPhee prefers the "lyrical imprecision of playing over natural country, as the first golfers did on the Old Course, teeing up on wee pyramids of sand and whacking the ball past the sheep toward holes that grew larger by the end of the day" (49–50).

The second part of the book, "An Album Quilt," is a nonlinear, patchwork waltz of alternate realities. Like some old box of photos, the text pulls you into corners of your memory—people, places, and things you thought you knew or should know but clearly do not: celebrities such as Richard Burton (159–67) and Joan Baez (184–86), notions departments (195–96), and government employees (197–98). McPhee recognizes our proclivity to look quickly and superficially, and disrupts that impulse by repeatedly inscribing hidden realities, as in the golf club parking lot, adorned with telling license plates (112–18), and the Nevada desert, fed by the subterranean remains of prehistoric rainfall (128–30). While the author's task is to reify glimpses of the authentic, others may be busy, meanwhile, concocting masks, like glamorous movie stars with less-than-glamorous names (229–33), or spawning imitations, such

as synthetic foods and fragrances (137–43).

In its final segment, *The Patch* investigates authentic identity in the essay on Alaska—this time, a process of awakening not only for the reader but also for the author, who discovers a sense of being, he suggests, that transcends environmental and social constructs—that instead defies them—in a remote landscape upon which “a human being is an event” (240).

From a critical perspective, *The Patch* both supports and challenges expectations for literary journalism. The author is front and center in voice and person in much of the text, as in his tour of a subterranean gold vault (187–92) or when awkwardly infiltrating a Mensa meeting (178–83). But there are passages in which McPhee stays farther in the wings, as in his profiles of Arthur Ashe (175–77) and Thomas Wolfe (186–87). McPhee capitalizes on the verbal elasticity of the form to create expanding contours of meaning, at times taking great liberties with rhetorical conventions to produce a unique cadence or effect. Touring *Time* magazine’s vault of abandoned cover art, for example, he found so many images of Richard Nixon that he exclaims, “[E]verywhere you looked, an unused Nixon. Nixon. Nixon. Nixon. . . . [Eleven more Nixons.] . . . Nixonixonixonixonixonixonixon . . .” (128).

The book’s narrative structure, however, with its disjointed snapshots and mismatched socks, is a departure from what the reader might expect in literary journalism, telling not one but many stories, and some but slightly. Admittedly, the lack of structure and context, particularly in the second section of the book, can be a bit perplexing, but perhaps the reader’s experience is structured deliberately to mirror that of the ancient golfer, unable to see where he or she is going (50)—while McPhee seems to know all along.

Reading *The Patch* is like following familiar avenues but then being led up side streets and darting through secret passageways. To McPhee, you see, nothing is *simple*. More a scattered telling than a systematic reporting, *The Patch* is McPhee’s way of escorting the reader on a journalist’s adventure to discover the intricate nature of things. It transcends objective reporting by infusing perspective, nuance, context, and new ways of seeing, much like the altimeter that guided him in that Manhattan park. In fact, the book functions exactly as the things it discusses: simple at first glance, but replete with hidden pathways, symbols, and discoveries.

MISSION STATEMENT

Literary Journalism Studies

Literary Journalism Studies is an international, interdisciplinary blind-reviewed journal that invites scholarly examinations of literary journalism—a genre also known by different names around the world, such as literary reportage, narrative journalism, the New Journalism, *nuevo periodismo*, reportage literature, literary nonfiction, narrative nonfiction, and creative nonfiction—focusing on cultural revelation. Published in English but directed at an international audience, the journal welcomes contributions from different cultural, disciplinary, and critical perspectives. To help establish comparative studies of the genre, the journal is especially interested in examinations of the works of authors and traditions from different national literatures not generally known outside their countries.

There is no single definition of the genre, but the following descriptions help to establish a meeting ground for its critical study:

- “The art and craft of reportage—journalism marked by vivid description, a novelist’s eye to form, and eyewitness reporting that reveals hidden truths about people and events that have shaped the world we know.” —*Granta*
- “Reportage Literature is an engagement with reality with a novelist’s eye but with a journalist’s discipline.” —Pedro Rosa Mendes, Portugal
- “I think one of the first things for literary reportage should be to go into the field and to try to get the other side of the story.” —Anne Nivat, France
- “A good reportage must not necessarily be linked with topical or political events which are taking place around us. I think the miracle of things lies not in showing the extraordinary but in showing ordinary things in which the extraordinary is hidden.” —Nirmal Verma, India
- Literary journalism is a “journalism that would read like a novel . . . or short story.” —Tom Wolfe, United States

Such definitions are not comprehensive and may at times conflict, but they should help to establish an understanding of this fundamentally narrative genre, which is located at the intersection of literature and journalism.

At the critical center of the genre lies cultural revelation in narrative form. Implicit to the enterprise are two precepts: (a) that there is an external reality apart from human consciousness, whatever the inherent problems of language and ideology that may exist in comprehending that reality; and (b) that there are consequences in the phenomenal world, whether triggered by human or natural agency, that result in the need to tell journalistically-based narratives empowered by literary technique and aesthetic sensibility. Ultimately, the emphasis is on the aesthetics of experience.

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR LITERARY JOURNALISM STUDIES

The International Association for Literary Journalism Studies is a multidisciplinary learned society whose essential purpose is the encouragement and improvement of scholarly research and education in literary journalism (or literary reportage). For the purposes of scholarly delineation, our definition of literary journalism is “journalism as literature” rather than “journalism about literature.” Moreover, the association is explicitly inclusive and warmly supportive of a wide variety of approaches to the study and teaching of literary journalism throughout the world. The association’s web address is <http://www.ialjs.org>.

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