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LITERARY JOURNALISM STUDIES

VOL. 12, NO. 2, DECEMBER 2020

■ Barry Siegel + Amy Wilentz on America's only LJ undergraduate program ■

Literary Journalism Studies

Vol. 12, No. 2, December 2020

Fantastic Art
dada
SURREALISM



And Their
influence on
JAMES AGEE'S

let us now praise famous men

INTO THE KRAKAUER TRANSMEDIA UNIVERSE
Miles Franklin and "Mary-Anne"

The Journal of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies

This issue's front cover was created by *LJS* designer Anthony DeRado. It is based on the original 1936 poster art for the "Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism" exhibition shown at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, December 9, 1936–January 17, 1937.

Literary Journalism Studies

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SUBMISSION INFORMATION

LITERARY JOURNALISM STUDIES invites submissions of original scholarly articles on literary journalism, which is also known as narrative journalism, literary reportage, reportage literature, New Journalism, and the nonfiction novel, as well as literary and narrative nonfiction that emphasizes cultural revelation. The journal has an international focus and seeks submissions on the theory, history, and pedagogy of literary journalism throughout the world. All disciplinary approaches are welcome. Submissions should be informed with an awareness of the existing scholarship and should be between 5,000 and 8,000 words in length, including notes. To encourage international dialogue, the journal is open to publishing on occasion short examples or excerpts of previously published literary journalism accompanied by a scholarly gloss about or an interview with the writer who is not widely known outside his or her country. The example or excerpt must be translated into English. The scholarly gloss or interview should generally be between 1,500 and 2,500 words long and indicate why the example is important in the context of its national culture. Together, both the text and the gloss generally should not exceed 8,000 words in length. The contributor is responsible for obtaining all copyright permissions, including from the publisher, author, and translator, as necessary. The journal is also willing to consider publication of exclusive excerpts of narrative literary journalism accepted for publication by major publishers.

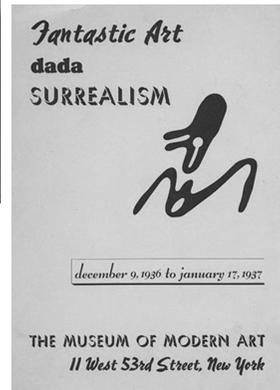
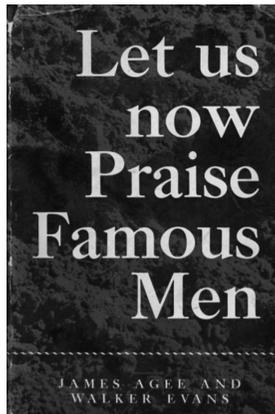
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BOOK REVIEWS are invited. They should be 1,000–2,000 words and focus on the scholarship of literary journalism and recent original works of literary journalism that deserve greater recognition among scholars. Book reviews are not blind reviewed but selected by the book review editor based on merit. Reviewers may suggest book review prospects or write the book review editor for suggestions. Usually reviewers will be responsible for obtaining their respective books. Book reviews and/or related queries should be sent to Nancy L. Roberts at <nroberts@albany.edu>



André Breton, father of Surrealism. Image by Henri Manuel, 1927. Wikimedia Commons. Left inset: cover of the first edition, 1941. Right inset: Museum of Modern Art's Surrealism exhibition poster, 1936.



The Influence of Surrealism on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

Juliana Rausch
Rowan University, United States

Abstract: The experimental nature of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* has generated debate among scholars regarding its style, structure, and generic classification. The book has been traded among various literary camps: it is an example of the 1930s documentary genre, a work of modernism, and a classic of literary journalism. Offering a rationale for not only James Agee and Walker Evans's lyrical style but also the book's complicated reception history, this study suggests that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is a work of Surrealist art. There is little scholarly work documenting the influence of Surrealism on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, yet Agee and Evans were intimately connected to the movement. This study examines these connections in addition to the presence of Surrealist artistic practices, such as automatic writing and the treatment of found objects as art objects, in the book. The goal of this research is to show that the way in which Agee and Evans perceived reality was shaped by Surrealism and thus their collaborative work documenting the lives of tenant farmers necessarily reflects a Surrealist turn of mind. More broadly, this research suggests that by widening the cultural context in which *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is read, new pathways uncovering the importance of literary journalism to multiple facets of U.S. culture, including the visual arts, might be found.

Keywords: literary journalism – documentary – surrealism – *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* – James Agee – Walker Evans

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men is a strange book. It began as an assignment given to James Agee while he was working for *Fortune* magazine. Agee chose photographer Walker Evans to take pictures that would accompany the article. Agee was supposed to report on the conditions of tenant farmers in the South for the magazine's "Life and Circumstances" series. Instead, he wrote a book that includes sexual fantasies about the female tenant farmers, memories of masturbating at his grandfather's house, and a description of overalls that is 536 words long. The original article was rejected by *Fortune*. After it was rejected by *Fortune*, it was rejected by multiple book publishers.¹ As Norman Sims notes, it was only by chance that Houghton Mifflin agreed to publish the book,² and since its original publication in 1941, critics have puzzled over how to make sense of it and what even to call it.

Though Lionel Trilling praises James Agee and Walker Evans's overall achievement, he notes in his 1942 review that "some of the introspective and meditative passages turn furiously purple."³ Alfred Kazin writes that it is the "documentary book written to end all documentary books."⁴ In a similar vein, William Stott observes that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is a "classic of the thirties' documentary genre," but "[l]ike many another classic, it epitomizes the rhetoric in which it was made, and explodes it, surpasses it, shows it up."⁵ Miles Orvell suggests that the structure of the book is a "defiant puzzle, a confusion of false starts and premature endings, a trunk full of fake bottoms."⁶ More recently, in her introduction to the *New Critical Essays on James Agee and Walker Evans: Perspectives on Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Caroline Blinder acknowledges that compared to other documentary work that featured photography and writing, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men's* construction is different: "The photographs preceded the text, they were uncaptioned and less obviously illustrative and the writing, intensely lyrical, discursive, and philosophical, dispensed with any apparent sociological rigor."⁷

It is perhaps because the book's content is so dizzying that it defies the boundaries of genre. Emily Sun writes that the book moves "between such traditions as poetry, autobiography, philosophy, theology, and, of course, journalism."⁸ It is easy to understand, then, how such a book could be co-opted by various literary camps. When *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is not being read in the context of Depression-era documentary work—one of the more popular contexts in which to read the book—it is read as a work of Modernism. In his book, *American Modernism and Depression Documentary*, Jeff Allred suggests that it is the yoking of high and low culture that demonstrates how *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* participates in the movement of Modernism:

Agee and Evans place their sympathies with the Gudgers' tendency in myriad ways throughout the text: for example, Agee's choice to live at the Gudgers' house throughout his trip; Evans's choice to place photographs of the Gudgers before those of the other two families; and the disproportionate number of pages devoted to descriptions [of] the Gudgers' home and family members. This sympathy between elites and a certain kind of "folk" sensibility is one of the most prominent hallmarks of literary modernism, ranging from Pound's revisions of Provençal and Anglo-Saxon epic poetry to Lorca's experiments with traditional Iberian lyrics in his *Poem of the Deep Song* (1931) to the "renaissances" that wedded "folk" materials to a modernist poetics in African American and Irish writing of the early twentieth century.⁹

The book is also considered a classic of literary journalism. Unlike more traditional works of journalism, Agee "did not want to use the individuals he had befriended to illustrate a social problem. Instead, he emphasized their dignity in the midst of privation, and the complex actuality of their daily lives."¹⁰ The emphasis on dignifying the tenant farmers rather than illustrating a social problem through them led to a more personal journalism, one where Agee's own subjectivity is a key feature. But even under the umbrella of literary journalism the perception of the book's meaning and purpose has changed. In his 2000 book, *A History of Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form*, John Hartsock initially saw Agee's literary journalism in terms of what William Stott called "instrumental" documentary, meaning Agee's writing was designed to "prompt social awareness."¹¹ However, in his 2016 book, *Literary Journalism and the Aesthetics of Experience*, Hartsock changes his position:

His [Agee's] was less a material instrumentality, however, and more a psychological and philosophical instrumentality aimed at trying to help readers (and himself) understand the subjectivities of poor white southern tenant farmers by means of the concrete metaphors reflecting distinctive intersections in time and space. (In a sense, he was attempting in his own way a kind of cultural documentary reflected and refracted through interior consciousness.)¹²

Hartsock's change in position is demonstrative of just how frustratingly ambiguous *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is, yet his description of Agee's writing as reflecting a more "psychological and philosophical" instrumentality might actually help illuminate the intensely experimental nature of the book.

Agee and Evans were both connected to Surrealism, and the foundations of Surrealism were shaped by a Freudian exploration of and investment in

unconscious desires, the kind of “psychological and philosophical” context Hartsock hints at above. The basic connections between Agee, Evans, and the Surrealist movement are numerous. For example, in a letter to Father Flye¹³ from January 1937, Agee writes that he was “very much moved by the big Fantasy and Surrealism Show.”¹⁴ Agee is referring to the 1936 MoMA exhibit produced by Alfred Barr called *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* that featured works by artists such as André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, and Salvador Dalí. Importantly, Walker Evans’s photographs were also included in this show.¹⁵ Moreover, in 1940, *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* published a section from the not yet published *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* “in the same issue . . . as a section devoted to ‘Values in Surrealism’ that contained ‘A Surrealist Anthology,’ ‘A Surrealist Pocket Dictionary,’ an interview with Nicolas Calas, and essays on surrealism by Calas, Herbert J. Muller, and Kenneth Burke,”¹⁶ indicating that it was not only Evans’s photographs but also Agee’s prose that seemed suitable for publication among other works of Surrealism. Thus, extending Hartsock’s argument, it may be possible to show that Agee and Walker produced a work of cultural documentary that “reflected and refracted” not interior consciousness but rather unconscious desires, and thus find a new framework that helps explain the book’s obtuse nature.

There is little scholarly work that unpacks the connections between Agee, Evans, and Surrealism. Two of the more extensive treatments of the topic are now more than a decade old. In his 2007 book, *Pop Modernism: Noise and the Reinvention of the Everyday*, Juan Antonio Suárez suggests that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* can be read as a work of Surrealist art, but he does not produce an extensive close reading of the book. His interest is not in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* specifically; instead, he is interested in Agee’s work with film. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is thus given only a cursory glance.¹⁷ A year later, Hugh Davis’s book, *The Making of James Agee*, made a convincing case for why *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* exemplifies Surrealist ethnography.

Davis carefully articulates the parallels between *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and Surrealist writer André Gide’s *Travels in the Congo*.¹⁸ Davis’s focus, however, is primarily on Agee, and his book is meant to serve as a corrective to Agee’s posthumous reputation as a man aloof from the day-to-day influences of his time. Though Davis does discuss the influence of Surrealism on Walker Evans, the photographs Evans took for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* take a back seat in Davis’s close reading of the book’s text. This analysis is meant to revive the discussion of Surrealism’s influence on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and to demonstrate that both Agee’s writing and Evans’s photographs are actual expressions of Surrealist practices. To do this, key features of Surreal-

ism—automatism, the use of dissonance and synesthesia, and the treatment of found objects as art objects—will be explored alongside Agee and Evans's engagement with them in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. This research offers a rationale for the strange nature of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* that takes seriously a formerly neglected cultural influence on both Agee and Evans. The broader implications of avant-garde art's influence on documentary work will be addressed in the conclusion.

Agee and Words: Surrealism's Automatism, Use of Dissonance and Synesthesia

Psychic automatism is a defining element of Surrealism. The poet André Breton is widely recognized as the founder and leader of Surrealism who articulated its core principles in his 1924 *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Breton's ideas were shaped by the work of Sigmund Freud, and much of what drives the Surrealist movement involves finding ways to access the unconscious. In his 1924 manifesto, Breton wrote:

We are still living under the reign of logic. . . . The absolute rationalism that is still in vogue allows us to consider only facts relating directly to our experience. Logical ends, on the contrary, escape us. It is pointless to add that experience itself has found itself increasingly circumscribed. It paces back and forth in a cage from which it is more and more difficult to make it emerge. . . . Under the pretense of civilization and progress, we have managed to banish from the mind everything that may rightly or wrongly be termed superstition, or fancy; forbidden is any kind of search for truth which is not in conformance with accepted practices. It was, apparently, by pure chance that a part of our mental world which we pretended not to be concerned with any longer and, in my opinion by far the most important part—has been brought back to light. For this we must give thanks to the discoveries of Sigmund Freud. . . . The imagination is perhaps on the point of reasserting itself, of reclaiming its rights.¹⁹

Breton believes experience is suppressed by rationality; experience, in his words, functions like a caged animal. It was Freud's unlocking of the unconscious that Breton saw as the key to reclaiming the power of the imagination and breaking the "reign of logic." Breton did not advocate, though, for a full release into the dream world or a complete abandonment of rationality. Instead, he wanted a "future resolution of these two states, dream and reality . . . into a kind of absolute reality, *surreality*."²⁰ Thus Surrealism can be characterized, in part, as a movement which sought to unleash the power of the unconscious, but which also sought to meld the power of the unconscious with reality. The question then is how, exactly, does one do this? For Breton, the method by which one accesses the unconscious is the defining element of

Surrealism, literally. In the *Manifesto* he writes:

I am defining it [Surrealism] once and for all:

SURREALISM, *n.* Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.

ENCYCLOPEDIA. *Philosophy.* Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to ruin once and for all all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in solving all the principal problems of life. The following have performed acts of ABSOLUTE SURREALISM: Messrs. Aragon, Baron, Boiffard, Breton, Carrive, Crevel, Delteil, Desnos, Eluard, Gérard, Limbour, Malkine, Morise, Naville, Noll, Péret, Picon, Soupault, Vitrac.²¹

The means of accessing the unconscious involves thinking and writing freely without the imposition of reason, and automatism is how one does this. Breton models his version of automatism off Freud's methods of psychoanalysis: "Completely occupied as I still was with Freud at that time . . . I resolved to obtain from myself what we were trying to obtain from them, namely, a monologue spoken as rapidly as possible without any intervention on the part of the critical faculties, a monologue consequently unencumbered by the slightest inhibition and which was, as closely as possible, akin to *spoken thought*."²² What automatic writing provides is the opportunity to inhabit a certain frame of mind, one where a writer would be particularly open to imaginative possibilities. To engage in automatic writing, Breton writes, "Put yourself in as passive, or receptive, a state of mind as you can. Forget about your genius, your talents, and the talents of everyone else."²³ It is crucial to the process of automatic writing that one remain in this passive, receptive state. This state of mind prevents reason, logic, or anxieties about fame and talent from blocking access to the unconscious and thus allows one to remain entirely open to possibility. This openness is reminiscent of an almost childlike frame of mind, and Breton suggests that Surrealism is an avenue by which one could return to childhood: "The mind which plunges into Surrealism relives with glowing excitement the best part of its childhood."²⁴ Children and childhood became tropes in Surrealism because of their relationship to the imaginative, wild elements of human thought that Breton sought out. David Hopkins observes, "The cult of the child in Surrealism was possibly more extensive and systematic than in any other movement. Essentially, one

can see it as an inheritance from Romanticism, with the child seen as close to the sources of the ‘marvelous’ (Breton’s central measure of poetic/aesthetic value).²⁵ Automatism, then, is more than just an activity or creative writing exercise; it is a frame of mind that allows one to access a source of creativity un-impinged by rationality.

In his journals dating 1936–41, the years he was working on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, there is evidence that Agee was well versed in the ideas animating Surrealism and that these ideas, in turn, influenced his work. Agee, like Breton, was familiar with the works of Freud and was reading Freud while writing *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.²⁶ Yet Agee’s connection to the ideas of Freud is more intimately linked with Surrealism when he writes about the production of the book; more specifically, Agee is concerned with the state of mind he must occupy in order to write to his satisfaction. In one journal he writes, “I had better, as a crutch, get myself into as near as I can a baby state of mind. . . . the other end of it is, to become much more deliberate and conscious of what I am trying to do than I am.”²⁷ Agee’s desire for a “baby state of mind” is contrasted with what Agee *least* desires: to become “more deliberate and conscious” as he writes. This mirrors precisely what Breton advocates for automatic writing. In a letter Agee wrote to Father Flye while in Frenchtown, New Jersey—the place where Agee composed much of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*—he writes, “I’m very much more drawn toward innocence, and the relaxed or abandoned brain, and simplicity and childhood, and the so-called . . . ‘sub’-organic, than I’ve appeared by the ways I’ve written; . . .”²⁸ Agee notes here that his writing has yet to reflect his interest in the “abandoned brain,” which is perhaps why, at the end of the first journal entry mentioned above, Agee writes: “End of Alabama book: series of reprises—musical form, elliptic.”²⁹ There is an implicit connection here between Agee’s desire to inhabit a less deliberate frame of mind and an imagined ending of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* that is reflective of this state of mind. The ending of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* would, indeed, take up a kind of musical form that exposes its Surrealist underpinnings.

At the end of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Agee produces a lengthy meditation on what he believes are the sounds of two foxes he and Walker Evans hear as they lay on the front porch of the Gudger home. The sounds are dissonant and require from Agee a reproduction of such dissonance in order to capture their astonishing effect. Surrealism’s engagement with dissonance took more than one form, particularly because dissonance is more associated with music than with writing. However, Agee describes the fox calls in explicitly musical terms. He compares the effect the sound has on him to “listening to the genius of Mozart at its angriest and cleanest,”³⁰ and writes

of the co-mingling of the two fox calls: “By use only of silences, without changing their stanzaic structure, these two calls went through any number of rhythmic-dramatic devices of delays in question and answer, of overlappings, of tricks of delay by which each pretended to show that it had signed off for the night or, actually, that it no longer existed.”³¹ Agee’s task is to recreate the dissonance he hears, and he does this in a manner quite similar to other Surrealist writers. Peter Stockwell argues the following:

Much surrealist writing depends on the creation and manipulation of *dissonance*. . . .

[S]urrealist writing can approach the effect of synchronous dissonance by piling up quickly successive phrasal clashes so that the sense of temporal ordering offered by sequentiality is undermined. The effect can be compared with the multimodal experience of clashing sounds, language, and images that was often characteristic of surrealist events. At the International Surrealist Exhibition in London (June, 1936), André Breton delivered a lecture on “*Limites non-frontières du Surréalisme*,” while Dylan Thomas toured the room offering teacups of boiled string, asking ‘Do you like it weak or strong?’ while an electric bell was intermittently sounded. This multiple dissonance approaches the synchronous effect, and the rapid succession of phrases makes it very difficult to toggle attentionally between elements.³²

When Agee describes the sounds, he writes, “It was perhaps most nearly like the noise hydrogen makes when a match flame is passed across the mouth of a slanted test-tube. It was about the same height as this sound: soprano, with a strong alto illusion. It was colder than this sound, though: as cold and as chilling as the pupil of a goat’s eye, or a low note on the clarinet.”³³ Agee describes the sound of the foxes in terms that go beyond hearing. The sound feels “cold and chilling” like the look of a goat’s eye; the sound also resembles the “height” of a soprano’s voice. Agee represents the fox calls through an arsenal of senses, including touch and sight, and the effect is similar to Breton and Thomas’s experiment with dissonance in that one’s attention is “toggled” between Agee’s sensory exploits. The difficulty in splitting one’s attention between sensory elements serves as a reminder that:

our cognition of the senses is continuous and linked rather than being separate modules in the mind. . . .

In effect, the dissonant elements occur too fast for each one to be resolved adequately, so the unresolved dissonance from the last few phrases persists in recent memory.³⁴

The rapid piling up of sensory experiences brings the senses together, allowing an experience of the world without the barriers imposed by a discern-

ing, rational mind. Agee continues his descriptions of the sound in this vein: “One time it [the fox call] would be sexual; another, just a casual colloquy; another, a challenge; another, a signal or warning; another, a comment on us; another, some simple and desperate effort at mutual location; another, most intense and masterful irony; another, laughter; another, triumph . . .”³⁵ The dissonant sounds turn into a cognitive dissonance; the meaning of the sounds, their intentions, change and shift as they are being heard. As a result, dissonance produces not a single apprehension of sound but a wide-ranging sensory experience that reverberates through consciousness. Davis suggests that this breaking down of sensory and cognitive barriers is precisely what is occurring in the final section of Agee and Evans’s book: “The foxes’ performance collapses the boundaries between instinct and consciousness, life and art, Agee and Evans, the speaker without words and the listener who hears them.”³⁶ The dissonant sound of the foxes creates the collapsing of boundaries between instinct and consciousness that Agee himself desired and that he recreated in his writing. Readers get close to synchronicity, a collapsing of boundaries, through dissonance in Agee’s contrasting sensory descriptions. In this way, Agee connects the style and philosophy of Surrealism. His use of dissonance manifests a collapsing of cognitive boundaries and demonstrates that his desire to write with an “abandoned brain” and his idea that the “end of Alabama book” should be a “series of reprises—musical form, elliptic” were connected and realized through his writing. This is also the case for Agee’s actual experimentation with automatic writing.

In their collection of Agee’s journals, notes, and manuscripts, Michael Lofaro and Davis provide seven examples of Agee’s automatic writing that were most likely produced in 1936 when Agee was on sabbatical from *Fortune*. This was the sabbatical he took immediately before heading south with Evans to Alabama. Agee does, as Breton outlines in his manifestoes, record whatever thoughts, aural stimuli, and sensations come into his mind. He begins one entry explicitly detailing his task: “Writing first thing comes into my mind. Point being nothing does when you watch for it.”³⁷ Agee acknowledges here that the benefit of automatic writing is that it allows material to come to mind that otherwise would not when you consciously attempt to conjure it. In other places in his automatic writing, Agee demonstrates a compelling awareness of what the practice offers. Consider the following passages: “You lose the gestures of childhood: they return suddenly with gladness, etc. & in dreams. the early gestures of childhood.”³⁸ These passages demonstrate again that Agee was immersed in the practice of automatic writing as well as the theory behind it, specifically the interest in returning to childhood as a source of creativity. Moreover, automatic writing reinforced in Agee the importance

of engaging multiple senses in his writing. For example, in one of his passages of automatic writing, Agee notes the following: “Crooked shore. Crippled shore. Crippling the shore. / Smell of water hits like sound of weltering tin on iron. Taste & quality, dead, of galvanized iron, of Zinc. / Absolutely necessary cut loose from self. Possibly best is to write voluminously & carelessly. Make writing the living & get inside it as you are inside living.”³⁹ Agee’s senses are co-mingling here: the water hits like a sound before its metallic taste is registered. Immediately after, Agee draws a connection to his work as a writer who needs to “get inside it [writing] as you are inside living.” In many of the passages of automatic writing that follow, Agee registers experience in synesthetic terms describing things like “cold flowers,”⁴⁰ and wheels that “delicately taste each other. Wheels taste and turn each other. TASTING THE TIME THEY TURN. . . . THE WHEELS DELICATELY TASTE THE TIME THEY TURN.”⁴¹ After this last passage, Agee recognizes that his senses are working together. He then writes the following: “SIGHT HEARING TOUCH SMELL TASTE.” This is followed by, “TASTING THE EARTH” and “TASTE EXHAUSTION.”⁴² Through the process of automatic writing, Agee connects the power of sensory experience with his task to write *inside* experience, to embody it and not merely to evoke it. His use of synesthesia as a means of manifesting this embodiment is present not only in his automatic writing but also in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

One of the more obvious examples of Agee’s engagement with synesthesia in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is the section Agee dedicates to the odors of the tenant family homes. In this section, though, Agee moves beyond merely describing odors in terms of comparable scents and describes them in terms of their feel. This is reminiscent of the end of the book where Agee describes the sound of foxes as “cold.” He describes the smell of the Ricketts home as hard to get used to because the odors are “sucked into all the wood, and stacked down on top of years of a moldering and old basis of themselves . . .”; the odors of the Woods’ house are “blowsy, moist and dirty”; and the smell of the Gudger home is “younger, lighter.”⁴³ Agee draws on the experience of touch, using words like “stacked” and “blowsy” and “lighter,” to communicate the experience of smell, continuing the use of synesthesia that characterized his automatic writing. These descriptions carry through the entirety of the book. In a list of things that bring Agee joy is “the taste of a mountain summer night.”⁴⁴ The jam he eats at the Gudgers’ house tastes “a deep sweet purple tepidly watered.”⁴⁵ The blue color of George Gudger’s overalls is “delicious.”⁴⁶ Spring water might “break in the mouth like crystals”⁴⁷ and in another instance the taste of water is described as having an “an ugly, feathery, sickening taste.”⁴⁸ This last description is particularly compelling because it

evokes a specific piece of Surrealist art: Meret Oppenheim's *Object*. The work was displayed at the 1936 *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* show, mentioned in the introduction to this study, that Agee was "very much moved by." Her work has been referred to as a "paradigmatic surrealist object."⁴⁹ Oppenheim's piece is a teacup, saucer, and spoon covered entirely with fur. Oppenheim's *Tasse, soucoupe et cuillère revêtues de fourrure (Fur-Lined Teacup, Saucer, and Spoon)*, 1936⁵⁰ represented Surrealism's interest in taking ordinary, everyday objects and recontextualizing them to reveal unconscious meaning. Heyrman describes the piece as synesthesia literalized: "Oppenheim's [work] makes references to the varieties of sensual pleasure; fur may delight the touch but it repels the tongue. And a cup and spoon, of course, are made to be put in the mouth. It provokes the viewer into imagining what the fur lined cup might feel like to drink from and forces the anti-graceful sensation on a mixture of the senses."⁵¹ Her fur-lined teacup produces contradictory reactions. On the one hand, the fur seems soft and inviting. On the other hand, the fur adorns objects usually made for consumption, thus making the fur seem repulsive when considered alongside the sensation of taste. Will Gompertz argues that "Two incompatible materials have been brought together to create one troubling vessel. Fur is pleasing to touch, but horrible when you put it into your mouth. You want to drink from the cup and eat from the spoon—that is their purpose—but the sensation of the fur is too repulsive. It's a maddening cycle."⁵² The attraction-repulsion one might have to Oppenheim's work testifies to its broader purpose and its importance to the movement of Surrealism. Covering a teacup and saucer in fur is inviting the unfamiliar into the familiar; in so doing, Oppenheim's "*Object* exemplifies . . . Breton's argument that mundane things presented in unexpected ways had the power to challenge reason, to urge the inhibited and uninitiated (that is, the rest of society) to connect to their subconscious . . ."⁵³ Agee's repeated use of synesthesia in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* takes up the Surrealist enterprise of challenging one's perception of familiar, everyday objects through surprising and unexpected sensory combinations.

Agee and Evans: Surrealism's Found Objects

Agee's Surreal descriptions both work with and challenge Walker Evans's photographs. While Evans was as intimately connected with Surrealism as Agee, Agee expresses an implicit anxiety about some of Evans's photographs for which Agee's Surrealist writing functions as a kind of corrective. Critics often read Agee's experimental prose as an effort to match the representational power of Evans's photographs. James Burrows notes the following: "James Agee's dense, intermittently lyrical, occasionally opaque 1941 photo-text *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* . . . has been repeatedly characterized as the

attempt to render in prose the justly famous Walker Evans photographs that open the book.”⁵⁴ However, this assertion overlooks the moments in the text when Agee is critical of Evans’s photography, particularly the family portraits. For instance, Agee imagines how Mrs. Ricketts must feel about the process of having her family documented by Evans. Agee writes, “. . . and Walker setting up the terrible structure of the tripod crested by the black square heavy head, dangerous as that of a hunchback, of the camera; stooping beneath cloak and cloud of wicked cloth, and twisting buttons; a witchcraft preparing, colder than keenest ice, and incalculably cruel . . .”⁵⁵ Evans’s preparation for documenting the family is depicted in distinctly negative terms here: the camera is cold as ice, its structure is terrible, and Evans is the witch beneath the cloak.⁵⁶ Later, Agee’s fear about what will happen after the photographs are taken is made clearer. He writes that the Ricketts, by standing in front of the “cold absorption of the camera,” are laid bare in their “shame and pitiableness” only to be “fried into and laughed at.”⁵⁷ The “cold absorption of the camera” objectifies the Ricketts and they become Other, rendered in a state of alterity. This primes the road for viewers not to empathize with their condition but instead to view it with *schadenfreude*, that is, malicious joy. Though Agee complained about language’s limited ability to justly render reality, Burrows goes on to suggest that Agee contradicts his own statements in the book about photography’s advantage over language:

The critical insistence on the literalness of Agee’s constant complaint that language is not literal enough fails to take account of the fact that the text constantly contradicts its own declared shortcomings: Agee apologizes for being unable to write seriously of bareness and space, before embarking on some of the lengthiest descriptions of emptiness ever published; he insists on the superiority of the camera, only to enumerate precisely those sensations—odors, sounds, tastes, texture—unavailable to photography⁵⁸

Agee’s emphasis on sensation, outlined in the previous section, serves to produce in writing what Agee felt Evan’s portraits could not: the felt, lived experience of the tenant farmers. Interestingly, Agee reserves his critique of Evans’s photography for the portraits Evans took of the family. When it came to the objects Evans documented, Agee is less concerned. At one point, he even defers to Evans’s photographs in place of his own writing. When describing the kitchen of one of the tenant homes Agee writes, “In the opposite side of the kitchen is a small bare table from which they eat; and on the walls, what you may see in one of the photographs.”⁵⁹ This deferring to a photograph without additional comment is unusual in the text and does not occur with frequency. That it occurs around a picture of ordinary, everyday kitchenware is perhaps not coincidental. Evans’s photographing of found

objects link his work in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* most directly with Surrealism, and it is perhaps because of the way in which these photographs evoke the uncanny, embodied world of the tenant farmers that Agee felt more comfortable with them than the portraits.

Other evidence supports the idea that Agee and Evans shared a particular interest in found objects and that they hoped to manifest this interest in projects outside of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Agee and Evans were both collectors of cultural products: Evans collected postcards and clipped images from newspapers and Agee was interested in crime-scene photographs from detective magazines.⁶⁰ These collections reflected a particularly American spin on Surrealism, one that began with Julien Levy's 1931 show, simply called "Surrealism." Dickran Tashjian observes that "Levy understood that Surrealism, far from being a mere style, required cultural assimilation if it were to take root in America."⁶¹ In order to give Surrealism a specifically U.S. flavor, Levy turned toward "Americana that was surrealist, as evidenced by a 'frieze of negative photostats, a series of shocking cover-page seriocomic collages from the New York *Evening Graphic*, the yellowest of vulgar journalism and incredible Americana featuring the story of 'Peaches' and her 'Daddy' Browning."⁶² Evans had long been a collector of U.S. cultural artifacts, particularly the "penny postcards—the most ubiquitous form of photography of their day By his death, Evans had amassed a collection of over nine thousand cards, a treasure house of American vernacular architecture and anonymous photography."⁶³ In addition to voraciously collecting postcards, Evans composed a "scrapbook of newspaper and magazine clippings . . . , thirty-five loose album pages with the working title *Pictures of the Time*."⁶⁴ The scrapbook includes frequent "pairings of high and low, 'civilized' and 'primitive' images from the pictures press. Evans's album contains clippings from the German illustrated magazine *Der Querschnitt*, which was known for similarly witty juxtapositions of photographs for satirical effect."⁶⁵ In short, Evans's scrapbook reflects the trend of finding the Surreal in the "real." Indeed, when Breton visited Evans in his darkroom and saw "his penchant for torn posters, fragmented words, and junk, Breton declared that he had a surrealist turn of mind."⁶⁶ Agee had plans not only for Evans's collection but also his own, similar collection, though this collection does not survive today.⁶⁷ Davis notes that in a letter to Archibald McLeish in 1938, Agee proposed that he and Evans "be set up to office space and to ease and choice in getting news pictures, COMPLETELY INDEPENDENT of the weekly production of the issue, *and* in our work COMPLETELY INDEPENDENT of detailed responsibility to any editor, for two or, better, three months, as an experimental department."⁶⁸ Agee's idea was that he and Evans could work through the

picture archive at *Life* in a special, “experimental department,” but republish those pictures without their original, familiar context. Though Agee proposed to work at *Life*, he did not want to necessarily work *with* McLeish. Davis points out that in a letter to Evans, Agee writes, “Another thing that ‘occurs’: that a fair way of indicating to them why neither you nor I would give a fuck to work in the Magazine Proper would be to present their looking-over your Scrapbook as is, and my advertising and hate-art similarly arranged.”⁶⁹ Here Agee references his own collection of work, seemingly akin to Evans’s, as evidence that the goal of the *Life* project was radical experimentation with cultural products. The “experimental department” at *Life* never came to fruition, but Agee and Evans were clearly interested in recontextualizing Americana, and the photographs for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* manifest the growing roots of Evans’s desire to expose the surreality of everyday objects.

Evans: Photography and Surrealism’s Found Objects

Walker Evans had first-hand exposure to the emergence of Surrealism in Paris in the 1920s. His work was also routinely displayed in Surrealist exhibits throughout the 1930s. In 1926, Evans went to Paris to study French at the Sorbonne.⁷⁰ While there, Evans frequented Shakespeare and Company, where Surrealist writers, including André Gide and Kay Boyle, also spent time.⁷¹ During his year abroad, Evans undertook a translation of the Surrealist novel *Moravagine* by Blaise Cendrars, and his translation would eventually be published in *Alhambra*. This is the first time that Evans’s written work appears in print, but it is also the site of his first published photograph. Evans also worked on the translation of another Surrealist writer’s work, Gide’s autobiography *Si le grain ne meurt (If I Die)*.⁷² This is fortuitous because Agee, while writing *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, was reading Gide’s *Travels in the Congo*. Davis argues that Gide’s influence on Agee is one of the reasons *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* qualifies as a work of Surrealist ethnography.⁷³ Evans’s translation of Gide in the 1920s⁷⁴ shows he was also well-versed in Gide’s work, likely even before Agee was. Evans’s engagement with Surrealism moves beyond just a surface-level familiarity with Surrealist writers and artists, though. Like Agee, Evans demonstrated an awareness of and interest in art as the exploration of the unconscious and dreams. In a 1930 letter to his roommate Hans Skolle, Evans writes,

Had a wonderful dream last night. Where in the hell do all those details come from. Really, literature, all the greatest descriptions I know are so much watery smudge to the least of my dreams. I suppose the best thing about dreams is the abolition of time. After one like last night’s I spend the day tasting the tail ends of lovely unearthly moods without a headache. I think my powers lie mostly there, in dreams.⁷⁵

Here Evans acknowledges the power of dreams in a way that echoes the sentiments of Surrealist thinkers, such as Breton, detailed earlier. Moreover, Evans's photography often engages explicitly with the Surrealist concept of "objective chance," which exposed "the uncanny and coincidental manifestation of conscious or unconscious subjective desires in the lived realm."⁷⁶ The manifestation of objective chance came through the exploration of everyday objects which provides a compelling link between documentary work and theories animating Surrealism. For example:

. . . Breton found in the disarray of the local flea market a privileged site for discovering an unexpectedly poetic meaning clinging to objects that had fallen out of current systems of function, value and exchange . . . : "I go there often, searching for objects that can be found nowhere else: old-fashioned, broken, useless, almost incomprehensible, even perverse—at least in the sense I give to the word." The interruption or deflection of an object's initial purpose and commodity value, then, provided the key to its rescue, unlocking something dormant within it.⁷⁷

The objects of everyday life, particularly ones that appeared useless, had revelatory potential when seen or placed in a new context. The task of a Surrealist artist would be to unlock that new context and, in the process, expose the uncanny, extraordinary quality of everyday objects. Throughout his career, Evans undertook this task. In the passage that follows, Evans describes his interest in photographing a dressing table in Mississippi in 1945:

This shows what I call "unconscious arrangement." It's a kind of eternal theme, though I'd never seen it done. Again, it's something I collected. You've got to collect. This is a piece of the anatomy of somebody's living. . . . I was visiting Biloxi. Greek fishermen, shrimp fishermen, lived nearby. Their homes were all together. A friend got me inside. The artist gets rewarded by finding a thing like this. You know that people haven't seen this this way, and here you're able to show it to them, to say "Look at this with me, look at the expression of the value of pictures, the instinctive joy in pictures this dressing table shows." The great simple appeal of the picture, here it is among Greek fishermen, decorating their house with love and excitement, and plain direct pleasure.⁷⁸

Evans notes that what is particularly valuable to him in shooting these domestic spaces is that "people haven't seen that this way," indicating that Evans, like other Surrealists, saw everyday objects, or "found objects," as concealing meaning it was the artist's job to reveal. Evans's exploration of everyday objects also manifested in his series of roadside photographs, particularly his photographs of billboards. Again, Evans took objects otherwise ignored and, through the process of both photographing and editing them, imbued

them with meaning. Commenting on one of Evans's billboard photographs, Rosenheim writes, "Clearly the Surrealists' trick of isolating a form from its natural context also played a part in this study. Photographing the billboard head-on and with the sun high in the sky, he [Evans] flattened the works and their shadows into their work. He eliminated the roadside and all but one feeble cypress tree that emerges from behind the billboard, an ironic token reference to the real world."⁷⁹ In altering the context of an everyday object, Evans's work is directly linked with the work of other Surrealist artists.

Evans's interest in shooting everyday objects and domestic spaces in order to reveal "unconscious arrangements" carries into the photographs he took for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Evans's selection of photographs for the book demonstrates that he was uninterested in participating in the more dominant trends of journalistic photography at the time. Rosenheim notes that while Evans "made quick studies of the family engaged in daily farm work, including chopping wood, fetching water from the well, and picking cotton . . . he elected to exclude these images of general agricultural activities from the book's first edition, instead settling on a formal, antijournalistic presentation made up primarily of portraits and interiors."⁸⁰ The interior shots that Evans made reflect the Surrealist interest in everyday objects, and Evans included several photographs that anticipate his 1945 shot of the dressing table in Mississippi. In the Alabama photographs, Evans focuses on the mantle of the Ricketts family home. These photographs show the same kind of Surreal juxtapositions Evans used in his scrapbook collection. In one photograph, the mantle can be seen almost in its entirety, with the wall above the mantle covered in calendars, newspaper pictures, and various other decorative items. In the picture that follows, Evans has zoomed in on the mantle. Rosenheim describes this strange sequence as follows:

In one . . . , a small photograph, its lower left corner clipped off, is centered over the mantelpiece. The flash reflects directly off the picture's glossy paper surface, throwing a white haze over the subject, an elderly woman standing in a field looking directly at the camera. In appearance, pose, and expression she recalls Evan's portrait of Katie Tingle. Curiously, the same snapshot appears in another photograph made outside the house; Evans removed the photograph and nailed it to an exterior wall, once again his background of choice, pairing it with a smaller and even more dog-eared snapshot of four children sitting in the dirt . . . ⁸¹

Taking into consideration the depth of Evans's engagement with the work of Surrealism, the removal of the photograph of the elderly woman and its repositioning alongside the photograph of the children is not nearly as curious as it might initially seem. The recontextualization of found material was not

only something Evans was already doing when he photographed the tenant farmers, but also something that was inspired and informed by Surrealism. The new placement of the photograph is a Surrealist gesture that is revelatory of deeper meaning: that the children playing in the dirt are bound to become the elderly woman as the cycle of tenant poverty continues.

Agee takes a keen interest in the mantel of the Gudger home. Around the objects he nearly obsessively catalogs, Agee creates an almost religious reverence. When Agee is describing the mantel above the fireplace, it falls under a section titled “The Altar.” Similarly, the contents of a table drawer are listed under a section called “The Tabernacle.”⁸² The objects listed under these sections would not ordinarily qualify as special, yet Agee’s careful cataloging and detailing of them, along with giving them a new, religious context, makes them other than what they seem; these objects are an index of the family who keeps them and thus they have a life beyond their use-value. Agee writes:

In the table drawer, in this order:

A delicate insect odor of pine, closed sweated cloth, and mildew.

One swooning-long festal baby’s dress of the most frail muslin, embroidered with three bands of small white cotton-thread flowers. Two narrow courses of cheap yet small-threaded lace are let in near the edge of the skirt. This garment is hand-sewn in painfully small and labored stitchings. It is folded, but not pressed, and is not quite clean.

One plain baby’s dress of white cotton; a torn rag; homesewn, less studiously; folded.

Another, as plain, save for pink featherstitching at the cuffs. Torn, not folded.

Another, thinlined gray-blue faded checks on a white ground. The silhouettes of two faded yellow rabbits, cut out at home, are stitched on the front, the features are x’d in in pink thread. . . .⁸³

Like Evans, Agee is recontextualizing ordinary objects, encouraging readers to see in them the extraordinary way they are seen by the family who owns them. Emily Sun writes that:

The descriptions of both Agee and Evans allow us to see the fireplaces as murals where the members of the families produce collages, where they themselves produce isolatable images.

. . . Perhaps the most suitable captions for them would be: “Look at this with me, look at the expression of the value of pictures” these fireplaces show.⁸⁴

Agee goes beyond just recounting the objects he finds. One of the last items he uncovers in the “tabernacle” is a torn piece of newsprint. Agee cata-

logs this item as he did the others, “[a] scissored hexagon of newsprint,” but takes a step further by actually reproducing the content of the newsprint, including descriptions of images, on the page:

GHAM .NEWS

hursday afternoon, March 5, 1936

Price: 3 cents

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The effect of reproducing the newsprint on the page is that it both looks and reads like a work of poetry. Breton, too, found it possible to create art out of the language of everyday life. In his *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, he writes, “It is even permissible to entitle POEM what we get from the most random assemblage possible (observe, if you will, the syntax of headlines and scraps of headlines cut out of newspapers).” What follows is an excerpt from the “POEM”:

POEM

A burst of laughter
of sapphire in the island of Ceylon

The most beautiful straws

Have faded color

Under the locks

. . . .⁸⁶

Breton’s version might be more organized than the one reproduced by Agee, but they both testify to the way in which the language of everyday life could be, in the eyes of Surrealists, transformed into art. The content of the paper was transformed once by the Gudgers, in their hexagonal cutting and keeping of the paper, and is transformed again by Agee to reinforce, as Sun noted above, the way tenant families produce “isolatable images” in their repurposing of everyday material. Suárez notes that:

Like Evans did in his photographs, Agee delved into the way farmers modified found objects . . . to suit their own purposes and to aestheticize their surroundings. These interventions expressed desires and fears, revealed an entire conception of the world, and bore testimony to the determination to survive and wrench beauty from an inhospitable environment.”⁸⁷

It might be the case that the surreal nature of these objects stems originally from the tenant farmers repurposing of them. Yet Agee and Evans both recognize this gesture and emphasize it repeatedly throughout both the photographs and the text, transforming, as do other Surrealist artists, ordinary objects into expressions of human desire.

Afterword: Beyond *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

After *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was published, both Agee and Evans continued avant-garde pursuits. After returning from Alabama, Evans started taking photographs in the subways of New York using a camera he concealed in his coat. This project would eventually become *Many Are Called*, and Agee wrote the introduction to the book.⁸⁸ *Many Are Called* can be understood as a response to the portraits Evans took for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Agee was not the only one to notice that Evans's portraits leaned more toward the traditional than the avant-garde. Margaret North points out that in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* "compositional choices and visual signs like carried objects or tattered clothing [link the tenant farmers] to traditional portraiture and a traditional subject-artist relationship."⁸⁹ In *Many Are Called*, however, the concealed camera meant Evans's was " 'shooting blind,' guessing the precise composition of his pictures as he took them."⁹⁰ When Evans described his work in *Many Are Called*, he interestingly wrote that it was a "rebellion against studio portraiture. . . . I was angry [he said]. It was partly angry protest—not social, but aesthetic—against posed portraiture."⁹¹ Considering that Evans's photographs for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* bear some resemblance to studio portraiture, then Evans's rebellion might have been against himself. Implicitly, Evans's work in *Many Are Called* responds to Agee's concern about the photographs of the tenant farmers. Evans relinquishes some of the control he wielded in Alabama in a way similar to Agee's implementation of psychic automatism in his writing. The "passivity and receptiveness" of Evans's camera in *Many Are Called* does with portraits what Evans did with objects in Alabama; they capture "the *unconscious* self: the self that is only perceived by a stranger in passing, the self that never appears in the bathroom mirror but can sometimes be glimpsed in a plate-glass shop window, before you recognize the reflection as your own."⁹² The unconscious arrangements of Evans's domestic interiors find their corollary in the portraits of *Many Are Called*.

One of the projects Agee undertook after *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was an experimental film called *In the Street*. The film was a collaborative effort between Agee, Helen Levitt, and Janice Loeb. Like *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the movie is often considered in the context of documentary work. Yet, as Suárez notes,

In the Street is clearly more than straight reportage. . . . [the film] shows that automatic registration yields an undecidable real and that popular practice, even seemingly innocuous children's games, contains undertones of disintegration and fear. . . .

Uncertainty, ambiguity, and a vaguely unnamable excess make the film a record of untutored popular expressiveness *and* a surrealist artifact.⁹³

The “automatic registration” to which Suárez refers comes from the use of hidden cameras which were a key feature of the film's production and provide a path back to the kind of experimentation Evans was undertaking in the production of *Many Are Called*:

[*In the Street*] was shot in East Harlem and on New York's Lower East Side during 1945 and 1946 using hidden cameras and a right-angle view finder, a device that allowed for unobtrusive filming and that had been used by Paul Strand for his pictures of street characters published in *Camera Work* in 1917 and, after him, by two of Levitt's main influences, Ben Shan and Walker Evans.⁹⁴

The automatic registration of the hidden camera, used by both Agee and Evans, might be mistaken for straight reportage, but it was not employed to document reality. It was, instead, an instrument for the expression of a Surrealist belief that reality was a cover for unconscious longings, desires, and fears. The point here is not that Agee and Evans were not documentarians. Instead, the point is to consider more thoroughly what Agee and Evans might have perceived reality to be and what influences shaped the consciousness and unconsciousness of both men. Understanding the connections to Surrealism and the manifestation of Surrealist practices in Agee and Evans's work is one means to this end.

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Notes

- ¹ Sims, "The Discovery of the Depression," 149. Sims notes that Harper and Brothers and three other publishers rejected the manuscript.
- ² Sims, 149. Sims points out that it was through the influence of a Harper editor's wife that Houghton Mifflin eventually agreed to publish Agee and Evans's work.
- ³ Trilling, "Greatness with One Fault in It," 101.
- ⁴ Kazin, *On Native Grounds*, 495.
- ⁵ Stott, *Documentary Expression*, 266.
- ⁶ Orvell, *The Real Thing*, 273.
- ⁷ Blinder, introduction, 1–2.
- ⁸ Sun, *Succeeding King Lear*, 127.
- ⁹ Allred, *American Modernism*, 102.
- ¹⁰ Kerrane and Yagoda, *The Art of Fact*, 417.
- ¹¹ Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism*, 185. See also, Stott, *Documentary Expression*, 238, 240, quoted in Hartsock, 177–78.
- ¹² Hartsock, *Literary Journalism and the Aesthetics of Experience*, 38.
- ¹³ Father Flye met Agee when Flye was a teacher at St. Andrew's and Agee was just nine years old. The two developed and maintained a friendship until the end of Agee's life. In 1962, Father Flye published the letters he and Agee exchanged over the course of their friendship.
- ¹⁴ Agee, *Letters of James Agee*, 95.
- ¹⁵ Barr, *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism*, 4.
- ¹⁶ Davis, *The Making of James Agee*, 108. In the text, the term surrealism appears both capitalized and in lowercase: that is, Surrealism and surrealism. Quotes have been fact checked and where there are inconsistencies across sources, the inconsistencies remain, per the original sources. Within the study, every effort has been made to capitalize Surrealism when the term refers to the movement and to use lowercase when the term refers, not to the movement, but rather to the phenomenon, i.e., surreal, keeping all other mentions lowercase.
- ¹⁷ Suárez, *Pop Modernism*, 237, 240, 250.
- ¹⁸ See Davis, *The Making of James Agee*, particularly " 'Syncopations of Chance': *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as Surrealist Ethnography," 105–198. See also, Gide, *Travels in the Congo*.
- ¹⁹ Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 9–10.
- ²⁰ Breton, 14.
- ²¹ Breton, 26 (emphasis in original).
- ²² Breton, 22–23 (emphasis in original).
- ²³ Breton, 29.
- ²⁴ Breton, 39.
- ²⁵ Hopkins, "Re-enchantment," 271.
- ²⁶ Agee, "Notes remembered," 117.
- ²⁷ Agee, "Not by any stratagem," 34.
- ²⁸ Agee, *Letters of James Agee*, 107.
- ²⁹ Agee, "Not by any stratagem," 34.

- ³⁰ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 413.
- ³¹ Agee and Evans, 411.
- ³² Stockwell, *Language of Surrealism*, 71–72 (emphasis in the original).
- ³³ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 409.
- ³⁴ Stockwell, *Language of Surrealism*, 71, 75.
- ³⁵ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 411–12.
- ³⁶ Davis, *The Making of James Agee*, 160.
- ³⁷ Agee, “Writing first thing,” 198.
- ³⁸ Agee, “SERVICE IN EXISTENCE,” 205 (emphasis in original).
- ³⁹ Agee, “clouds as if they lay,” 203 (emphasis in original).
- ⁴⁰ Agee, “SERVICE IN EXISTENCE,” 205.
- ⁴¹ Agee, “THE TINDERING STARS,” 208 (emphasis in original).
- ⁴² Agee, 208 (emphasis in original).
- ⁴³ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 136.
- ⁴⁴ Agee and Evans, 201.
- ⁴⁵ Agee and Evans, 366.
- ⁴⁶ Agee and Evans, 236.
- ⁴⁷ Agee and Evans, 114.
- ⁴⁸ Agee and Evans, 168.
- ⁴⁹ Mileaf, *Please Touch*, 147. See also, MoMA, *Object*, MoMA Learning; Heyrman, “Art and Synesthesia.”
- ⁵⁰ Mileaf, 146.
- ⁵¹ Heyrman, “Art and Synesthesia.”
- ⁵² Gompertz, *What Are You Looking At?*, 258.
- ⁵³ MoMA, *Object*.
- ⁵⁴ Burrows, “The Power of What Is Not There,” 117.
- ⁵⁵ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 322.
- ⁵⁶ Agee and Evans, 321–22.
- ⁵⁷ Agee and Evans, 321.
- ⁵⁸ Burrows, “The Power of What Is Not There,” 117.
- ⁵⁹ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 167.
- ⁶⁰ Davis, *The Making of James Agee*, 90.
- ⁶¹ Tashjian, *Boatload of Madmen*, 41.
- ⁶² Tashjian, 41.
- ⁶³ Rosenheim, “‘The Cruel Radiance of What Is,’” 66.
- ⁶⁴ Eklund, “‘The Harassed Man’s Haven of Detachment,’” 121.
- ⁶⁵ Rosenheim and Eklund, *Unclassified*, 214.
- ⁶⁶ Rathbone, *Walker Evans: A Biography*, 180.
- ⁶⁷ Davis, *The Making of James Agee*, 90.
- ⁶⁸ Agee, “Letter to Archibald Macleish,” in Lofaro and David, *James Agee Rediscovered*, 28 (emphasis in original), quoted in Davis, *The Making of James Agee*, 94.
- ⁶⁹ Agee, letter to Evans, 27 July 1938, 1, James Agee Collection, Harry Ransom Research Center, U of Texas, Austin, box 11, folder 12, 1, quoted in Davis, *The Making of James Agee*, 95.

- ⁷⁰ Rathbone, *Walker Evans: A Biography*, 24.
- ⁷¹ Hambourg, "A Portrait of the Artist," 10.
- ⁷² Rosenheim and Eklund, *Unclassified*, 32, 36.
- ⁷³ Davis, *The Making of James Agee*, 131–38.
- ⁷⁴ Evans, "Translated Excerpt of Andre Gide's *Si le grain ne meurt*."
- ⁷⁵ Rosenheim and Eklund, *Unclassified*, 145.
- ⁷⁶ Susik, "Chance and Automatism," 250.
- ⁷⁷ Fijalkowski, "The Object," 197, quoting André Breton, *Nadja*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 52.
- ⁷⁸ Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," 84.
- ⁷⁹ Rosenheim, " "The Cruel Radiance of What Is '," 57.
- ⁸⁰ Rosenheim, 90.
- ⁸¹ Rosenheim, 94.
- ⁸² Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 143, 145.
- ⁸³ Agee and Evans, 145.
- ⁸⁴ Sun, *Succeeding King Lear*, 144, 149.
- ⁸⁵ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 146.
- ⁸⁶ Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 41.
- ⁸⁷ Suárez, *Pop Modernism*, 250.
- ⁸⁸ Evans, *Many Are Called*.
- ⁸⁹ North, "The Significance of Walker Evans' *Many Are Called*," 35.
- ⁹⁰ Fineman, "Notes from the Underground," 107.
- ⁹¹ Walker Evans, interview with Jeffrey W. Limerick, 1973, cited in Gilles Mora and John T. Hill, *Walker Evans: The Hungry Eye* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 219, quoted in Fineman, 108.
- ⁹² Fineman, "Notes from the Underground," 109.
- ⁹³ Suárez, *Pop Modernism*, 240–41, 255.
- ⁹⁴ Suárez, 237–38.

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Author Jon Krakauer at a speaking engagement, October 2009.
Devon Christopher Adams/Wikimedia.

From Literary Journalism to Transmedia Worlds: *Into the Wild* and Beyond

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Abstract: This study explores literary journalism's potential to create transmedia worlds through a salient example—the narrative world that has slowly grown around the news story recounting the discovery of Christopher McCandless's body in a remote Alaskan camp in 1992. The study describes how the news story has grown into a larger and richer storyworld scattered across different media, and details how readers have found and created various opportunities to engage in this storyworld. The expansion from news story to transmedia world, the study argues, was made possible because author Jon Krakauer became interested in the story and turned it into two pieces of literary journalism: "Death of an Innocent," a 1993 article published in *Outside* magazine and, more importantly, his 1996 book, *Into the Wild*. Those pieces of literary journalism provided full, vivid, and emotionally charged accounts of McCandless's story with strong impact and resonance. Other authors expanded Krakauer's narrative into a larger and richer world, dispersed across different media, thereby engaging larger audiences in the storyworld. The study concludes with a discussion of a few other examples of literary journalism that to varying degrees expand into transmedia worlds and argues for literary journalists to consider transmedia storytelling when conceiving their narratives.

Keywords: transmedia – literary journalism – storyworld – audience participation – Jon Krakauer

On September 13, 1992, numerous U.S. media outlets reported the discovery of an unidentified hiker's body in a remote area of Alaska. Almost three decades later, many people throughout the world still know the young hiker's name, Christopher McCandless, and his story, which became well known through a book and then film, both entitled *Into the Wild*.¹ Fans and detractors have commented on the story in letters to the book author, columns in the media, and posts on social networks or fan websites. "Pilgrims" have embarked on the same journey to Alaska,² and the young hiker's fate has inspired numerous articles, books, films, and television shows.

This essay details how that first news story slowly expanded into what can be considered a *transmedia world*—and highlights the role that literary journalism played in that expansion. Over the decades there have been multiple examples of cross-media literary journalism, with magazine pieces or newspaper series turned into books, documentaries, or films. What distinguishes *Into the Wild* from those—and argues for its being considered transmedia—is the extent and richness of the *storyworld* created around the core story, as well as the numerous and diverse ways that have emerged for readers and viewers to *participate* in this storyworld.

The essay first presents the notion of transmedia storytelling and its adaptation to journalism. It then relates how a large and engaging storyworld has grown around the story of McCandless and discusses why the storyworld can be considered transmedia. The conclusion briefly examines a few other examples of journalistic narratives that have circulated across media—from *Hiroshima* to *Serial*—in order to reflect on the relationship between literary journalism and transmedia storytelling.

Transmedia Storytelling, World-Building, and Audience Participation

Since Marsha Kinder first introduced the term *transmedia* into the field of media studies in 1991,³ the notion has been widely debated.⁴ The most widely used definition remains Henry Jenkins's, who says transmedia storytelling can be understood as "a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes [its] own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story."⁵ As such, transmedia storytelling provides "a new model for co-creation—rather than adaptation—of content that crosses media."⁶ Transmedia storytelling "do[es] not involve the telling of the same events on different platforms; [it] involve[s] the telling of *new* events from the *same* storyworld."⁷

The notion of *storyworld* has recently gained traction in narratology, as the dynamic model of the world projected by a narrative text—be it fictional

or factual.⁸ Marie-Laure Ryan describes a storyworld as being composed of:

Exists: the characters of the story and the objects that have special significance for the plot

Setting: a space within which the existents are located

Physical laws: principles that determine what kind of events can and cannot happen in a given story

Social rules and values: principles that determine the obligations of characters

Events: the causes of the changes of state that happen in the time span framed by the narrative

Mental events: the character's reactions to perceived or actual states of affairs⁹

Whereas every narrative text normally projects its own storyworld, in transmedia storytelling, the storyworld refers to “the representation of a world [that] is distributed among many different texts of different media.”¹⁰ Ryan thus argues that the term transmedia *world-building* would be more appropriate than transmedia *storytelling*.¹¹ World-building is also central to Jenkins's conception of transmedia, and he suggests that there are two main logics in transmedia world-building. Most of the time, authors opt for a logic of *continuity*, proposing different narrative segments that are coherent with each other in order to increase the plausibility of the world. However, a transmedia world may sometimes offer alternative versions of a story or character, thus applying a logic of *multiplicity*.¹² Although Jenkins probably draws this distinction for the field of fictional narratives—as he usually does—it appears particularly interesting for nonfictional narratives, for which conflicting versions often may coexist, depending on who tells the story.¹³

Because transmedia storytelling creates storyworlds *across media*, the phenomenon appears to be closely connected to the current context of media convergence, that is, “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want.”¹⁴ In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins convincingly argues that convergence should not be primarily seen as a technological shift, but as a cultural transformation, toward “participatory culture,” in which, by his definition, “fans and consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content.”¹⁵ Accordingly, in transmedia storytelling, the construction of a larger storyworld ultimately

aims at “intensifying audience engagement.”¹⁶ Carlos Scolari, Paolo Bertetti, and Matthew Freeman suggest the following equation: “*Media Industry (canon) + Collaborative Culture (fandom) = Transmedia Storytelling.*”¹⁷

Regarding the circulation of content, scholars have mostly focused on *spreadability* as “the potential—both technical and cultural—for audiences to share content for their own purposes, sometimes with the permission of rights holders, sometimes against their wishes.”¹⁸ Yet Jason Mittel suggests that audiences also engage in *drillable* texts, which encourage them to “dig deeper” into the storyworld.¹⁹ Noting that drillable texts become highly spreadable for fan audiences, Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green consider both spreadability and drillability as valid models for engaging audiences in transmedia storytelling.²⁰

Audiences also engage with the storyworld in more active ways, by creating their own contributions to it—activating what Jenkins describes as opportunities for *performance*.²¹ Such participation can be foreseen or encouraged by the authors, or not. Participation may result in the creation of a new segment, such as in fanfiction writing, or not—for example, when reenacting scenes of the story. Audience performance can sometimes even become an integral part of the storyworld and affect the unfolding of future stories.

Transmedia and Journalism

Though first conceived as a commercial strategy of media conglomerates in the fields of fiction and entertainment, “transmediality has since grown into a distinct subfield of scholarly investigation . . .”²² The notion of transmedia has quickly been adapted to journalism, among other fields. Transmedia journalism is then “characterized by the involvement of (1) multiple media platforms, (2) content expansion, and (3) audience engagement.”²³ This definition highlights the same key features as the previous discussion of transmedia storytelling: the dispersion of non-repetitive yet highly cohesive content across different media—that is, building a storyworld—and the participation of audiences.

In their effort to explore and outline *Transmedia Archaeology*, Scolari, Bertetti, and Freeman claim that “[j]ournalists have been producing transmedia storytelling for years . . .”²⁴ Indeed, news stories have long been covered in different media²⁵ and the public has long had opportunities to engage with such stories, first through letters or phone calls to the newsrooms, then through comments, forums, emails, and so on. Yet, as Renira Gambarato and Lorena Tárca note, “thus far, the majority of the content spread across different media platforms is simply repurposed.”²⁶ While a large number of news media, now more than ever, tailor their content for different platforms,

true transmedia projects, in which each platform offers a form of content expansion—not repetition or slight adaptation—are recent and remain few in number in journalism.²⁷

Most of the research on transmedia journalism has focused on such projects. Gambarato and Tárca argue that “[a]lthough every newsworthy event has the potential to be transmediatic, transmedia journalism is optimized when it becomes a proactive planned process with journalists assuming responsibility for building a storyworld in which the prosumers . . . , consumers who are also media producers, are engaged.”²⁸ Accordingly, transmedia journalism would be especially well-suited for digital longform journalism as they both “embrace new technologies (mobile, locative media, for instance) and devices (smartphones, tablets, etc.) to tell compelling stories able to reach a diversified public. The audience engagement is a central point for both to involve the audience as collaborators and create a more valuable experience.”²⁹

This study explores further the connection between transmedia and longform journalism, arguing that forms of transmedia longform journalism predate these recent digital projects, although such forms were not designed as unified and coordinated experiences. As Ryan notes, even in the field of fiction, “[t]ransmedia storytelling is supposed to be a top-down operation that coordinates various media for a global experience, but in practice it usually starts bottom-up, by exploiting the commercial success of a narrative originally conceived as autonomous. . . .”³⁰ Following Ryan, this study suggests that the absence of planning and coordination does not disqualify a set of narrative segments from being considered as a transmedia venture.

Moreover, the study adheres to Freeman and Gambarato’s argument that “[r]evising, refining, and clarifying our understanding of what does—and therefore what does not—constitute a form of “transmedia” is indeed crucial, both to the future of this avenue of study but more importantly to our collective abilities to make sense of how, why, and when media content flows, expands, and moves across multiple media platforms in particular ways, for particular reasons, and with particular effects.”³¹ The study intends to contribute to this endeavor within the field of journalism by exploring a form of transmedia journalism that was not “the result of ‘carefully orchestrated company strategies’,”³² but sprang from a largely unintended and uncoordinated expansion. Through the example of *Into the Wild*, this analysis will show how a simple news story became a piece of literary journalism that then grew into a large and highly engaging storyworld spreading across different media. It will then reflect on the relationship between literary journalism and transmedia.

Into the Wild Obsession

ANCHORAGE, SEPT. 12—Last Sunday a young hiker, stranded by an injury, was found dead at a remote camp in the Alaskan interior. No one is yet certain who he was. But his diary and two notes found at the camp tell a wrenching story of his desperate and progressively futile efforts to survive.³³

The story that is now known as *Into the Wild* started with this 1992 article in the *New York Times*, headlined “Dying in the Wild, a Hiker Recorded the Terror.” Many U.S. media outlets covered that story until a second and final *Times* article entitled, “Hiker Identified by Self-Portrait,” was published a week later, on September 20. The article reported that the young man was in fact “Christopher J. McCandless, a 24-year-old from Annandale, Va., who graduated from Emory University in Atlanta.”³⁴ Yet this revelation was far from being the end of McCandless’s story. An editor from *Outside* magazine who had read the first *Times* piece became so intrigued by the tragic details of the young hiker’s story that he asked writer Jon Krakauer to investigate it further and write a long piece for the magazine. Krakauer was busy with other writing but the story resonated with him “on a deeply personal level,” and he decided to accept the new assignment.³⁵

The resulting magazine piece, “Death of an Innocent,” published in the January 1993 issue of *Outside*,³⁶ mixes deep and thorough reporting with Krakauer’s personal experience in order to deliver a gripping and vivid re-creation of the life and journey of McCandless while also reflecting on the human relationship to wilderness. The text thus reveals all the characteristics of literary journalism as defined by Norman Sims—“immersion reporting, complicated structures, character development, symbolism, voice, a focus on ordinary people . . . and accuracy.”³⁷ Krakauer concluded, at the end of the piece:

One of his last acts was to take a photograph of himself, standing near the bus under the high Alaskan sky, one hand holding his final note toward the camera lens, the other raised in a brave, beatific farewell. He is smiling in the photo, and there is no mistaking the look in his eyes: Chris McCandless was at peace, serene as a monk gone to God.³⁸

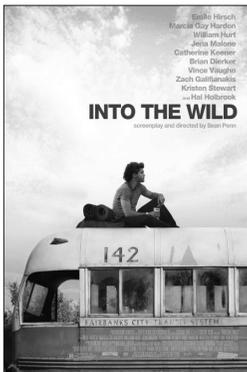
Krakauer, however, could not let the story go: “I was haunted by the particulars of the boy’s starvation and by vague, unsettling parallels between events in his life and those in my own.”³⁹ He resumed his reporting and investigation, retracing McCandless’s life step by step. The outcome of this



hard work was a book-length manuscript published in 1996 entitled *Into the Wild* that qualifies as literary journalism according to Sims's definition. The book is not only a longer and more detailed account of McCandless's story, it also includes more people McCandless met along the way and longer flashbacks to his childhood and previous travels. Based on his additional investigation, Krakauer suggested another cause of death. He also developed comparisons with his own younger self and with other adventurers who sought the wild that were only briefly outlined in the magazine piece. As he explains in the author's note:

In trying to understand McCandless, I inevitably came to reflect on other, larger subjects as well: the grip wilderness has on the American imagination, the allure high-risk activities hold for young men of a certain mind, the complicated, highly charged bond that exists between fathers and sons.⁴⁰

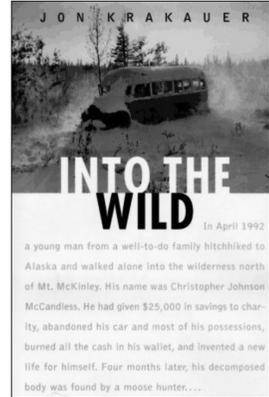
The book quickly became a bestseller, with several million copies purchased in the United States alone. Among the first readers was actor and director Sean Penn. He immediately knew he wanted to turn it into a film, although because of concerns from McCandless's family it took more than



ten years to complete the project. Also titled *Into the Wild*, the film was released in 2007. Its revenue exceeded \$18 million in U.S. theaters, and \$56 million worldwide.⁴¹ Although the film is based on the book, and Krakauer, as well as other characters from the book, acted as consultants on the set, the film reflects Penn's own take on McCandless's story. Adapting written words to the screen, Penn had no choice but to fictionalize the story in some measure. But he went further than what was strictly needed to fill the gaps in Krakauer's text with images and sounds.

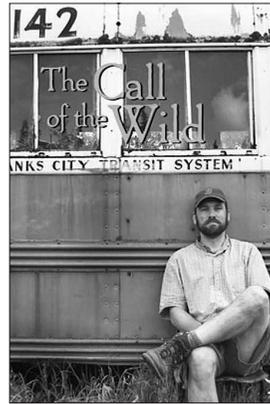
Compared to the book, the film features important changes regarding structure and voice—sometimes it seems McCandless is telling or commenting on his own story, sometimes it is his sister Carine—and, most notably, the ending of the story.

In the book, as in the magazine article, McCandless dies alone in the abandoned bus where he has established his camp, "serene as a monk gone to God." In the film, McCandless, dying in the bus, smiles as he looks up at the sky and imagines himself running back to his parents; in voice-over, he asks: "What if I



were smiling and running into your arms, would you see then what I see now?” In her memoirs, Carine, who acted as a consultant for the film, recounts how this scene is Penn’s compromise between the idea of forgiveness that he wanted to convey and her fear of betraying her brother’s actual experience.⁴²

That same year, 2007, a few months after Penn’s film was released, another film was devoted to McCandless’s story—*The Call of the Wild*, an independent documentary made by Ron Lamothe, yet another man deeply touched by the story. It offers a rather different take on the story, openly disagreeing with some elements of Krakauer’s account—based on newly uncovered evidence, such as McCandless’s backpack and wallet—and suggesting a different hypothesis about the cause of McCandless’s death. Yet, according to Lamothe, “despite some of the unpleasant truths that are uncovered in the film, and some of the controversies engaged, or negative opinions given voice for the first time, this film is in the end a celebration of the spirit of Chris McCandless, and a reflection on his legacy.”⁴³

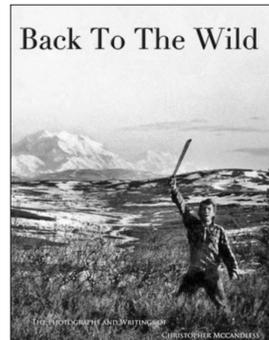


In 2008, Discovery Channel launched a new reality television series entitled *The Alaska Experiment*, which in 2009 was opportunely renamed *Out of the Wild: The Alaska Experiment*. In both seasons, participants were dropped off in the Alaskan backcountry during the middle of winter, where they would have to survive on their own for several weeks.⁴⁴



Then, in 2011, McCandless’s parents edited a book and a DVD, both entitled *Back to the Wild*, featuring the photographs their son took during his trip, as well as some of his correspondence. In a note at the beginning of the book, Krakauer presents these as “the raw material that enabled [him] to write *Into the Wild*.”⁴⁵ This raw material, however, is framed by introductory texts and captions written by a team of authors, including McCandless’s parents, in order to “give each photograph a voice.”⁴⁶

It was then the turn of Carine, McCandless’s sister, to publish a book in 2014. Her memoirs, *The Wild Truth*, recount their childhood as well as her life since her brother’s death. The memoirs focus largely on *The Secrets That Drove Chris McCandless*



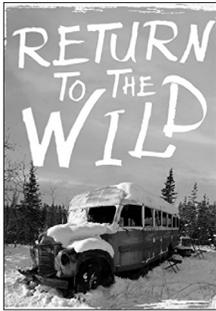
into the Wild, as the book subtitle puts it, detailing the climate of lies and violence in which they both grew up. Krakauer reveals in the foreword that Carine had told him all about their childhood when he was writing *Into the Wild*, but she had made him promise to keep it “off the record.”⁴⁷

I was confident I could provide enough indirect clues for readers to understand that, to no small degree, Chris’s seemingly inexplicable behavior during the final years of his life was in fact explained by the volatile dynamics of the McCandless family while he was growing up.

Many readers did understand this, as it turned out. But many did not. . . .

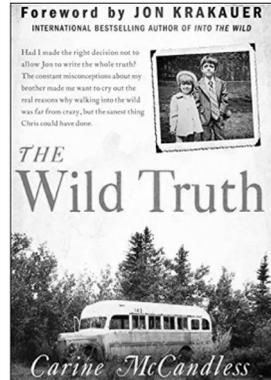
. . . Two decades after her brother’s death, she [Carine] decided it was time to tell Chris’s entire story, plainly and directly. . . .⁴⁸

Closely following the book’s release, U.S. public television broadcast *Return to the Wild: The Chris McCandless Story*, a documentary retracing both McCandless’s story and the new revelations in his sister’s memoirs.⁴⁹

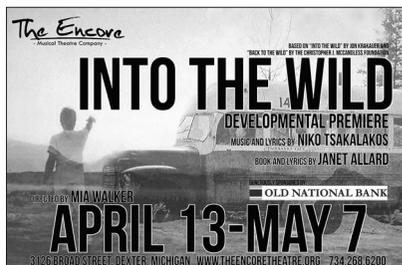


Meanwhile, Krakauer remained obsessed with the young man’s fate. His continuing investigation into causes of death resulted in the publication of two *New Yorker* articles—“How Chris McCandless Died,” published in September 2013, and “How Chris McCandless Died: An Update,” published in February 2015, both on the magazine’s Page-Turner website.⁵⁰

Krakauer was not the only one who could not let the story of McCandless go. Every new article, book, or film released also offered an opportunity for more comments in the media. While most of these comments seemed to be reviews or restatements of the main facts, a few raised divergent voices, some even vehemently challenging Krakauer’s account. The most vocal critic appears to have been Craig Medred, a columnist for the *Alaska Dispatch News*. Medred wrote, among other pieces, “Krakauer Goes Further ‘Into the Wild’ over McCandless Starving to Death in Alaska,” in September 2013, and “The Fiction That Is Jon Krakauer’s ‘Into the Wild,’” in January 2015.⁵¹ Medred’s main thesis is that “Krakauer fixated on the ‘aesthetic voyager’ part and started shaping a book around it. McCandless was transformed from a foolish, dead cheechako [inexperienced beginner in mining territory] into a heroic figure who died tragically, as heroes must.”⁵²



Despite the criticism, new productions based on *Into the Wild* kept popping up all over the world. To give just a few examples: In 2015, Tom Waes, a Dutch-speaking Belgian on-air presenter, inspired by the book, decided to devote a television show to Alaska.⁵³ In 2016, the *Diary of Chris McCandless* was posted online, as if McCandless were telling his own story in thirty-three blog entries.⁵⁴ The blog allegedly tells McCandless's story in the first person, through thirty-three entries loosely inspired by McCandless's actual diary—but, in reality, entirely rewritten and containing many fictionalized additions. In 2017, a musical entitled *Into the Wild* was premiered at a Michigan theater.⁵⁵ In 2018, a British novel, Abi Andrews's *The Word for Woman Is Wilderness*, came out, in which a young girl decides to go to Alaska after watching Penn's film.⁵⁶



Fans remain active, too. Beyond the comments generated by articles in the media—where one can also find critics—people have shared their thoughts on the internet: stories of transformation after reading or watching *Into the Wild* and pictures of their tattoos or fan art inspired by McCandless's story. One of Krakauer's later articles on the causes of McCandless's death, "How Chris McCandless Died,"⁵⁷ was prompted by an essay Krakauer read on a fan site.⁵⁸ On social networks, voracious fans as recently as 2018 were exchanging references of books to read after *Into the Wild*—such as *A Walk in the Woods*, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, *Wild*,⁵⁹ but also the works of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Edward Abbey, and others. Fans could also find on different websites, shells for mobile phones, cushions, bags, or t-shirts, all stamped Into the Wild and for sale.

Each year, like the Belgian TV presenter and the English fictional character, dozens of readers and viewers are drawn to Alaska. Many of them even go on a pilgrimage in McCandless's footsteps to the abandoned bus in which his body was found—despite the danger of such a trek. Each year, several have to be rescued as they get lost or injured on the way. In 2010 and 2019, two women died on their way to the bus while they were trying to cross a river.⁶⁰ But this has not deterred pilgrims who kept coming to the source—and become part of the story themselves, as they get media coverage.⁶¹ Eventually, in order to avoid other incidents, Alaskan state officials decided in June 2020 to remove the bus and transport to a "secure site."⁶²

The Features of Transmedia at Play

The storyworld that grew around the story of McCandless appears larger and richer than Krakauer's original article, or even his book. Penn's film provides a view of the places and landscapes McCandless visited. Lamothe's documentary gives the faces of some of the people he met, as well as a different version of the story. The book and DVD edited by McCandless's parents include McCandless's face and his photographs, as well as his own words. Carine McCandless's book broadens the scope of his story while also introducing and developing many minor characters. Each new narrative segment thus contributes to transmedia world-building—the expansion of the storyworld across different media. While all these narrative segments do not tell strictly distinct episodes, the expansion is perceptible even through the titles: *Into the Wild*, *Back to the Wild*, *The Wild Truth*, *Return to the Wild*, and so on. The storyworld, moreover, expands beyond the realms of facts and journalism into the realms of fiction, as with Penn's film, *Into the Wild*, or Andrews's British novel, *The Word for Woman Is Wilderness*; and entertainment, as with Discovery Channel's reality television series, *Out of the Wild*; and the Michigan theater's musical, *Into the Wild*. Such expansion across the divide between fiction and nonfiction suggests that neither transmedia storytelling in Jenkins's sense—that is, as the planned dispersion of various elements of a fiction across different media—nor transmedia journalism as it has been studied so far, provides a fully adequate framework to investigate complex transmedia forms such as *Into the Wild*—thus calling for a study of transmedia phenomena, beyond demarcated fields, in a transdisciplinary approach.

A large part of the storyworld expansion follows a logic of continuity with regard to the core narrative as it was told by Krakauer, first in the 1993 *Outside* piece, "Death of an Innocent," then in his book, *Into the Wild*. Krakauer was involved in producing Penn's film, the book edited by McCandless's parents, and McCandless's sister Carine's memoirs. Yet another part of the storyworld is built through a logic of multiplicity, which reveals each author's view of McCandless. This second logic appears most clearly in the articles written by Medred, who considers McCandless a "foolish, dead cheechako," accusing Krakauer of turning him into a hero. Continuity and multiplicity can also interact in complex ways. In their books, McCandless's parents and Carine present themselves as continuing Krakauer's story—and both books feature a note from Krakauer himself reinforcing the continuity.⁶³ But the logic at work between the two books is multiplicity: while McCandless's parents write that one can only speculate on the reasons that led their son into the wild, Carine's goal is precisely to shed light on those reasons and hold her parents accountable. Penn claimed to be "just a faithful adapter,"⁶⁴

but offered a slightly different take on the story, as evidenced by the ending of the film, noted earlier. Even among Krakauer's various texts, which careful comparisons show to be coherent with each other, there is a form of multiplicity: each offers a different explanation for McCandless's death, thus creating slightly different stories that coexist in the larger storyworld.

It seems that these two logics of world-building coexist and combine in such complex ways because the storyworld of *Into the Wild* is neither a top-down venture nor a grass-roots endeavor. There is no *Into the Wild* franchise, which would be entitled to narrative control over the storyworld. Instead, the storyworld grew from the bottom up, "through a process of aggregation that adds ever new documents to the representation of a storyworld that has already achieved popularity, independently of any transmedia buildup."⁶⁵ Yet contrary to most bottom-up transmedia endeavors, these new documents were created not only by amateur-fans, they were also and mostly produced by different professionals and distributed by various mainstream media, which all reveal highly diverse relationships to Krakauer and his original work. This particular configuration also accounts for the coexistence in the storyworld of deeply personal works by passionate authors like Krakauer, or even Lamothe, and purely commercial undertakings such as the reality TV show, *Out of the Wild*, and all the items stamped Into the Wild that one can buy online.⁶⁶

For audiences, the storyworld becomes more drillable with every new narrative segment. While *Outside* magazine readers had to wait several years to read the expanded version in book form, and another decade-plus to watch the film, fans can now access the original images of McCandless's journey, learn more about his childhood, and absorb conflicting perspectives on Krakauer's account. The elements of the storyworld have also become more spreadable. Although Krakauer's article and book were published before the age of social media, there are now Facebook pages, websites, and forums where readers can share other segments of the narrative world, some of which are created by other fans.

Segments of the narrative world created by fans constitute performances, in Jenkins's sense. Whether these new segments created by fans are personal essays, artwork, or even pictures of tattoos, they reveal how the narrative world of *Into the Wild* has made it into the lives of its readers. The highest degree of such performances happens with Krakauer's testing and then adopting a fan's theory on the causes of McCandless's death: an alternative version of the story, proposed by a fan, is validated by the primary author. Another kind of performance, also intense, consists of making one's life into the storyworld, as when fans turn themselves into pilgrims and make the journey to the bus in Alaska. Such pilgrimages attract media coverage that revives the

main story of *Into the Wild* and expands the storyworld as fans themselves become characters in this world.

Finally, by exchanging recommendations for books to read after *Into the Wild*, which can be seen as another form of performance, fans connect McCandless's story with other stories—that may be more or less similar. Fans are, in fact, continuing a movement that Krakauer himself initiated in his book, where he evokes the destiny of other adventurers—including himself—and creates an extensive network of references to great nature and outdoor writers, among them, Thoreau, Muir, and Jack London. It thus seems that both the primary author and the fans are exploring and questioning the boundaries of the storyworld around *Into the Wild*, as well as its relationship to other stories and other storyworlds that appear to be part of a broader cultural narrative about the human relationship with nature. Again, this invites a transdisciplinary investigation of transmedia phenomena that would be able to explore not only different storyworlds—both factual and fictional—but also the different kinds of relationships among these storyworlds.

As this analysis shows, the storyworld around McCandless cannot be considered as pure transmedia in Jenkins's sense—first because it was unplanned and uncoordinated, but also, and more fundamentally, because some part of it seems closer to cross-media.⁶⁷ It still qualifies as transmedia, however, because a rich storyworld is indeed built across different media and through the active participation of audiences. Consequently, the example of *Into the Wild* would call for a more complex definition of transmedia, which would take into account different modes of production as well as different degrees of content expansion.

Literary Journalism and Transmedia Expansion

One feature of transmedia seems of peculiar importance in the expansion process of the storyworld around *Into the Wild*: spreadability. Even before the internet and social networks helped spread McCandless's story, *Into the Wild* inherently had a particularly strong propensity to spread, which seems to be at the origin of its narrative expansion. This propensity seems to stem from both the story itself and the narrative into which Krakauer turned it. McCandless's story appears to appeal deeply to certain individuals. Indeed, *Into the Wild* started with an editor from *Outside*, fascinated by a news report about McCandless, who asked Krakauer to investigate the story further. Then Krakauer himself became obsessed with the story and devoted not only a magazine piece, but also a whole book to it—and several other magazine pieces, years later.

Krakauer's first two pieces appear pivotal in the expansion of the story into a larger transmedia world—especially the book, which reached a much

larger audience. By providing a full account of McCandless's story, these two pieces of literary journalism constituted the narrative core that was necessary for a larger storyworld to grow. Moreover, as vividly rendered and emotionally charged narratives, they had such strong impact and resonance that others—writers, filmmakers, witnesses, or even just fans—expanded them into a larger and richer world, dispersed across different media and engaging audiences.

Indeed, Penn decided to make a film about McCandless after reading the book.⁶⁸ As did Lamothe. McCandless's parents started their DVD and book project after witnessing “a steadily growing, international interest in Chris' story guided by Jon Krakauer's book (1996) and Sean Penn's film (2007).”⁶⁹ Carine, troubled by the “mistaken assumptions” of some readers of *Into the Wild*, finally decided to tell explicitly what she had asked Krakauer to keep “off the record.”⁷⁰ The first pilgrims trekked to the abandoned bus in Alaska before Penn's film was released—though the number of pilgrims increased after 2007.⁷¹ Even critics, such as Lamothe and Medred, reacted mainly to the book.

Nevertheless, Krakauer's version endured, despite all the challenges raised against it. What allowed Krakauer's narrative to both expand and survive its expansion—the criticisms, the alternative versions, but also the commercial hijacking—is the hallmark of literary journalists, their ability to recognize powerful stories and to tell these in such a way as to make them even more powerful. While *Into the Wild* appears as a particularly striking example of literary journalism's capacity to create rich and engaging storyworlds across media, it is not the only one.

An early example, although closer to cross-media than transmedia per se, could be John Hersey's *Hiroshima*. First published as a magazine piece in the *New Yorker*, in August 1946, just over a year after an atomic bomb had been dropped on the city of Hiroshima, the story was read on the radio and reprinted in newspapers and magazines, and then turned into a book.⁷² It was also widely discussed in other media and complemented, decades later, by Hersey himself in “Hiroshima: The Aftermath”⁷³—both of which can be considered forms of expansion across media. Although hard to measure in any objective way, Yavenditti describes Hersey's *Hiroshima* as having had a huge impact on the U.S. public and the debate about the atomic bomb⁷⁴—thus revealing strong audience engagement.

Another example might be *Black Hawk Down*, about the battle in Mogadishu⁷⁵—although, again, the storyworld beyond the core narrative appears somewhat limited. Written by Mark Bowden, the story was first printed as a news series in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 1997, and published on the

newspaper's website with multimedia extensions such as video, audio clips, maps, links to other online resources, but also question-and-answer sessions with the author.⁷⁶ In 1999, the series was adapted as a book, also entitled *Black Hawk Down*, and a companion documentary, *Somalia: Good Intentions, Deadly Results*.⁷⁷ Two years later, Ridley Scott adapted Bowden's story into a Hollywood film, which raised controversies about its depiction of the facts, thus reviving media coverage about the original story.⁷⁸

The first season of the *Serial* podcast appears as a more recent and more well-developed example.⁷⁹ In that first season, released in 2014, host Sarah Koenig reopened an old case, the murder of teenager Hae Min Lee in 1999, for which Hae Min Lee's ex-boyfriend, Adnan Syed, was convicted in 2000. In addition to the podcast itself, the *Serial* website also featured multimedia material—images of pieces of evidence, maps, and charts—related to the case. While the twelve-episode series ended without any clear conclusion about Syed's guilt, it revealed new evidence and prompted strong interest in the case—or, in other words, strong audience engagement. Various media took up the investigation, sharing hypotheses and clues online. So did an impressive number of listeners.⁸⁰

Rabia Chaudry, the lawyer and friend of Syed who first contacted Koenig about Syed's story, created *Undisclosed*,⁸¹ her own podcast about wrongful convictions, which started by investigating the case. She also wrote a book entitled *Adnan's Story: The Search for Truth and Justice after Serial*,⁸² in which she claims to present new evidence but also to share Syed's life in prison. A key witness in the case, Asia McClain Chapman, published a book as well, *Confessions of a Serial Alibi*,⁸³ explaining the part she played and telling her own story. A one-hour documentary produced by Investigation Discovery and a four-hour documentary produced by HBO were also devoted to the case and the aftermath of *Serial* on the case.⁸⁴ In March 2019, when Syed received a new hearing about the evidence revealed by and after *Serial*, Koenig herself went back to the case with three new episodes of the podcast.⁸⁵ All those narrative segments contributed to build a larger storyworld across different media.

Moreover, like *Into the Wild*, *Serial* became famous not only because of the case it dealt with, but also because of the way Koenig recounted the case and her own investigation. In fact, the distinctive style of the podcast gave rise to several parodies—on the video website *Funny or Die* and in Netflix mockumentary *American Vandal*, among others.⁸⁶ Indirectly, these connected Syed's story to other, fictional stories—in a manner somewhat similar to the way the intertextual references of Krakauer and *Into the Wild* readers connected McCandless's story to stories written by Thoreau and London. Syed's story was

also indirectly related to two other seasons of *Serial*. Season two focused on the case of protagonist Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, a soldier charged with desertion after being kept as a prisoner for five years by the Taliban, while season three focused on the entire U.S. justice system.⁸⁷

These are just a few examples of literary journalism pieces for which the stories were enriched by extensions on other media, thus creating larger storyworlds in which their audiences could engage and participate. While some of these extensions contain comparatively little new narrative information, and most of them were not the result of planned and coordinated efforts, the key features of transmedia storytelling are indeed at play in the expansion of these stories—to varying degrees. These few examples thus reveal the capacity of literary journalism to create transmedia worlds. This capacity builds on both the kind of complex human stories literary journalism tells and the way it tells them—through complete and highly experiential narratives that also convey a larger symbolic dimension.

As transmedia storytelling becomes more *en vogue* in media industries, this capacity could, in future, be more fully drawn out if literary journalists were to conceive their pieces as the core of a transmedia world that they could build—or at least plan—themselves. Such larger transmedia worlds might help literary journalists reach a larger audience, engage this larger audience more fully, and thus they might be more likely to take action as citizens, and help avoid the purely economic hijacking of their stories. This would require that literary journalists start thinking in terms of storyworld—of a network of intertwined stories, rather than focusing on a single plot—and reflecting on how, on what platform, and in what order each of these stories should be told, released, and connected to the others. Literary journalists should also consider how to make the storyworld both spreadable and drillable for their audience and try to identify opportunities in the storyworld for different kinds of audience performances.

Developing transmedia literary journalism projects would also require new forms of collaboration within the newsroom, because most newspapers and magazines now present information on multiple platforms. But development also means collaborations with other mainstream media or new actors in the field. Netflix, for example, has shown an interest in stories told by literary journalists, as evidenced by the recent releases of *Unbelievable* and *Dirty John*.⁸⁸ Such collaborations should bring together the reporting and storytelling skills of literary journalists and the expertise of transmedia specialists in world-building and audience engagement.

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Notes

- ¹ Krakauer, *Into the Wild*; Penn, *Into the Wild*.
- ² Holland, "Chasing Alexander Supertramp," para. 3.
- ³ Kinder, *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games*, 1. See also Scolari, "Transmedia Is Dead," 69–92.
- ⁴ Some of these debates are outlined in Ryan, "Le transmedia storytelling comme pratique narrative," para. 1–34. For a more comprehensive view on the state of scholarly discussion around transmedia, see, for example, Freeman and Gambarato, *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*.
- ⁵ Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling 101," para. 2.
- ⁶ Hence the distinction between *cross-media*—or adaptation—and *transmedia*. Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling: Moving Characters," para. 5.
- ⁷ Evans, *Transmedia Television*, 27 (emphasis in original).
- ⁸ "Nonfictional stories are told as true of the real world, but they do not necessarily live up to this ideal. The storyteller can be lying, misinformed, or playing loosely with the facts. It is therefore necessary to distinguish the world as it is presented and shaped by a story from the world as it exists autonomously. The former is the storyworld, the latter the reference world." Ryan, "Story/Worlds/Media," 33.
- ⁹ Ryan, 34–36.
- ¹⁰ Ryan, 32.
- ¹¹ Ryan, "Transmedia Storytelling," 4–5.
- ¹² Jenkins, "La licorne origami contre-attaque," 11–28. For a presentation of Jenkins's principles of transmedia storytelling in English, and his elaboration on the concepts of continuity and multiplicity, see Jenkins, "The Revenge of the Origami Unicorn: Seven Principles of Transmedia Storytelling," subsection 2, "Continuity and Multiplicity"; and "Revenge of the Origami Unicorn: The Remaining Four Principles of Transmedia Storytelling," section 4, "Worldbuilding."
- ¹³ Indeed, the possibility of coexisting conflicting versions concurs with Ryan's argument for applying the notion of storyworld to factual narratives (See note 8). Ryan, "Story/Worlds/Media," 33.
- ¹⁴ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 2.
- ¹⁵ Jenkins, 3, 290, s.v. "participatory culture." After stating his basic argument

on page 3, Jenkins weaves the argument throughout *Convergence Culture*. See also Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*.

¹⁶ Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media*, 138.

¹⁷ Scolari, Bertetti, and Freeman, *Transmedia Archaeology*, 3 (emphasis in original).

¹⁸ Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media*, 3.

¹⁹ Jason Mittell, in Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, enhanced edition (New York and London: New York University Press, 2013), as quoted in Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media*, 135.

²⁰ Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 135–37; 198–228.

²¹ Jenkins, “La licorne origami contre-attaque,” para. 52–55.

²² Freeman and Gambarato, “Introduction: Transmedia Studies—Where Now?” 2.

²³ Gambarato and Tárca, “Transmedia Strategies in Journalism,” 1386.

²⁴ Scolari, Bertetti, and Freeman, *Transmedia Archaeology*, 4.

²⁵ The circulation of news stories across various media is one of the defining characteristics of “media narratives” as defined by Lits, “Le récit médiatique,” 47–48, and Marion, “Narratologie médiatique et médiagenie des récits,” 70–71, among others.

²⁶ Gambarato and Tárca, “Transmedia Strategies in Journalism,” 1385.

²⁷ For examples, see Canavilhas, “Journalism in the Twenty-First Century: To Be or Not to Be Transmedia?” 1–14; Larrondo Ureta, “The Advance of Autonomous Public Televisions in the Convergent Scenario,” 107–20; Godulla and Wolf, “Future of Food: Transmedia Strategies of National Geographic,” 162–82; Moloney, “Future of Story: Transmedia Journalism and National Geographic’s *Future of Food Project*”; Gambarato and Tárca, “Transmedia Strategies in Journalism,” 1381–99.

²⁸ Gambarato and Tárca, 1385. Alvin Toffler introduces the term prosumers in his *Third Wave: The Classic Study of Tomorrow*, 267.

²⁹ Gambarato, “The Sochi Project: Slow Journalism within Transmedia Space,” 448–49. See also Eberwein, “A Question of Trust: Functions and Effects of Transmedia Journalism,” 15–30.

³⁰ Ryan, “Transmedia Storytelling,” 5.

³¹ Freeman and Gambarato, “Introduction: Transmedia Studies—Where Now?” 2.

³² Fast and Örnebring, “Transmedia World-Building,” 637, quoted in Gambarato, “Transmedia Journalism,” 92.

³³ “Dying in the Wild, a Hiker Recorded the Terror,” 31.

³⁴ “Hiker Identified by Self-Portrait,” 38.

³⁵ Krakauer, foreword to *The Wild Truth*, ix–x.

³⁶ Krakauer, “Death of an Innocent,” 92. Another magazine piece devoted to McCandless, “I Now Walk into the Wild,” was published the same month in the *New Yorker*. While it can also be considered literary journalism, it did not play the same part in the expansion of the story into a narrative world. Only Lamothe mentions the piece. See Chip Brown, “I Now Walk in the Wild,” *New Yorker*, February

8, 1993, 36f, cited in Lamothe, “The Call of the Wild: Back Story,” September 2007, http://www.tifilms.com/wild/call_backstory.htm, para. 2.

³⁷ Sims, *True Stories*, 6–7.

³⁸ Krakauer, “Death of an Innocent,” 92.

³⁹ Krakauer, *Into the Wild*, x.

⁴⁰ Krakauer, x.

⁴¹ “Christopher McCandless, Whose Alaskan Odyssey Ended in Death”; IMDbPro, “Into the Wild.”

⁴² Carine McCandless, *The Wild Truth*, 235–36.

⁴³ Lamothe, “The Call of the Wild,” para. 5.

⁴⁴ IMDb, “Out of the Wild: The Alaska Experiment.” A third season of the show, which went on the air in 2011, took place in Venezuela. IMDb, “Out of the Wild: Venezuela.”

⁴⁵ Christopher McCandless et al., *Back to the Wild*; see “A Note from Jon Krakauer.”

⁴⁶ Christopher McCandless et al., *Back to the Wild*; see Walt and Billie McCandless, “About This Book, Its Origin and Development.”

⁴⁷ Krakauer, foreword to *The Wild Truth*, xii.

⁴⁸ Krakauer, xiii.

⁴⁹ Condon and Prum, *Return to the Wild*.

⁵⁰ Krakauer, “How Chris McCandless Died”; Krakauer, “How Chris McCandless Died: An Update.”

⁵¹ Medred, “Krakauer Goes Further ‘Into the Wild,’ ”; Medred, “The Fiction That Is Jon Krakauer’s ‘Into the Wild.’ ”

⁵² Medred, “Krakauer Goes Further ‘Into the Wild,’ ” para. 5.

⁵³ Weis, “Alaska (Part 1),” Tom treedt in de voetsporen van Chris McCandless [Tom is following in the footsteps of Chris McCandless].

⁵⁴ “Diary of Chris McCandless: Dying to be Wild.”

⁵⁵ Tsakalagos and Allard, *Into the Wild*.

⁵⁶ Andrews, *The Word for Woman Is Wilderness*.

⁵⁷ Krakauer, “How Chris McCandless Died,” para. 7.

⁵⁸ Hamilton, “Theory on Chris McCandless’ Death.”

⁵⁹ Bryson, *A Walk in the Woods*; Ralston, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*; Strayed, *Wild*.

⁶⁰ Associated Press, “‘Into the Wild’ Pilgrimages Increase in Alaska”; Associated Press, “Into the Wild: Woman Dies in Alaska River Trying to Reach Famous Bus.”

⁶¹ See, for example, Saverin, “The Chris McCandless Obsession Problem”; Holland, “Chasing Alexander Supertramp.”

⁶² Levenson, “‘Into the Wild’ Bus, Seen as a Danger, Is Airlifted from the Alaskan Wild.”

⁶³ Christopher McCandless et al., “A Note from Jon Krakauer,” *Back to the Wild*; Krakauer, foreword to *The Wild Truth*, ix–xiii.

⁶⁴ Rea, “‘Into the Wild,’ with Sean Penn’s ‘Sad Reflection,’” para. 10.

⁶⁵ Ryan, “Transmedia Storytelling,” 6.

⁶⁶ The analysis of *Into the Wild* thus suggests that top-down and grass-roots configurations should not be seen as a simple opposition but as two extreme positions on a longer and more complex continuum.

⁶⁷ Here cross-media refers to the use of different media platforms to deliver the same content (see note 6).

⁶⁸ Penn's film played a part in the transmedia expansion of *Into the Wild*, as it made the story more widely known. Yet the only element of the narrative world that directly followed the film was the Discovery Channel's reality television series, *Out of the Wild*, that is the most openly, commercially oriented element of this world. Although some later narrative elements mention the film, they first and most often refer to Krakauer's book.

⁶⁹ Christopher McCandless et al., *Back to the Wild*, "Dear Reader."

⁷⁰ Krakauer, foreword to *The Wild Truth*, xii–xiii.

⁷¹ Associated Press, "'Into the Wild' Pilgrimages Increase in Alaska."

⁷² Roberts Forde, "Profit and Public Interest," 562–79.

⁷³ Hersey, "Hiroshima," 18–60; Hersey, *Hiroshima*; Hersey, "Hiroshima: The Aftermath," 37–63.

⁷⁴ Yavenditti, "John Hersey and the American Conscience," 24–49.

⁷⁵ Bowden, *Black Hawk Down*.

⁷⁶ Bowden, *Black Hawk Down*; Bowden, "Narrative Journalism Goes Multi-media."

⁷⁷ Bowden, *Black Hawk Down*; Mills and Bowden, *Somalia: Good Intentions, Deadly Results*.

⁷⁸ Scott, *Black Hawk Down*. For an example of the controversies raised by the movie, see Fryer, "Jingoism Jibe over Black Hawk Down."

⁷⁹ Koenig, *Serial*. Fall 2014, Season 1, Episodes 1–12.

⁸⁰ O'Meara, "'Like Movies for Radio': Media Convergence and the *Serial* Podcast Sensation."

⁸¹ Chaudry, Miller, and Simpson, *Undisclosed*.

⁸² Chaudry, *Adnan's Story*.

⁸³ Chapman, *Confessions of a Serial Alibi*.

⁸⁴ Genovese, *Adnan Syed: Innocent or Guilty?*; Berg, *The Case against Adnan Syed*.

⁸⁵ Koenig, *Serial*, February 2016, Season 1: Update, Day 1–3.

⁸⁶ Richanbach, "The Final Episode of *Serial*"; Yacenda, *American Vandal*.

⁸⁷ Koenig, *Serial*, Winter 2015–16, Season 2, Episodes 1–11; Fall–Winter 2018, Season 3, Episodes 1–9.

⁸⁸ *Unbelievable* is based on "An Unbelievable Story of Rape," written by T. Christian Miller (*ProPublica*) and Ken Armstrong (Marshall Project) and published in 2015. *Dirty John* is based on a series of articles sharing the same headline, written by Christopher Goffard and published in the *Los Angeles Times* in 2017.

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Miles Franklin as "Mary-Anne," 1904. Cole's Studio Book Arcade/State Library NSW

Miles Franklin Undercover: Domestic Service and Gonzo Advocacy in Literary Journalism

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Abstract: Immersing in low-wage labor brings to mind George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), yet there is a history of female literary journalists that predate him and his work. In 1903 Australian author Miles Franklin posed as a domestic servant for a year in Sydney and Melbourne, and her resulting unpublished manuscript, "When I was Mary-Anne, a slavey" (1904), positions Franklin in the tradition of "gonzo advocacy journalism" that uses immersion to reveal social inequalities. Sue Joseph charts gonzo advocacy from Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* (1903) and then Orwell, to contemporary authors Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* (2001) and Elisabeth Wynhausen's *Dirt Cheap* (2005), illuminating the lineage as a taxonomy of inspiration. Franklin's "Mary-Anne" contributes to a gendered performance of gonzo advocacy that amplifies the inequality women experience in low-wage service roles, joining nineteenth-century, so-called girl stunt reporters Elizabeth Cochrane (Nellie Bly), Eleanor Stackhouse (Nora Marks), and Elizabeth L. Banks; twentieth-century writers Marvel Cooke and Ester Blenda Nordstrom, and contemporary book-length journalism authors Ehrenreich and Wynhausen. While Franklin's published 1906 article, "San Francisco: A Fortnight After," is the most accessible exemplar of Franklin's little-known literary journalism, "Mary-Anne" is important for its gonzo advocacy that critiques the myth of equality that resonates today with women employed in low-wage service roles of cleaners, waitresses, and maids.

Keywords: Literary journalism – Miles Franklin – immersion – George Orwell – low-wage labor

In the introduction to their anthology of Australian author Miles Franklin's journalism, Jill Roe and Margaret Bettison describe her work as "topical writings." Quoting the *Macquarie Dictionary*, Roe and Bettison define topical as: " 'matters of current or local interest.' Such matters are inevitably diverse, and their treatment usually ephemeral. Thus 'topical writings' is a convenient umbrella term for a wide range of occasional pieces, mostly published in newspapers and magazines."¹ Within this umbrella definition Roe and Bettison include Franklin's reviews, opinion writing, and the "occasional sketch and serial,"² all of which are represented in the anthology. The mention of the sketch, however, teases that there are unrecognized works of literary journalism by Franklin blurred under the catchall "topical writings," as the sketch is a historical indicator of the form exemplified by Stephen Crane's writing.³ Accordingly, a closer read of the anthology reveals sketches that can be considered literary journalism: "San Francisco: A Fortnight After," written when Franklin visited the earthquake- and fire-ravaged city en route to Chicago in 1906⁴; and "Active Service Socks," which describes the World War I camp in the Balkans where Franklin was stationed as a volunteer orderly.⁵ But most intriguing is "Letter from Melbourne," published in the Australian periodical, the *Bulletin*, in March 1904.⁶ The letter is not literary journalism; rather, it points to a book-length unpublished work, "When I was Mary-Anne, a slavey," which chronicles Franklin's immersion in domestic service in Sydney and Melbourne for a year.

Roe, in her definitive biography of Franklin that follows the anthology, describes Franklin's "Mary-Anne" as a characteristically adventurous episode in Franklin's life and situates the immersion as a "personal turn-of-the-century social experiment" and "participant investigation"⁷ that further opens the literary journalism door, given the form's relationship to ethnographic practices.⁸ Roe briefly details Franklin's time as a domestic servant, laments the resulting manuscript from the "Mary-Anne" research was not published, then moves on to Franklin's years in Chicago.⁹

If Roe is a lighthouse for Franklin's life, this research places a spotlight on Franklin's unrecognized literary journalism, especially "Mary-Anne," in the context of her performing what Sue Joseph identifies as "gonzo advocacy journalism."¹⁰ Joseph charts gonzo advocacy from Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* (1903), to Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), and then to contemporary authors Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America* (2001) and Elisabeth Wynhausen's *Dirt Cheap: Life at the Wrong End of the Job Market* (2005).¹¹ The focus of Joseph's taxonomy is immersion in poverty, but Franklin's "Mary-Anne" joins a lineage of gendered performance of gonzo advocacy that illuminates feminized low-wage

labor emerging with Elizabeth Cochrane's (Nellie Bly), Eleanor Stackhouse's (Nora Marks) and Elizabeth L. Banks's immersions in domestic service in the late nineteenth century. Roe suggests Banks may have inspired Franklin, as Banks had in 1902 released her autobiography that detailed her immersion as a maid in London, first published as the series "In Cap and Apron," in 1893.¹² In 1914, Swedish journalist Ester Blenda Nordstrom immersed as a maid on a farm to expose the conditions¹³; and in 1935, Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke posed as women for hire in the "Bronx Slave Market" where unemployed women of color gathered for underpaid day labor as servants. In 1950 Cooke returned to the market for the New York *Daily Compass*, and in 1979 *Atlanta Constitution* reporter Charlene Smith-Williams worked as a motel maid.¹⁴ Early in the twenty-first century, Ehrenreich, then Wynhausen, "utilised the ethnographic immersion methods" of her predecessors to " 'perform' as gonzo advocacy journalism,"¹⁵ working in minimum-wage positions. Wynhausen acknowledges Ehrenreich as the inspiration for investigating the Australian experience, and Jan Wong followed suit in Canada for the *Globe and Mail* series, "Maid for a Month" (2006).¹⁶ Together this lineage of gonzo advocacy performed through a feminized and feminist lens amplifies the inequality women experience in the low-wage service labor of cleaning, maids, and waitressing.

This research affirms Franklin's place in gonzo advocacy journalism and further recognizes literary journalism as the "submerged half of the . . . canon"¹⁷ in Franklin's prolific early writing career, rather than "topical writings." While Franklin's published article, "San Francisco: A Fortnight After" (1906), is the most accessible exemplar of Franklin's little-known literary journalism, "Mary-Anne" is important for its gonzo advocacy and critique of the myth of equality that resonates today with women employed in low-wage service roles.

Miles Franklin

Born in 1879, Stella Miles Franklin grew up in rural southern New South Wales, Australia. She sent the manuscript for her debut novel to Australian poet and short-story author, Henry Lawson, who championed it to his London agent, and *My Brilliant Career* was published in 1901.

Franklin, 21, was hailed as an emerging literary star, but manuscripts for her sequel to *My Brilliant Career*—"My career goes bung"—and another novel, "On the outside track," were both rejected.¹⁸ Franklin then turned to literary journalism in 1903, immersing as a domestic servant for a year.

Franklin left Australia in 1906 to work with Australian expat and feminist Alice Henry in Chicago, editing the journal *Life and Labor*, produced by

the National Women's Trade Union League of America. Franklin then moved to London, and during World War I joined the Scottish Women's Hospitals as an orderly and cook. After the war Franklin's fiction gained prominence again with her 1936 award-winning novel, *All That Swagger*,¹⁹ and a series of six novels written under the pseudonym "Brent of Bin Bin," beginning with *Up the Country: A Tale of Early Australian Squattocracy* in 1928. Roe describes the series as "The Brent of Bin Bin Saga."²⁰

Upon her death in 1954, Franklin bequeathed the Miles Franklin Literary Award, which remains Australia's most prestigious literary prize for novelists. Because of this legacy, her literary journalism remains largely unknown.

"Mary-Anne, a slavey"

From April 1903 to April 1904,²¹ Franklin immersed as a domestic servant seeking "literary material,"²² and throughout the year kept a diary of all her experiences. Some of these are excerpted in the "Mary-Anne" manuscript and pre-date Franklin's collected published diaries that begin in 1909,²³ adding to the manuscript's importance both to literary journalism and epistolary scholarship around Franklin.

Franklin began her "Mary-Anne" immersion in Sydney, presenting herself in need of employment. As Nora Marks did in Chicago in 1888 when she investigated domestic service conditions for the *Chicago Tribune*, Franklin emphasized her country innocence.²⁴ Bar a few trusted confidants, Franklin told her social and writing circles that she was traveling overseas, and no one in 1903 expected an Instagram post. Franklin initially answered newspaper ads but found the experience fruitless, so turned instead to an employment registry office that placed her as a "General" in a private house in Waverley, near Bondi. There, she encountered a romantic milkman to whom she revealed her emerging feminist views on marriage:

"Do let me talk to you, just a minute."

"Certainly, if you talk sense, but don't begin to invite me out at night as I've made an inflexible rule to do so with no man."

"You'll be an old maid at that rate," he said.

"There are worse fates than that in matrimony," I retorted as I scampered off with my jug.²⁵

Upon leaving Bondi, Franklin endured a short stint with a difficult employer whom she characterized as caring more for her dogs than her family; then a popular boarding house on the harbor where she worked as a parlor maid, and a politician's home. She concluded her year working for a society family, a merchant, a doctor, and a country family in Melbourne.

Despite this year of immersive research, plus months writing, "Miles'

manuscript still awaits its publisher.”²⁶ The “Mary-Anne” manuscript is now held in the State Library of NSW as part of the voluminous Miles Franklin Papers and comprises two volumes of handwritten “sketches,” but the final draft is missing. Roe writes: “What happened to the completed manuscript is unknown, except for a passing commiseration from Sir Francis Suttor, president of the Legislative Council and a new patron in Sydney, that Mary-Anne ‘did not take on’ with the publishers.” Roe, *Stella Miles Franklin*, 98. Franklin succeeded in publishing only the short article in 1904 for the *Bulletin*, “Letter from Melbourne,” describing her year as a servant, and written as she concluded the immersion; a *Sydney Morning Herald* opinion piece in 1907 in which Franklin reflects upon her “practical experience” in domestic service to argue for better working conditions; and a small, similar article in the *Chicago Tribune* while she lived in the United States.²⁷ Then “Mary-Anne” disappears. Norman Sims reminds: “Literary journalists gamble with their time. . . . The risks are high. Not every young writer can stake two or three years on a writing project that might turn up snake-eyes.”²⁸

Franklin biographer Colin Roderick describes *Bulletin* literary critic A. G. Stephens as having thought the manuscript’s sketches were better suited to a series in the *Sydney Morning Herald*,²⁹ but Roe and Bettison’s companion index of Franklin’s topical writings, many of which were not included in the anthology, do not list any “Mary-Anne” related articles for the *Herald* beyond the 1907 opinion article.³⁰ Roe mentions that in 1905 Franklin told the editor of the *Herald* that she’d finished the “servant book,” suggesting there may well have been a conversation about serialization that never eventuated. Roe believes Franklin’s “Mary-Anne” has enduring value, and implies that publishers’ wariness of Australia’s strict defamation laws contributed to derailing publication of the manuscript in whole or part: “For various reasons, such as length and the sensitivity of the approach (Grandma Lampe characteristically thought it deceitful), it could hardly have been published at the time.”³¹ Roe further alludes to one of the reasons for the manuscript of Franklin’s sequel to *My Brilliant Career* being initially rejected was her penchant for skimming characters too closely from life for a publisher’s comfort.³²

Gonzo Advocacy or Stunt Journalism?

From the nineteenth century to contemporary practice, women literary journalists have been criticized for performing gonzo advocacy that investigates low-wage service labor. Cochrane (Bly), Banks, and Stackhouse (Marks) were known derogatorily as “girl stunt reporters” who practiced participatory immersive research, including domestic service, to prove their worth to publishers, and became a fixture of sensational yellow journalism in

the late nineteenth century. The practice has since been viewed as privileged women slumming for a story who were in turn exploited by commercially driven publishers, or in contemporary iterations for their own profile and profit. Fellow Australian journalist Ellen Fanning was critical of Wynhausen's immersion working as a waitress, cleaner, and factory worker, arguing that Wynhausen could have anticipated the cushioning effect of the Australian minimum wage "before she headed out of Bondi."³³ The deliberate mention of the fashionable Sydney beach suburb in which Wynhausen normally lived reiterates Fanning's critique of Wynhausen's privilege. Reviewer Monique Rooney³⁴ counters that Fanning misses Wynhausen's more subtle illumination of the impact of deregulation on low-wage work security, particularly for women. Likewise, the media historian Randall Sumpter refutes the stunt is entirely sensationalist. Discussing Banks, he argues "this genre in the hands of an experienced practitioner could range beyond the predictable topics and locations, incorporating balanced sources and employing ethics-based decision-making."³⁵ His argument aligns with Ted Conover's view of ethical participatory immersive practices.³⁶

Was Franklin an aspiring stunt journalist? She did not have a career in women's pages to escape, or a commissioning editor to impress. Although Roe suggests that Banks may well have been an inspiration, it seems Franklin's "Mary-Anne" is self-conceived outside any external publishing pressure. At the turn of the twentieth century, the so-called "servant problem" was discussed at length in the Australian press and the "Mary-Anne" title of the manuscript popularly referred to a woman working in domestic service.³⁷

In a summary of her immersion, "Concerning Maryann," Franklin writes she was interested in investigating the servant-question debate:

Some people wonder what domestic servants have to complain about. To satisfy my own curiosity on the point, I determined under the name Maryann Smith, to follow the calling for twelve months. No one could understand the depth of the silent feud between mistress and maid without, in their own person, testing the matter.³⁸

Franklin's rationale and resulting manuscript align with Robert Alexander's view that "Gonzo [journalism] is a fiercely political style of reportage with a powerful commitment to what . . . we call socio-political intervention."³⁹ For Franklin, both the novelistic style of literary journalism and the socio-political interventionist aims were instinctive. Franklin's "Mary-Anne" fits Joseph's view of gonzo advocacy journalism and Orwell's aim to make political writing an artform. Joseph argues that London, Orwell, Ehrenreich, and Wynhausen all "engage in a form of Gonzo ethnography, ultimately critiquing issues of poverty, social divide, and a certain voicelessness of social subsets

in order to bring them into mainstream consciousness, with an often self-deprecating, satirical, but definitely intense, lilt and performance.”⁴⁰

On the latter point, Franklin’s “Mary-Anne” is self-deprecating and has a “satirical but definitely intense” lilt; Franklin gives parody names to the homes and boarding houses where she immerses, such as “Geebung Villa,” and critiques the absurdity of the middle-class Australian household mistress: “The running of this midget establishment is like playing cubby house. . . .”⁴¹ Rather than a short-lived stunt, Franklin is determined to experience the domestic servants’ “lived reality” that supplies “new lines of evidence, context and attempts at understanding disadvantage in relation to the dominant culture and power structures.”⁴²

Franklin exhibits “ethics-based decision making” in her disclosure to fellow maids that she was immersing in domestic service for book research purposes, although she stopped short of telling them that she was the author of *My Brilliant Career*.⁴³ Reflecting the aims of performing gonzo advocacy, the maids that Franklin confided in urged her to give voice to their realities of domestic service. Franklin also writes that, “I deliberately told several of my mistresses I was really ‘maryanning’ for ink writing purposes . . . they kindly let pass the trifling dementia . . . ,”⁴⁴ and she disclosed that she was a writer to guests from the United States, whom she befriended while working at a boarding house.⁴⁵

That Franklin was ambitious for publication in book form places her more securely in gonzo advocacy, given that Joseph emphasizes book-length literary journalism in aligning the work of London, Orwell, Ehrenreich, and Wynhausen. Matthew Ricketson argues there are six qualities evident in book-length literary journalism, beginning with the obvious: writing about “actual events and people living in the world, and concerns the issues of the day,” and extensive, time-consuming research.⁴⁶ Franklin uses pseudonyms but underlines the actuality of her narrative in “Concerning Maryann,” which is bolstered by Roe citing the locations and employers of her domestic service posts. Franklin writes:

I am not so colossally conceited as to think in one twelve-month, or in one book compiled from the diary I carefully kept during that period, I could give a recipe for the satisfactory adjustment . . . [I] state the facts that I collected, in a straight way regardless of consequences . . .⁴⁷

Ricketson’s next three elements continue tenets familiar to literary journalism, in that they take a narrative approach, employ a range of authorial voices, and explore the underlying meaning of the event or issue. In Franklin’s “Mary-Anne,” narrative structure is evident in the scene setting, dialogue, lit-

erary devices, and independent sketches that work as chronological chapters. The underlying meaning is recognized through Franklin's performing gonzo advocacy, and her authorial voice of satirical outrage and vulnerability radiate throughout multiple points of view. The existing manuscript draft begins with Franklin posing as Mary-Anne in the first person—"I am ill with fear of failure"⁴⁸—that sets the participatory tone. From the fourth sketch, Franklin changes to limited third person to become the characters, "Mary-Anne," then "Jane." Analyzing Norman Mailer's similar third-person, limited point of view in *Armies of the Night*, James E. Breslin posits the technique as "inflating the self,"⁴⁹ which seems Franklin's intention in "Mary-Anne." Arguably the first-person sketches are more successful for their intimacy and authenticity, but without Franklin's final directions or final manuscript it is difficult to ascertain which point of view she ultimately preferred, if any. Perhaps she kept them both.

Whatever the point-of-view decision, Franklin's voice has parallels with John Stanley James ("The Vagabond"), who, Willa McDonald argues, concentrated "on powerlessness rather than poverty as the driving subject matter."⁵⁰ Franklin's voice gives insight into brittle domestic sphere power relations in post-colonial Australia that are supported by structural inequalities:

The biggest blot on the household arrangements was the maids were brutally overworked but the blame of this rests on society at large rather than upon the individual. This Mrs Bordinghaus was not violating any civil laws in regard to her maids—she was doing the usual thing.⁵¹

Yet Franklin's voice also retains a self-awareness of her privilege. She recognizes that she can, and does, take refuge with wealthy friends whereas her fellow "Mary-Annes" cannot. After a particularly difficult day, Franklin observes:

Oh, my blistered hand and jangled nerves! What of the girls who have no home awaiting their return when they fail in these battles? Who, if they wanted to, save enough for board while they searched for another engagement would be compelled to endure weeks of this Billings-gated slavery!⁵²

The final element identified by Ricketson is the impact⁵³ that gonzo advocacy inevitably accrues upon publication. While a series rather than a book, it is worth noting that Banks's "In Cap and Apron" sparked a debate in letters to editors about the servant question in London. Ehrenreich received letters from low-wage workers, one of which read: "I appreciate the fact that you were willing to experience first hand what many of us live with day to day. . . . You witnessed the 'pariah' syndrome the working poor experience daily."⁵⁴ Although "Mary-Anne" was never published, Franklin wrote about "Mary-

Anne” in the *Bulletin’s* “Letter from Melbourne” and was interviewed by the national women’s magazine *The New Idea*, known now simply as *New Idea*. The work in progress was mentioned in the feminist journal the *Australian Woman’s Sphere*.⁵⁵ The full impact of Franklin’s “Mary-Anne” may be yet to come.

Ricketson’s qualities of book-length journalism do not specify empathy. However, John Hartsock identifies empathy as a necessary quality in narrative literary journalism. Hartsock elaborates, arguing that discernment between literary journalism and sensationalism can be found in literary journalism’s “attempt to narrow the distance between the subjectivity of the journalist and reader on the one hand and an objectified world on the other.”⁵⁶ Lack of empathy is a main consideration of Hartsock’s reservations about Jack London’s *The People of the Abyss*, primarily: “. . . his inability to understand empathetically the subjectivities of the Other”⁵⁷ But empathy, it seems, is in the eye of the literary journalism scholar. Unlike Hartsock, Joseph sees empathy in London’s text and argues it is all the more powerful for its “savage look at ignored social destitution and deprivation within mere kilometers of untold wealth and entitlement.”⁵⁸

Franklin empathetically immerses herself in the “inferior” experience, so her advocacy is strengthened by its presence. She does not hold herself apart from the maids but respects the domestic servants she works alongside as colleagues and conspirators. Yet she retains perspective, such that she is able observe herself retreating into the silence of servitude:

With the exception of necessary remarks I am utterly silent, for this intangible something has gripped my feelings in a hand of ice and so frozen my individuality that only the mechanical part of me is in evidence. By doing some necessary work in another man’s home instead of in my own, I have become an inferior creature. . . .⁵⁹

Gonzo Advocacy and Bodily Sacrifice

In her study of girl stunt reporters, Jean Marie Lutes argues that their performative journalism meant that they endured “bodily sacrifice,”⁶⁰ and Pablo Calvi critiques a similar physicality in the contemporary writing of literary journalist Gabriela Weiner. Calvi observes: “Gonzo puts the entire perceptual body—and not just the disembodied eye—into the flow of the world.”⁶¹ It follows that bodily sacrifice is a defining characteristic of gonzo advocacy in Franklin’s “Mary-Anne.” Franklin emphasizes her physical appearance in appraisals by prospective mistresses, employment registry agents, and experienced servants. Franklin is repeatedly called too sensitive and slight for the demands of domestic service and admonished to be tougher by her peers lest

she be worked to death. Tellingly, Franklin's friend, the feminist Rose Scott, warns Franklin to protect herself from bodily sacrifice upon learning she is working as a servant:

My dearest Stella,
I was glad to hear from you—but dear one—do you only get *an hour* on Saturday? Have you no arrangement for an afternoon & Evening out? A day a month? Or any outings? because if so you will hurt the girls you want to help—they will think if you do not want times out, why shd other girls! Think of this point—for the sake of others, you must not be a slave. . . . I do not say this out of selfishness & because I want you—⁶²

Little time off was soon the least of Franklin's bodily sacrifice. In the first sketch of the manuscript, written while working at Waverley, Franklin details how she suffered a near blinding injury when the gas stove blew up in her face, only to have to continue working in a haze of blistering skin and pain:

That stove! That infernal stove! . . . the oven was filled with gas, which, when I opened the door, rushed out, and igniting by the lighted cooking jets on top enveloped me in flames. . . . The extent of my injuries were the loss of my eyelashes, the charring of my eyebrows and a band of front hair, my face was mostly in blister and my fingers painfully burned. The pain was so intense I had difficulty in suppressing a scream but instead had to fry the eggs and bacon warm potatoes and make the toast.⁶³

Franklin must have confided in Scott or other trusted confidants, as a small news article appeared in 1903 reporting her facial injuries as a result of a gas explosion,⁶⁴ but it does not say the accident happened because Franklin was working as a servant. At the conclusion of the year, she mentions her "Gretchen like locks"⁶⁵ and scalp were still scarred from the burns.

Her physical injuries flow into an undercurrent of harassment that Lutes identifies as a hazard and bodily sacrifice.⁶⁶ As a maid, Franklin negotiates flirtatious men, which she treats as humorous, but the undercurrent is evident. In a diary excerpt, she writes of a maid's necessary qualities with the survival of the power relations of harassment in mind: "She must be sufficiently comely to be smart, yet not so attractive as to win any stray admiration from the male members of the family she serves."⁶⁷

Franklin's Literary Journalism: After "Mary-Anne"

In the drought of her novels and the "Mary-Anne" manuscript rejection, Franklin turned to shorter works of literary journalism to earn a writing income. Roe estimates between 1905 and 1906 Franklin contributed over thirty articles to the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Daily Telegraph*, as well as periodicals such as the *New Idea* and *Steele's Magazine*. Of these, the forensic

Roe leaves a trail of literary journalism breadcrumbs in Franklin's biography that suggest other literary journalism articles not collected in the "topical writings" anthology. Roe highlights that Franklin participated in "A Mountain Cattle Muster" in the Australian Snowy Mountains, and wrote another work of travel literary journalism, "A Kiandra Holiday," "both described in such a way that the reader wishes they had been there."⁶⁸

The strength of the "Muster" article is Franklin's reportage of the Australian landscape and her capturing of the characters of the bush. Describing, in the second installment of the two-article series, the horse ride through the rugged high country, Franklin writes: "the rattle of the horses' hoofs among the hard, water-worn boulders was enough to make one shudder, as it seemed as if they must be bruised and split to pieces, . . ." ⁶⁹ In the same article, Franklin characterizes the lead stockman as "triumphantly driving the steers before him with the crack of a 15ft stockwhip, and holding a heavy pipe between a set of false teeth, where it had remained through all the action."⁷⁰

Franklin wrote these articles and other pieces for the *Herald* under the pseudonym, "Vernacular." She would display a liking for pseudonyms throughout her career.

The following year, and tellingly under her own name, Franklin also wrote for the *Herald*, "San Francisco: A Fortnight After," which chronicles the Great Earthquake damage she witnessed upon arriving in the city. "San Francisco" can be repositioned historically as a companion piece of literary journalism to Jack London's far better known story, "The Story of an Eyewitness,"⁷¹ which chronicles the city in the hours after the disaster. Far more than simply "topical," Franklin's evocative, finely observed scenes show a ruined city revealing itself in the dawn and struggling to survive its new reality. Franklin writes:

Shortly after midnight on Monday, April 20, the Golden Gate was entered, and the liner cast anchor down stream at about 2 a.m. . . . Right ahead gleamed acres of city night eyes, giving the impression that there was a great deal of the city yet standing . . . As the daylight strengthened it looked like a series of vast rubbish tips cut out in squares where the streets had been, and from it all arose the odour of a great burning.⁷²

Franklin observes, "The first landmark to catch the eye of the traveller was the tower of the Ferry Building, with its flag-pole bent and out of plumb, and its big clock pointing to a quarter-past 5, the fatal hour on the morning of April 18, when the earthquake occurred."⁷³ She sees tangles of pipes in apartment buildings, and notices silence where there should be "the hum and rattle of street cars."⁷⁴ Always a horsewoman, Franklin takes special note of the exhausted horses replacing suspended steam and electric transport: "Some

of the gaunt and sweated creatures ran for 48 hours without rest.”⁷⁵ “San Francisco” also exhibits Franklin’s perennial eye on equality as she describes the disaster reducing class distinctions to rubble.

Upon arriving in Chicago, Franklin continued freelancing for Australian newspapers and periodicals. Her article, “Letter from Chicago,” shows her eye for social observation: “It was a traveller’s party, and after we had eaten our ice-creams (it is impossible to conceive of the Americans conducting anything from a prize fight to a mission service without the aid of ice-cream), . . .”⁷⁶ Her writing for *Life and Labor* in the years after falls more into reports and feature-style profiles but is informed by her previous year-long immersive research for “Mary-Anne.” Although Franklin seems to have shelved the “Mary-Anne” manuscript, Roe notes that she surveyed employment agencies as research for her *Chicago Tribune* article, “No Dignity in Domestic Service.” According to Roe, there is a school exercise book cover filed among her unpublished plays with a penciled heading, “The Misdemeanours of Mary Anne,” suggesting she rewrote it for an unrealized theater production while living in Chicago.⁷⁷ There is also an undated, unfinished manuscript, “Untitled novel re Mary, a servant girl,” that carries similarities to “When I was Mary-Anne, a slavey.” Later, the main first-person character in Franklin’s satirical drawing room mystery novel, *Bring the Monkey*, poses as a maid to attend a society party, evoking Franklin’s real-life Mary-Anne.⁷⁸

In 1915, Franklin moved to London. To support the war effort, she served as a volunteer orderly and cook in the Balkans, where she wrote the work of literary journalism, “Active Service Socks.” She describes the camp and again exhibits her ability to capture place: “The winds rushing down the valleys between the ancient, denuded hills, carrying heavy rains, which make camp existence a soggy thing and cold, . . .”⁷⁹

Conclusion

Franklin remains revered in Australia as a novelist. Yet this reputation overshadows her unrecognized contribution to early twentieth-century literary journalism. Revisiting Franklin’s nonfiction writing in the early period of her writing career reframes her relevant work as literary journalism, and Franklin as a literary journalist, rather than a fiction writer dabbling in occasional “topical” writings.

“San Francisco, A Fortnight After” is the most accessible of Franklin’s literary journalism. It is a companion piece to Jack London’s “The Story of an Eye-witness” and, more widely, literary journalism writing on natural disasters. However, the unpublished book-length “Mary-Anne” is arguably a more important work, as it establishes her as a contributor to literary journalism’s

tradition of performing gonzo advocacy, which Joseph traces from London and Orwell to Ehrenreich and Wynhausen.

Franklin takes her place in a more gendered gonzo advocacy that examines low-wage service labor through a feminized lens that amplifies the inequality women experience in these roles and challenges myths of meritocracy. The nineteenth-century works of Cochrane (Bly), Stackhouse (Marks), and Banks are tangled with the historical tags of stunt-girl reporting that hides their gonzo advocacy. Rather than also be dismissed as an aspiring stunt-girl reporter, Franklin meets Ricketson's requirements for book-length literary journalism. Her work's contribution is strengthened by Hartsock's additional view that literary journalism is characterized by empathy, and empathy radiates throughout "Mary-Anne." Franklin's work enlivens the debate about gonzo advocacy by stunt-girl reporters and is a historical counterpoint to both early twentieth century and more recent immersions in service by women literary journalists.

In the contemporary labor market, the rise in women's employment in Australia is dominated by low-wage caring roles, such as childcare. According to the NWLC, in the United States, "women represent nearly two-thirds of the workforce in low-paid jobs," many of which are cleaning and waitressing.⁸⁰ More than a century after her immersion, Franklin's performance of gonzo advocacy in her exploration of the "servant question" endures.

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Notes

¹ *Macquarie Dictionary*, s.v. “topical.” Quoted in Roe and Bettison, *A Gregarious Culture*, xv–xvi.

² Roe and Bettison, xvi.

³ Hartsock, *History of American Literary Journalism*, 25.

⁴ Franklin, “San Francisco: A Fortnight After,” 25–30. Franklin arrived in San Francisco two days after the earthquake, contrary to the *Sydney Morning Herald’s* headline.

⁵ Franklin, “Active Service Socks,” 87–89.

⁶ Franklin, “Letter from Melbourne,” 8–10.

⁷ Roe, *Stella Miles Franklin: A Biography*, 92–93.

⁸ Joseph, “Australia’s Elisabeth Wynhausen,” 89. See also, Ted Conover’s extensive relationship with ethnography, detailed in *Immersion: A Writer’s Guide to Going Deep*.

⁹ Roe, *Stella Miles Franklin: A Biography*, 92–96, 98. Roe’s hefty biography is the authoritative study of Franklin’s life.

¹⁰ Joseph, “Australia’s Elisabeth Wynhausen,” 88.

¹¹ Joseph, 87–110; London, *The People of the Abyss*; Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*; Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*; Wynhausen, *Dirt Cheap*.

¹² Roe, *Stella Miles Franklin: A Biography*, 92; see also, Sumpter, “‘Girl Reporter’: Elizabeth L. Banks and the ‘Stunt’ Genre”; Banks, *Campaigns of Curiosity*.

¹³ Bremmer, *Ett jävla solskén*. See also, “Ester Blenda at Skarhult Castle,” <http://www.skarhult.se/en/95/the-exhibitions/ester-blenda-at-skarhult-castle>.

¹⁴ Baker and Cooke, “The Bronx Slave Market,” 330, 335; Cooke, “I Was a Part of the Bronx Slave Market,” appeared in the *Compass*, throughout January 1950. Articles include, “I Was a Part of the Bronx Slave Market,” *Daily Compass*, January 8, 1950, 9, 15; January 9, 1950, 4, 7; January 10, 1950, 4, 21; January 11, 1950, 4, 21; January 12, 1950, 6. Brooke Kroeger’s ‘Undercover Reporting’ database includes Smith-Williams as a contributor to Lieberman and Goolrick, “The Underpaid and Under-Protected,” *Atlanta Constitution*, December 4, 1979. <https://undercover.hosting.nyu.edu/s/undercover-reporting/item-set/94>.

¹⁵ Joseph, “Australia’s Elisabeth Wynhausen,” 103, 88.

¹⁶ Wynhausen, *Dirt Cheap*, 1; Wong, “Maid for a Month,” a series of articles published in the *Globe and Mail*, April 1–22, 2006.

¹⁷ William M. Curtin, ed., *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather’s Articles and Reviews, 1893–1902* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1970), xvi, quoted in Beyer, “‘A Work and a Purpose’: Willa Cather’s Journalism,” 74.

¹⁸ Both were later revised extensively and published: Originally called “The end of my career,” *My Career Goes Bung: Purporting to be the Autobiography of Sybylla Penelope Melvyn* appeared in 1946, and “On the outside track” became the basis of *Cockatoos: A Story of Youth and Exodists* published in 1954 under Franklin’s pseudonym “Brent of Bin Bin.”

¹⁹ Franklin, *All that Swagger*.

²⁰ Franklin [Brent of Bin Bin] *Up the Country: A Tale of the Early Australian*

Squattocracy. Franklin wrote six sequential, related novels “of settler families in south-eastern Australia,” under the “Brent of Bin Bin” pseudonym. See Roe, *Stella Miles Franklin: A Biography*, 294.

²¹ Franklin wrote a letter to her friend, author Joseph Furphy, on March 23, 1904, saying her twelve-month “experience” would be up on April 7, 1904. See Roe, *My Congenials*, 1:31.

²² Franklin, unpublished manuscript, “Concerning Maryann. First draft,” 1. This manuscript is the basis of the “Letter from Melbourne” published in the *Bulletin* in 1904 and is separate from the literary journalism work, “When I was Mary-Anne, a slavey,” detailed in endnote 25.

²³ See Brunton, *The Diaries of Miles Franklin*.

²⁴ Lederer, “Nora Marks, Investigative Reporter,” 306–18.

²⁵ Franklin, “When I was Mary-Anne, a slavey,” 46. The manuscripts are bound with a shortened title: “When I was Mary-Anne, sketches 1–4,” and, in the second, 5–6. Franklin’s original, handwritten title in the manuscript is used. In both these manuscripts, Franklin uses “Mary-Anne,” which Roe also uses and is followed here unless quoted otherwise. “Maryann” is used only in her above, separate manuscript draft of the Letter (“Concerning Maryann”).

²⁶ Roe, *Stella Miles Franklin: A Biography*, 98.

²⁷ Franklin, “Letter from Melbourne,” 8–10; Franklin, “Concerning ‘Helps,’” 8; Franklin, “No Dignity in Domestic Service,” 57.

²⁸ Sims, “The Literary Journalists,” 9.

²⁹ Roderick, *Miles Franklin: Her Brilliant Career*, 96.

³⁰ Bettison and Roe, “Miles Franklin’s Topical Writings”; Franklin, “Concerning ‘Helps,’” 8.

³¹ Roe, *Stella Miles Franklin: A Biography*, 98.

³² Roe, 87. Colin Roderick, in *Miles Franklin: Her Brilliant Career*, also mentions defamation concerns around Franklin’s rejected sequel to *My Brilliant Career*, 92.

³³ Fanning, “Underclass Expose Just Doesn’t Work,” 16.

³⁴ Rooney, “*Making Poverty Visible*,” 45.

³⁵ Sumpter, “‘Girl Reporter’: Elizabeth L. Banks,” 62.

³⁶ Conover, *Immersion*. See “Undercover: Moving Beyond Stunt,” 88–111.

³⁷ See Kingston, “The Servant Problem,” *My Wife, My Daughter, and Poor Mary Ann*, 30–31. Kingston does not mention Franklin’s “Mary-Anne.” Franklin refers to service as “Maryanning” in “Concerning Maryann. First Draft,” 5.

³⁸ Franklin, “Concerning Maryann,” 1. Franklin also used “Sarah Frankling” as a pseudonym while working in Waverley. See Roe, *Stella Miles Franklin, A Biography*, 93.

³⁹ Alexander, introduction, 6.

⁴⁰ Joseph, “Australia’s Elisabeth Wynhausen,” 92.

⁴¹ Franklin, “Mary-Anne, a slavey,” 19.

⁴² Avieson and McDonald, “Dangerous Liaisons,” 139.

⁴³ Franklin, “Mary-Anne, a slavey,” 88.

- ⁴⁴ Franklin, "Concerning Maryann," 7.
- ⁴⁵ Franklin, "Mary-Anne, a slavey," 127.
- ⁴⁶ Ricketson, "The Vibrant State of Book-Length Journalism," 69–70.
- ⁴⁷ Franklin, "Concerning Maryann," 1.
- ⁴⁸ Franklin, "Mary-Anne, a slavey," 18.
- ⁴⁹ Breslin, "Style in Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*," 162.
- ⁵⁰ McDonald, "A Vagabond," 71.
- ⁵¹ Franklin, "Mary-Anne, a slavey," 147.
- ⁵² Franklin, 65.
- ⁵³ Ricketson, "The Vibrant State of Book-Length Journalism," 70. See also Ricketson, "Keynote Address: Navigating the Challenges of Writing Book-Length Literary Journalism," 114–31.
- ⁵⁴ Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*, 227.
- ⁵⁵ "Miles Franklin," *Australian Woman's Sphere*, April 15, 1904, 429. Also see "Casual Conversation: Miss Miles Franklin," *New Idea*, May 1904, 998. The *Australian Woman's Sphere* is also known as the *Woman's Sphere*; *New Idea* as the *New Idea*.
- ⁵⁶ Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism*, 141.
- ⁵⁷ Hartsock, 150.
- ⁵⁸ Joseph, "Australia's Elisabeth Wynhausen," 94.
- ⁵⁹ Franklin, "Mary-Anne, a slavey," 26.
- ⁶⁰ Lutes, *Front-Page Girls*, 30.
- ⁶¹ Calvi, "The Return of Gonzo through the Female Body," 210.
- ⁶² Roe, *My Congenials*, "1.21 From Rose Scott Sydney, May 22, [1903, pm]," 26.
- ⁶³ Franklin, "Mary-Anne, a slavey," 20–21.
- ⁶⁴ "Comments," *The Book Lover*, June 1, 1903, 353.
- ⁶⁵ Franklin, "Mary-Anne, a slavey," 356.
- ⁶⁶ Lutes, *Front-Page Girls*, 30.
- ⁶⁷ Franklin, "Mary-Anne, a slavey," 233.
- ⁶⁸ Roe, *Stella Miles Franklin: A Biography*, 111. These articles appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in August 1905.
- ⁶⁹ Franklin [Vernacular, pseud.], "A Mountain Cattle Muster, II," 2:6.
- ⁷⁰ Franklin, 2:6.
- ⁷¹ London, "The Story of an Eye-Witness," 22–23.
- ⁷² Franklin, "San Francisco: A Fortnight After, 1906," 26.
- ⁷³ Franklin, 27.
- ⁷⁴ Franklin, 28.
- ⁷⁵ Franklin, 29.
- ⁷⁶ Franklin, "Letter from Chicago," 31–33.
- ⁷⁷ Roe, *Stella Miles Franklin: A Biography*, 123.
- ⁷⁸ Franklin, "Untitled novel re Mary a servant girl"; Franklin, *Bring the Monkey*.
- ⁷⁹ Franklin, "Active Service Socks," 87–89.
- ⁸⁰ Cassells, "Women Are Dominating Employment Growth." See also the National Women's Law Center, "When Hard Work Is Not Enough: Women in Low-Paid Jobs."

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Svetlana Alexievich, July 2, 2016. Image by Tomaz Silva/Agência Brasil (WikiMedia Commons).

Teaching LJ . . .

Svetlana Alexievich and the Polyphonic Translation Model of Literary Journalism

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Abstract: Nobel Laureate Svetlana Alexievich's books, like literary journalism itself, defy definition. However, her longform, polyphonic "translations" of her sources' stories are powerful accounts of some of the twentieth century's most horrific events, including the fall of the Soviet Union, the Soviet-Afghan War, and the Chernobyl catastrophe. The works, which she calls "novels," push the boundaries of what can be defined as journalism due to the fact that they are often written from the point of view of her subjects but in the author's own elegant prose. They are also in many ways the opposite of literary journalism, which often privileges the voice of the author and relies on anecdotes or images that may or may not be indicative of the larger whole. As such, Alexievich's techniques, this essay argues, should be taught as an alternative that can help students avoid some of the ego-driven pitfalls of literary journalism. Instead, if students look at each source they interview as a facet of a narrative prism, that prism will not be dependent on one source or story. Even if Alexievich's techniques prove beyond the ability and resources of student journalists to fully understand, exposure to her work will shore up students' journalistic skills and maybe even teach them to listen.

Keywords: literary journalism – Soviet Union – journalism – pedagogy – Svetlana Alexievich

“She interviews hundreds of people. Lets them tell their stories through her. Soldiers. Nurses. Nuclear Technicians. She doesn’t speak for them, but she uses her talent and way with words to let them speak for themselves. It’s not easy, and she’s one of the few who can do it without screwing it up.”¹ This pronouncement, followed by the phrases Nobel Laureate and Cold War documentarian, produces blank stares from a normally enthusiastic group of budding literary journalists.² Yet, it is necessary to press on because the work of Belarusian literary journalist and historian Svetlana Alexievich embodies an issue of primary importance to the instructor of literary journalism: the responsibility and difficulties of telling the stories of those who cannot tell the stories themselves.

Whether it is a language barrier, a class barrier, or simply a lack of platform, the lives of others often need telling by someone who is not intimately familiar with their lives, communities, and milieu. This often comes as a shock to Generation Z students³ who commonly insist that journalists should tell only their *own* stories and not dare to speak for anyone else. In part a noble idea rooted in an aversion to cultural appropriation, the notion also stems from a self-centered belief that first-person journalism is more literary and more real and more valid than any other form of nonfiction writing.

When confronted with the notion that banning reporters from writing about anything but their own lives and communities would likely produce thousands of articles about petty problems but few if any multi-faceted stories about the residents of Ugandan slums, intersectional narratives about the Hong Kong protests, histories featuring sources who are no longer living, many students tend to quiet down. Moreover, they already know some stories require the perspective of multiple sources across class, race, and ethnic lines. At this point in the semester, the students in the literary journalism class have read Tom Junod’s “The Falling Man”⁴ and Alex Perry’s “The True Story of the White Island Eruption,”⁵ both of which are stories that contain the perspectives of multiple sources, though those perspectives are presented in the third person rather than the first.

How, however, can a writer do this? How can a writer bring to light and life the lives of people radically different from the writer’s self? This is where Alexievich’s work can be highly instructive. The Cold War might be distant history to the students, and their initial reaction might be to recoil, but they do come around once they have been presented with captivating passages from Alexievich’s work and given some context. It is especially effective to start with her account of Chernobyl, because younger students know of the disaster through countless YouTube videos and Instagram accounts that document journeys into the exclusion zone. Once students have a taste for

her prose, however, the now-distant fall of the Soviet Union becomes vivid and real: “Pretty soon, I’ll be decomposing into phosphorous, calcium, and so on. Who else will you find to tell you the truth? All that’s left are the archives. Pieces of paper. And the truth is . . . I worked at an archive myself, I can tell you firsthand: paper lies even more than people do.”⁶

Alexievich earned the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2015 for her books *Chronicles* chronicling dark events in the Soviet Union, from World War II to the Soviet-Afghan War to the Chernobyl catastrophe. The selection of Alexievich and her work marked a rare case of a person winning the literary prize for reportage.⁷ Given the dearth of English translations of her work and the relative rarity of any literary journalism being taught in many universities, the announcement may have been the first time many readers had ever heard of her. While her previous lack of fame was unfortunate, her rise to worldwide prominence came at a crucial time, especially as an army of sophisticated propagandists infected worldwide media with the fiction of Soviet innocence. Russian President Vladimir Putin and his supporters were some of the few people who did not approve of the Nobel committee’s choice.⁸ However, first-time readers of her work not only discovered her uncompromisingly detailed accounts of the failure of the great Soviet experiment, they were also treated to a specific style of polyphonic literary journalism rarely seen—one that can and should be held as a model for avoiding some of the pitfalls of some forms of literary journalism.

This is not to say that Alexievich’s techniques should or could replace the conventions of much literary journalism. There are several reasons why her methods might be difficult for literary journalists to apply. One reason is that conducting dozens, possibly hundreds, of interviews is time-consuming, labor-intensive, and costly. It is simply beyond the budget of most publications, especially student publications. Another stumbling block is that it requires an enormous amount of self-discipline for the author not to project him or herself into the subject’s story and change it to better match what the author *wants* the story to say.

However, scaled-down versions of Alexievich’s techniques, where students interview five to six sources and present the sources’ stories in the sources’ voices, are within reach. In the literary journalism classroom, students are instructed to think of each source and voice as a different side of a prism, and each should be an equal facet of the narrative. The results have been mixed, but there are usually a few students eager to do the required legwork. Moreover, the discussions of how to go about this work often focus on neglected journalistic skills, such as listening to and having empathy for the subject.

Yet, if a student is to hold up Alexievich as a model, it is helpful to ar-

ticulate what precisely she does, what her books are—among them *Zinky Boys* (1989), *Voices from Chernobyl* (1997), and *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets* (2013)—and why they work so well. This has been, for many critics, a challenge as elusive as defining literary journalism itself. Students, once they grasp what is different about her approach, relish this challenge. Discussions of her work often crystalize some of the more esoteric problems of voice and perspective in nonfiction. Contrasting Alexievich's writing with the nonfiction work of Truman Capote or Tom Wolfe tends not to diminish any of the authors, but rather illustrates the particular genius of each one.

**Students must ask: Are her books journalism? Nonfiction?
History? Oral history?**

What distinguishes Alexievich's work from that of many U.S. literary journalists (and other cultures as well), is not just her polyphonic or multi-voiced journalism, but the way in which her own authorial perspective is subsumed in favor of the perspective of the subject's perspective. Her meticulously factual prose reads as though it is the voice of the interviewed subject, not the journalist's. She is "translating"—or perhaps, more accurately, "ghost-writing" the raw interviews into her own elegant prose. In this way, she gives voice to the voiceless, allowing her own gifts to be used by those who cannot speak as beautifully themselves. A Russian soldier's experience of the Afghan War comes alive in his brutal words: "Fear is more human than bravery, you're scared and you're sorry, at least for yourself, but you force your fear back into your subconscious. Well, I admit it. I had the greatest respect for the Afghan people, even while I was shooting and killing them."⁹

Students tend to delight in such honesty, and they crave the ability to tease such a pronouncement from their own sources. They want to know how Alexievich does it, and suddenly become engaged in the specifics of technique. Alexievich's descriptions of her processes have been sparse but consistent. She does dozens, if not hundreds, of interviews with many witnesses to whatever crisis about which she is writing.¹⁰ In her books, her often humble subjects speak with consistent grace and style. For example, in *Voices from Chernobyl*, an account by the wife of a fireman named Lyudmilla Ignatenko, who watched her husband Vasily die from radiation sickness, reads:

On the very first day in the dormitory, they measured me with a dosimeter. My clothes, bag, purse, shoes—they were all "hot." And they took that all away from me right there. Even my underwear. The only thing they left was my money.

He started to change; every day I met a brand-new person. The burns started to come to the surface. In his mouth, on his tongue, his cheeks—at first there were little lesions, and then they grew. It came off in layers—as

white film . . . the colour of his face . . . his body . . . blue, red, grey-brown. And it's all so very mine!"¹¹

In a later passage, chemical engineer Ivan Nikolaevich Zhykhov speaks of the astounding folly he encountered during the haphazard cleanup:

We dug up the diseased top layer of soil, loaded it into cars and took it to waste burial sites. I thought that a waste burial site was a complex, engineered construction, but it turned out to be an ordinary pit. We picked up the earth and rolled it, like big rugs. We'd pick up the whole green mass of it, with grass, flowers, roots. It was work for madmen.¹²

The fact that the words themselves are not the subjects' own can and does provoke discomfort from journalists. An audience member at a panel discussion expressed concerns about Alexievich's use of the perspective of her sources, as well as what he observed as the obviousness of the two passages from *Voices of Chernobyl*, from two different sources, having been written by the same writer.

Students generally do not notice the consistency of the prose, until it is pointed out to them. Even when it has been pointed out, they tend to praise the elegance and effectiveness and do not see a problem with it, until they attempt to replicate the technique. Questions such as:

"Am I allowed to change the source's words?"

"What if the source doesn't like the way I write it?"

"How can I be accurate if I wasn't there?"

Answering these questions usually leads to complex ethical discussions, the kind that are a cornerstone of the literary journalism classroom.

The resulting conclusion is most often that there is real potential for abuse using this translation technique, but there is potential for abuse in many other areas of journalism as well. Bad journalists routinely cherry-pick facts to back up their theses, put thoughts into the heads of their sources and edit quotes in misleading ways. The solution is, in these cases, the same as for those using Alexievich's translation technique. Train journalists in ethics and demand they not engage in malfeasance.

Concretely defining the technique proves even more difficult. There is something fictive and illusory in presenting prose that did not come from the source's mouth as the source's voice, because it pushes against the boundaries of what journalism is. Language translators can manipulate word choice in the same way, and there is much scholarly debate as to if or when a translation is not the same as the original. The risk in employing Alexievich's technique is, in fact, less of a risk than translation, because the subject has the language skills to fact check the journalist's work. Yet, if executed with discipline and a

lack of bias, it can work much as translation does when a person cannot speak a language. But is translation the right word? At this stage, students can start to look for and read similar translations in their own language publications, seeing how the authorial technique can vary even when the basic premise remains the same.

The ghost-writing/translation technique is not unknown in U.S. journalism. Studs Terkel, the late chronicler of U.S. life, employed a similar method to create his oral histories of grand topics such as urban life in *Division Street* and the Great Depression in *Hard Times*.¹³ Much like Alexievich, Terkel was hailed for giving voice to marginalized communities and populations. Unlike Alexievich, he more deftly created an illusion that his subjects were speaking for themselves. He did, however, field criticism for indulging in primitivism by letting their poor grammar and regional accents exist in what was still his prose.¹⁴

Even as they are often compared, the way the two authors' works read is remarkably different. In his preface to an interview with Alexievich for LitHub.com, John Freeman summed it up:

Unlike Studs Terkel, whose oral histories of American life arrange themselves like transcribed radio interviews, Alexievich's books are strange creations. They never ask the reader to imagine their subjects are representative individuals. When she won the Nobel in 2015, Alexievich described them as novels—which is a fair comparison given the meticulous arrangement required to create such clear and evocative pastiche. Whatever they are, her books are as eerie and beautiful as overheard voices on a crowded train car traveling through the night.¹⁵

At the other end of the spectrum, polyphonic ghost-writing also remains a common practice in U.S. women's magazines such as *Marie Claire* or *Cosmopolitan*, and thus can be a familiar structure to some students, though the prose style and subject matter can vary wildly. *Marie Claire* leans heavily on direct quotes when telling the stories of women who successfully run for office,¹⁶ while the magazine's regular feature telling the stories of reunions between exes, that is, people who were previously married, is decidedly not literary. "In spite of all the 'Miss Independent' and 'Girl Power' books I had read—and was planning to write someday—I fell in love. Fast and furious."¹⁷ Recently, *Cosmopolitan* reached toward the literary when writer Anna Louie Sussman tells the story of a young woman from Texas who self-performs an abortion during the COVID-19 pandemic: "They try to tell you, 'We're going to help you do this, we're going to help you do that.' I've had friends say they told them that too. But once the baby was there, there was no help. So I was just scared, just thinking, *I'm really going to have to give birth.*"¹⁸

As with Alexievich's work, these writers seek to elevate each individual source's narrative, sans authorial commentary. However, this technique must be employed with care and caveats, especially in terms of the multiplicity of sources. The more sources a writer includes in the story "translation" of sources' voices, the more journalistically sound the story becomes.

Multi-sourced narratives are inoculated against a single narrative or single perception bearing the weight of an argument. If one of a writer's sources turns out to be wrong, whether via deception, delusion, or mistake, it simply becomes an example of the chaos of a situation, if there are dozens of other, accurate voices shoring up the thesis. In a less multi-voiced story, such as the disastrous *Rolling Stone* exposé of rape culture at the University of Virginia,¹⁹ a bad source destroys the credibility of the thesis.

Even in a small-scale classroom situation, students notice the contradictions between their sources and wonder if they should include them. They push back against the notion of writing down anything that they perceive to be incorrect, even when reminded that the source being incorrect can be an essential part of the story. They push back against making their sources look like fools or liars, rightfully fearing backlash. They push back at annotating the work, fearing it will ruin the narrative. The real breakthrough comes when the students realize that the solutions do not come easily, the facts are not always apparent, and sometimes they must write the truth even if it hurts the source.

The translation process also requires an authorial distance. One that is often the opposite of the approach of some U.S. literary journalists, who thrive on self-insertion and advancing their own points of view. This kind of author-centered journalism is not necessarily a bad thing, and it has given some of the greatest literary journalism. Classic works that do the opposite of what Alexievich does, such as Gay Talese's "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold"²⁰ and Joan Didion's *The White Album*²¹ unfold their stories so the reader sees the subject through the author's eyes, observing everything the author observes and most times absorbing the author's brilliant perceptions of the subject. Even more extreme examples can be found in the works of Hunter S. Thompson and Norman Mailer, as they take their readers on a journey through their own consciousness,²² a journey that often completely subsumes whatever subject about which they are writing. When presented with these contrasts, one group of students concluded that Talese and Didion write about their subjects, Thompson and Mailer write about themselves through their subject, and Alexievich writes about the Soviet Union.

This can then lead into a discussion about the popularity of author-centered journalism and how it has led to some spectacular journalistic disasters

in which authors have been accused of advancing their own perceptions over facts or, worse, becoming fiction writers. *Grantland* writer Caleb Hannan allowed his own transphobia to shift the focus of his feature away from his subject's business dealings and toward his subject's gender identity, leading to the subject's suicide.²³ Stephen Glass's fabulist escapades at the *New Republic* are the stuff of legend,²⁴ and even *Esquire's* well-respected Tom Junod was rightfully called out for his fictional lead in a Michael Stipe profile.²⁵ Still, U.S. editors like *Grantland's* Bill Simmons and *Esquire's* David M. Granger, heavily influenced by the New Journalism, often seemed to operate under the incorrect assumption that if the author's point of view is not the center of the story, then the story is not literary. Alexievich, on the other hand, speaks of her ability to listen to her sources and articulate their point of view as a core element of her work.²⁶

These lessons have proved invaluable and should be a part of literary journalism pedagogy even if producing large scale works using Alexievich's translation technique is beyond most students' capabilities. Teaching them to value more than one voice, teaching them to privilege the source's voice over their own, and, above all, teaching them to listen, will only make all their writing stronger.

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Notes

¹ Author's in-class description to students. "Screwing it up," in this case, means the journalist projecting his or her own thoughts onto the subject as the journalist speaks for the source. What Alexievich does is a kind of high-end ghost writing, one that takes extraordinary sensitivity and self-restraint.

² The classroom scenes in this reconstruction are from my own memory, and the more esoteric conclusions mine, usually gently pushed onto the students by me.

³ Generation Z is a term applied to people born from 1997 forward, as defined and named by the U.S. Pew Research Center. Dimock, "Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins," para. 5.

⁴ Junod, "The Falling Man," 176–99.

⁵ Perry, "The True Story of the White Island Eruption."

⁶ Alexievich, *Secondhand Time*, 171.

⁷ "Nobel Prize in Literature 2015," All Nobel Prizes in Literature, *The Nobel Prize*. Accessed December 16, 2020. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/lists/all-nobel-prizes-in-literature>.

⁸ Charnysh, "Belarus, Ukraine, Russia React to Alexievich's Nobel Prize."

⁹ Alexievich, *Zinky Boys*, 20.

¹⁰ Lucic, "A Conversation with Svetlana Alexievich," para. 8.

¹¹ Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 12.

¹² Alexievich, 161.

¹³ Terkel, *Division Street*; Terkel, *Hard Times*.

¹⁴ Tonguette, "The Greatest Thing about Studs Terkel," para. 27–28.

¹⁵ Freeman, "How the Writer Listens," para. 3.

¹⁶ Adler and Ortiz, "How I Did It."

¹⁷ Goad, "Three Women on Why They Got Back with Their Ex," para. 4.

¹⁸ Sussman, "I Did My Own Abortion," para. 5 (emphasis in original).

¹⁹ Cornel, Coll, and Kravitz, "Rolling Stone and UVA."

²⁰ Talese, "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold."

²¹ Didion, *The White Album*.

²² As editor Bill Reynolds wrote to me, "Talese and Didion are keen, even fearsome observers. They tend to fade into the woodwork and let the characters do the work. They do the sculpting of the material, for sure, but those stories aren't really about them—are they? I can see what you mean when you're talking about Hunter S. Thompson and Norman Mailer—the story was always about them or how they were making the reader quite aware that it was their consciousness through which the reader was seeing this filtered reality." Email message, August 14, 2020.

²³ Simmons, "The Dr. V Story: A Letter from the Editor."

²⁴ Glass, "Hack Heaven."

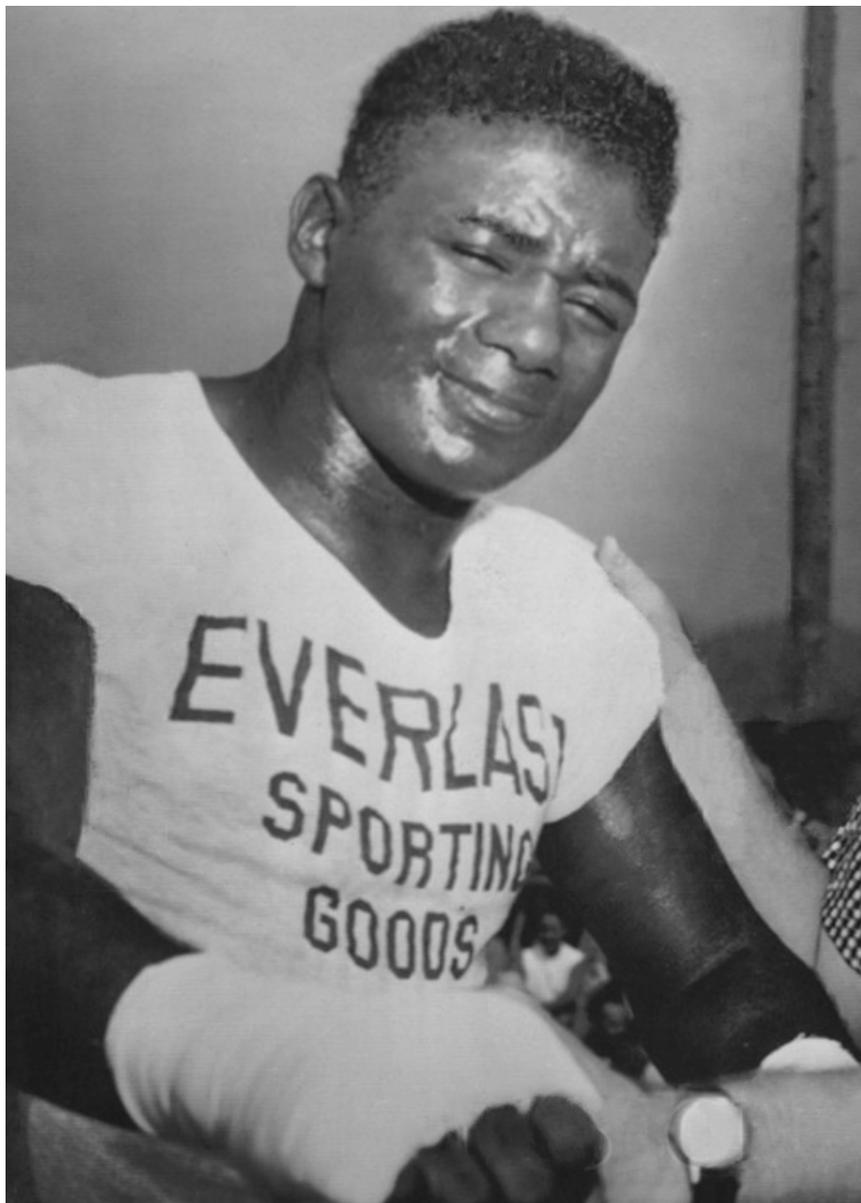
²⁵ Billboard, Staff, "Writer Comes Clean on Fake Stipe Profile."

²⁶ Freeman, "How the Writer Listens," para. 1.

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Professional heavyweight boxing champion Floyd Patterson, August 21, 1957.
Photographer unknown. 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 2019 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 books and articles published in peer-reviewed journals. Some works may have appeared online before print publication, and some with earlier publication dates may not have appeared until 2019.

BOOKS

Individual Author Studies

Azade Seyhan's *Heinrich Heine and the World Literary Map: Redressing the Canon*¹ makes a case for including Heine, the nineteenth-century German writer who was despised by the twentieth-century Nazis, among those identified as important contributors to world literature. Seyhan argues that Heine's many different identities—as poet, historian, essayist, cultural critic, journalist, exile, and German Jew, among others—has kept critics from identifying his work as “world literature,” a category that is defined largely by cross-cultural and transnational texts. Along with making that argument, Seyhan devotes parts of several chapters to Heine's journalism, suggesting that its innovations, including eschewing objectivity and promoting ambiguity, show Heine to be a forerunner of the U.S. New Journalism that emerged more than a century later. Of particular interest to scholars of literary journalism is Seyhan's focus on *Conditions in France* [*Französische Zustände*], which is Heine's 1833 collected journalism describing French culture for a German audience, as well as his use of the travelogue to produce pointed political satire.²

Truman Capote and his “nonfiction novel” *In Cold Blood* continue to receive considerable attention. Adding to what has been known about how Capote constructed his best-selling, if controversial, book is Jan Whitt's *Untold Stories, Untold Voices: Truman Capote and In Cold Blood*.³ In it, Whitt describes some of the rivalries and jealousies that Capote sustained both during and after he was writing the book, which resulted in the unacknowledged assistance—notably from childhood friend Harper Lee—and sources suggested by Whitt's title.⁴

As editors Alice Mikal Craven and William E. Dow note in their introduction to *Of Latitudes Unknown: James Baldwin's Radical Imagination*,⁵ remarkably little scholarly attention has been paid to Baldwin's literary journalism. Part two of their four-part volume is an effort to address that lack. Three essays—on Baldwin's work about the Civil Rights Movement, on his adaptation of the documentary tradition to prose, and on his use of first-person narration—open up new ways to think about Baldwin's literary journalism, inviting scholars to attend more closely to this important dimension of Baldwin's oeuvre.

Jeremy Treglown explains that his *Mr. Straight Arrow: The Career of John Hersey*⁶ is a study of Hersey's career rather than a full biography, but Treglown does use Hersey's published work to flesh out much of Hersey's life, from his childhood travels with his missionary parents through his lengthy career as

a journalist, novelist, and teacher of writing. Although Hersey thought he should be most remembered for his fiction, Treglown demonstrates that it is his nonfiction that best displays Hersey's skill and most deserves continued attention. Given Hersey's distinguished career—he won a Pulitzer for his novel *A Bell for Adano*, and *Hiroshima* is credited with being a groundbreaking and widely influential example of literary journalism—it is perhaps remarkable that Treglown's is only the second book-length biographical study to have been published. But as Treglown makes clear in his preface to the book, Hersey's dedication to truth and disinclination to seek the limelight are traits that continue to make Hersey and his work relevant for our time and beyond.⁷

National/Regional Studies

Pablo Calvi, in his *Latin American Adventures in Literary Journalism*,⁸ argues that literary journalism has helped both to create national identities in Latin America and to consolidate Latin America as a *supranational identity*.⁹ Through an analysis of six historical moments between the 1840s and the 1970s, along with a comparison of the development of Latin American literary journalism with the evolution of the genre in the United States, Calvi shows how the genre has functioned as “an instrument for ideological formation”¹⁰ in Latin American countries. While doing this, he also highlights how the literary traditions of Latin America are distinguished by having grown out of the periodical press rather than individual books, creating a dynamic conversation not only between texts that would appear in a single publication but also among its readers and their varying social positions. This dynamism, Calvi argues, points to how literary journalism helped create Latin America as a political entity that could then move into the world market.

Another study that focuses on the importance of the periodical press in the evolution of literary journalism is Thomas R. Schmidt's *Rewriting the Newspaper: The Storytelling Movement in American Print Journalism*.¹¹ With a focus on three decades—the 1970s through the 1990s—Schmidt argues for rethinking how narrative journalism came to play a prominent role in daily news production. If it started as what he calls a “rebellious act”¹² in the 1960s, Schmidt suggests in the following decades storytelling became a sign of “institutional change.” To make his case, Schmidt takes an approach that he calls “cultural institutionalism,” which he describes as a combination of two theoretical modes common to media studies, institutionalism and cultural analysis. He claims that what evolved was a storytelling movement that fundamentally changed the relationship between the producers and consumers of news in the United States.¹³

Hedley Twidle's *Experiments with Truth: Narrative Non-Fiction and the Coming of Democracy in South Africa* is described as the first book to analyze the nonfiction produced by South African writers during the decades of the country's transition out of apartheid.¹⁴ In eight chapters framed by an introduction and afterword, Twidle looks at a range of narrative nonfiction forms—longform journalism, literary journalism, oral history, memoir, and essay, among others—to suggest how those forms, employing new aesthetics, engage with difficult stories of collaboration and confession and offer eyewitness accounts of the country's effort to reconstruct itself after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The book ends with a prediction regarding the future of nonfiction in South Africa.

International Studies

An important contribution to the scholarship on international war reporting is *Literary Journalism and Africa's Wars: Colonial, Decolonial and Post-colonial Perspectives*,¹⁵ edited by Andrew Griffiths, Audrey Alvès, and Alice Trindade. With an introductory chapter and eight additional essays, along with related excerpts from literary journalistic texts from the 1860s to the 1990s, the volume explores how writers used the techniques of literary journalism to call into question the colonial enterprise and its legacy. The contributors look at reporting from England, France, Spain, Portugal, Poland, and the United States—including work by Henry Morton Stanley, Ramón J. Sender, Ryszard Kapuściński, Frederick Forsyth, and Kurt Vonnegut—to reveal how the reporting often reproduced even as it challenged the colonial discourse supporting pronounced power imbalances on the continent.

The degree to which literary journalism has become a regular part of the scholarly discourse about journalism is reflected in the three-volume *International Encyclopedia of Journalism Studies*.¹⁶ With eleven sections and more than 250 entries, the encyclopedia covers a range of topics of interest to scholars that either explicitly or implicitly engage with literary journalism, including “Activist and Radical Journalism,” “Interpretive Journalism,” “Global Muckraking,” “New Journalism and Gonzo,” “Magazine Journalism,” and even “Comics and Comic Strips.” The editors set out to reflect the new reality for journalism, documenting not only historical developments, but also the concepts, theories, and methodologies that inform today's journalism. The entries have been produced by established scholars with extensive backgrounds in their subject areas as well as by new voices.

Historical Development

In *Literary Journalism in British and American Prose: An Historical Overview*,¹⁷ Doug Underwood continues his investigations into the relationship

between journalism and literature, factual and fictional writing. In this volume, he sets out (1) to broaden readers' understanding of the work canonical literary figures in the United States and Great Britain produced in both areas of traditionally conceived "literature" and "journalism"; (2) to argue for opening up the literary canon to include more of what Underwood calls narrative and discursive writing; and (3) to show how journalism has played a vital role in creating opportunities for women, minorities, and others historically excluded from the general discourse about literature. He accomplishes this in seven chapters, plus an introduction and epilogue, and provides appendices that list the names and works of writers Underwood is arguing should be part of his expanded canon.

Digital Technology

David O. Dowling's *Immersive Longform Storytelling: Media, Technology, Audience*, reviewed in the December 2019 issue of *Literary Journalism Studies*,¹⁸ builds on his earlier work about the *New York Times*'s ground-breaking, prize-winning, multimedia story "Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek," to argue that the digital age, rather than leading to less engaged and more superficial reading practices, has instead ushered in an era in which long-form narrative journalism is attracting audiences willing to invest the kind of time and attention usually associated with reading literature. As a collaboration between news and technology, digital literary journalism, Dowling explains, "operates at the nexus of cinema, radio, and print,"¹⁹ thereby offering the possibility of a deeply immersive experience. In particular, the use of drone and 360/VR technology allows journalists to bring readers/viewers into contact with people, places, and events normally not seen or easily accessed, and in that way is supporting journalism's traditional focus on public service and social justice.

ARTICLES

Digital Technology

David O. Dowling and Subin Paul, writing in *Literary Journalism Studies*, make the case for how web-based literary journalism has become central to the Dalit protest movement in India. The work of Meena Kendasamy is featured.²⁰

Also in *Literary Journalism Studies*, Willa McDonald and Bunty Avieson examine the development of the Australian Colonial Narrative Journalism database. Their study considers definitional issues that arose in constructing the database as well as the potential for the database to serve as a tool to disseminate specialized content to a broad audience.²¹

Historical Development

Writing in the *Journal of American Studies*,²² Caitlin Cawley examines changes in the way U.S. soldiers are depicted in two key works from 1977 and 2010. Differences in aesthetic choices are linked to the growing distance between the military and the U.S. public.

Individual Author Studies

Cuban ethnographer Miguel Barnet and his testimonial novel *La vida real* are explored by Holly Schreiber in *Literary Journalism Studies*. She compares his work to that of Oscar Lewis to demonstrate alternative ways of presenting the poor in narrative literature.²³

Rolf Brandt, an early German literary journalist who started as a war reporter during World War I, is the subject of Troy R. E. Paddock's article in *Literary Journalism Studies*. Brandt's conservative politics are highlighted.²⁴

Lucas Thompson, writing in *Comparative Literature Studies*, traces the influence of numerous German writers in the work of David Foster Wallace. The study relies on archival research and close reading.²⁵

A study of reporter George G. Foster in antebellum New York City examines his contributions to the early development of literary journalism. The article, by Denitsa Yotova, appears in *Journalism History*.²⁶

Alok Amatya, writing in *Environmental Humanities*, reviews a 2010 travel essay by Arundhati Roy. The reviewer argues that this essay can be studied as part of a body of work dealing with conflicts over natural resources.²⁷

In the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, Dominic Davies uses Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* to comment on and critique the role of literary nonfiction in the governance at work in extremely poor urban centers. Literary journalism is presented as both resisting and participating in certain colonial legacies.²⁸

Christopher P. Wilson, in *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, examines a 2014 book by Suki Kim and the author's subsequent defense of her methods. The use of immersion and its reception by critics are considered.²⁹

Writing in the *Journal of the Southwest*, Lauren Goodley describes the papers of Charles Bowden, known for his reporting from the U.S.-Mexico border, in the Witliff Collections at Texas State University, San Marcos. The article provides an overview of the archive and suggests possible areas of research.³⁰

Phillip J. Hutchison uses a case study approach to analyze the relationship between literary journalism and sports journalism, focusing on Gay Talese and his writing about Floyd Patterson, the boxer. The article, in *Journal*

of *Sports Media*, employs the concept of liminality, borrowed from anthropology, to illuminate the literary strategies used by Talese.³¹

In *Literary Journalism Studies*, James Rodgers analyzes two texts by Svetlana Alexievich to show how her work is an attempt to compensate for the shortcomings of conventional journalism. Rodgers finds that Alexievich's work fits into a Russian-specific conception of journalism as a form of literature.³²

The environmental journalism of Marilynne Robinson is the subject of a study by David O. Dowling in *Literary Journalism Studies*. He compares her work to that of Rachel Carson and shows how Robinson spent much of the twenty-five years between the publication of her first and second novels bringing the techniques of literary journalism to bear on complex and critical issues.³³

Hilde Van Belle examines work by Dutch literary journalist Joris van Casteren to show how he challenges the boundaries of the form in his use of a range of techniques. A key one is suggestion, which is combined with an absence of emotion, interpretation, and judgment to allow for the consideration of varying perspectives,³⁴ Van Belle argues in *Literary Journalism Studies*.

Narrative Theory

In *Narrative Inquiry*, Samuli Björninen proposes a method for looking at factuality in narrative as a rhetoric. The approach combines narrative theory and fictionality studies.³⁵

In the *Journal of Narrative Theory*, Katrina Quinn focuses on the work of Albert Deane Richardson, a reporter for Horace Greeley's *New-York Daily Tribune*. Quinn focuses on Richardson's dual role as protagonist and narrator in his accounts of a trip through several Southern states just before the outbreak of the Civil War.³⁶

National/Regional Studies

Katarzyna Frukacz, writing in *Literary Journalism Studies*, analyzes the distinctive nature of Polish literary reportage. Its development from the nineteenth century to contemporary times in response to sociopolitical factors is reviewed.³⁷

In *International Journal of Communication*, Subin Paul examines the use of emotionality in Nepal's English-language press. Subjective reporting and the embrace of emotions are seen as forming a distinctive way of creating journalism about Nepali workers in Qatar.³⁸

How the *crónica* of contemporary Latin American journalism fit into U.S. definitions of literary journalism is explored in *Brazilian Journalism Research* in an essay by Marcela Aguilar. The perspectives of ethnographic real-

ism and cultural phenomenology are considered.³⁹

As part of a larger study of the Spanish-language press, Udane Goikoetxea Bilbao and Txema Ramirez de la Piscina review three examples of digital magazines, two in Spain and one in Argentina. In *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, the authors conclude that the magazines are developing a new and audacious model at a time of great difficulties and uncertainties.⁴⁰

Practice

Siobhan McHugh, writing in *Nieman Reports*, argues that literary journalism is reinventing itself through podcasting. The author describes how the increasingly popular format allows for a blend of investigative reporting and opinion.⁴¹

In the *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, Dolores Palau-Sampio reviews the use of investigative and narrative techniques in covering Central American migration to the United States. An ethnographic and analytics approach is shown to improve coverage of complex issues.⁴²

Theophilus Tinashe Nenjerama and Nkululeko Sibanda make the case for a definition of journalism that takes in all art forms. This study, in *Communicatio: South African Journal for Communication Theory & Research*, focuses on protest theater that arose in Zimbabwe in response to repressive media laws.⁴³

Restorative narrative, a recently identified form of contextual news coverage, is analyzed by Nicole Smith Dahmen in *Newspaper Research Journal*. Textual analysis and interviews are used to situate this form in current practice.⁴⁴

The use of archival research in creative nonfiction is examined by Jay Ludowyke in *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creating Writing*. The author's personal experience in investigating the construction of the RMS Carpathia during the excavation of Hadrian's Wall is a major focus.⁴⁵

Ezeah Gregory and Gever Verlumun Celestine describe their research into the use of literary journalism as a tool for fighting hunger in Nigeria. Writing in the Ukrainian journal *Skhid*, they argue that literary journalism can be used to promote food security.⁴⁶

Literary journalism is proposed as a way to foster interfaith dialog in an article published in *Religions* by Alba Sabaté Gauxachs, Josep Lluís Micó Sanz, and Míriam Díez Bosch. Their work is based on content analysis of seventy-five articles and interviews with thirty-eight journalists.⁴⁷

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Notes

- ¹ Seyhan, *Heinrich Heine*.
- ² Seyhan, 39–56.
- ³ Whitt, *Untold Stories, Untold Voices*.
- ⁴ For a full review of Whitt's book, see Matthew Ricketson's in *Literary Journalism Studies* 11, no. 2 (December 2019): 186–88.
- ⁵ Craven and Dow, *Of Latitudes Unknown*.
- ⁶ Treglown, *Mr. Straight Arrow*.
- ⁷ Treglown, ix–xii. See also, Susan Swanberg's review of Treglown's book in *Literary Journalism Studies* 11, no. 2 (December 2019): 174–78.
- ⁸ Calvi, *Latin American Adventures in Literary Journalism*.
- ⁹ Calvi, 9.
- ¹⁰ Calvi, 5.
- ¹¹ Schmidt, *Rewriting the Newspaper*.
- ¹² Schmidt, 3.
- ¹³ See also, Jeffrey C. Neely's review of Schmidt's book in *Literary Journalism Studies* 11, no. 2 (December 2019): 198–201.
- ¹⁴ Twidle, *Experiments with Truth*, front dust jacket flap.
- ¹⁵ Griffiths, Alvès, and Trindade, *Literary Journalism and Africa's Wars*.

- ¹⁶ Vos, et al., *International Encyclopedia of Journalism Studies*.
- ¹⁷ Underwood, *Literary Journalism in British and American Prose*.
- ¹⁸ Dowling, *Immersive Longform Storytelling*. See also, Robert S. Boynton's review of Dowling's book in *Literary Journalism Studies* 11, no. 2 (December 2019): 179–82.
- ¹⁹ Dowling, 2.
- ²⁰ Dowling and Paul, "Digital Literary Journalism," 86–99.
- ²¹ McDonald and Avieson, "Having Your Story and Data Too," 32–55.
- ²² Cawley, "Documenting American 'Grunts,'" 351–84.
- ²³ Schreiber, "Rewriting *La vida*," 36–59.
- ²⁴ Paddock, "Rolf Brandt," 60–85.
- ²⁵ Thompson, "Wallace's Germany," 1–30.
- ²⁶ Yotova, "Antebellum Urban Reporting," 221–31.
- ²⁷ Amatya, "Itineraries of Conflict," 52–71.
- ²⁸ Davies, "Literary Non-Fiction and the Neo-Liberal City," 94–107.
- ²⁹ Wilson, "Suki Kim, North Korea, and Immersion," 93–114.
- ³⁰ Goodley, "Charles Bowden," 176–87.
- ³¹ Hutchison, "Gay Talese and Floyd Patterson," 47–66.
- ³² Rodgers, "Making Space," 8–30.
- ³³ Dowling, "Robinson's Environmental Literary Journalism," 56–87.
- ³⁴ Van Belle, "Joris van Casteren," 88–112.
- ³⁵ Björninen, "Rhetoric of Factuality," 352–70.
- ³⁶ Quinn, "Undercover Reportage," 1–26.
- ³⁷ Frukasz, "Literary Reportage," 6–34.
- ³⁸ Paul, "Gulf Crisis," 1323–39.
- ³⁹ Aguilar, "Latin American Contemporary Chronicle," 244–65.
- ⁴⁰ Goikoetxea Bilbao and Ramírez de la Piscina, "Three Audacious Forms," 692–715.
- ⁴¹ McHugh, "Podcasting," 36–43.
- ⁴² Palau-Sampio, "Reframing Central American Migration," 93–114.
- ⁴³ Nenjerama and Sibanda, "Navigating between Protest Theatre," 18–33.
- ⁴⁴ Dahmen, "Restorative Narrative," 211–21.
- ⁴⁵ Ludowyke, "Carpathia and Hadrian's Wall," 238–50.
- ⁴⁶ Gregory and Celestine, "Global Food Crisis," 34–40.
- ⁴⁷ Sabaté Gauxachs, Micó Sanz, and Díez Bosch, "Slow Religion," 485–509.

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University of California, Irvine (UCI) faculty members Barry Siegel (image by Steve Zylus), and Amy Wilentz (image by Paula Goldman).



Scholar-Practitioner Q & A . . .

An Interview with Barry Siegel and Amy Wilentz

Isabelle Meuret
Université libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

While conversations on literary journalism studies are well and alive in this international community, some defending the field as a discipline in its own right or celebrating its lack of disciplinary status,¹ classes and programs emerge and thrive across the world, each with its local take or global perspective, depending on the context. As scholars try and test different methods and formats, experiment with new pedagogical tools and techniques, think of expanding the canons and promote inclusive approaches, I was curious to see how those who pioneered a still-to-this-day unique, full undergraduate program in literary journalism in the United States could enlighten us about the promises and possibilities of such educational ventures.² Hence, this conversation with Barry Siegel and Amy Wilentz, from the University of California, Irvine (UCI).

Important to note is the program in literary journalism at UCI is housed within the English department,³ a home base that bears relation to the specific attention attached to language. Besides its distinguishing badge of excellence in narrative writing, the program reflects the hybridity of literary journalism itself, with an equally solid offering of workshops and classes in reporting. Many institutions now provide courses in literary journalism, but rarely as a comprehensive program. For instance, the Extension of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) features an online introductory course in literary journalism,⁴ while other institutions offer courses at the master's, not undergraduate, level. By way of illustration, the Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute at New York University (NYU) offers a master's "Literary Reportage" program.⁵

My immense gratitude goes to Barry Siegel, director of and a professor in the program in literary journalism at UCI, and to Amy Wilentz, a distinguished professor on their faculty. They both generously shared some of their precious time to provide insight into their experience and expertise, now that the program has been running successfully for more than fifteen years. UCI started its three-year comprehensive course in literary journalism in 2003, with Barry Siegel at the helm. Since then, a few professors have joined in, students have responded, and bright days lie ahead, with a growing demand for storytelling skills across disciplines. Adaptability is the order of the day, with students' needs receiving special attention, and professors standing by their standards of quality and high principles.

Siegel is an acclaimed writer, Pulitzer Prize-winning author, and long-time contributor to the *Los Angeles Times*. He is director of the UCI literary journalism program, and teaches reporting, nonfiction narrative, and the history and theory of literary journalism. His latest book, *Dreamers and Schemers*, published in 2019, details and chronicles how the 1932 Olympic Games changed Los Angeles and triggered the city's stunning expansion.⁶ Wilentz, a former Jerusalem correspondent for the *New Yorker*, is an award-winning author who writes on Haiti, contributes to the *Nation*, and teaches personal essay writing, climate literature, and nature writing.⁷ Other instructors are Carol M. Burke, Miles Corwin, Amy DePaul, Christopher Goffard, Erika Hayasaki, Patricia Pierson, and Hector Tobar, all teaching a variety of theoretical and practical skills.

Shortly before California was forced into lockdown to contain the coronavirus, we sat for lunch in Los Angeles, blissfully unaware this would be one of our last authorized social gatherings for a while. Their enthusiasm for the program and the resulting complementarity that comes from working together with passion and dedication, is both palpable and inspirational. No need to ask them whether literary journalism qualifies as a discipline, or that sort of captious question. The gist of the program lies in the making of their craft—reporting and writing—that is, the essence of good literary journalism. Most striking in the conversation is the resourcefulness and commitment of this small-sized staff, and their unwavering devotion and attention to students and to the UCI community at large.

Our conversation took place on March 9, 2020, at a restaurant in Toluca Lake, Los Angeles. It was recorded, transcribed, and edited for clarity where necessary. I stayed true to the most agreeable meandering of the conversation into a variety of subjects, and later introduced and complemented it with notes from previous research and information collected from the program website at UCI.⁸

Isabelle Meuret: How did you come up with a program in literary journalism at UC Irvine?

Barry Siegel: My only exposure to university is that I had taught one semester at USC (University of Southern California) as a journalist in residence from the *LA Times*. That was a journalism school. When I was approached by UC Irvine, back in 2003, the idea that was being promoted and created by the English department, and was going to be housed there, was that all non-fiction narrative was worthy of being regarded as literature. It was a body of literature worth a degree program inside the English department. This spoke to what our interests were.

Meuret: More and more creative and nonfiction writing classes are created around the world. Why do you hold on to “*literary journalism*” rather than teach “longform writing” or “storytelling”?

Amy Wilentz: Barry always says about our workshops that we have all these different names for them but, really, they are all about narrative, storytelling.

Siegel: The power of storytelling.

Wilentz: So why do we hold on to *literary*? Because we don’t want to be swept into a dustbin of facts, solely, so that you’re just forgotten in history, and you don’t mean anything, and your work doesn’t have any standing in the way literature ostensibly has in the long run.

Siegel: Enduring—it’s news that stays news.

Meuret: Is it also linked to the origins, the fact that it was published in literary magazines?

Wilentz: That’s what I taught at Columbia, where I was an adjunct professor. I taught their magazine journalism class. It was kind of half professional, and half literary journalism. So, we put together a new magazine. The kids had the idea for the magazine, and we put it all together. And then they wrote it and designed it. It was every aspect of magazine. But of course, Columbia had the money.

Meuret: Robert Boynton is leading a literary reportage program at NYU. But you pioneered the literary journalism program at UCI, right?

Siegel: We were first—the literary reportage at NYU is a graduate program. Ours is an undergraduate program, but NYU is probably the closest approximation to what we are doing. It came after ours.

Wilentz: Iowa has also a program in creative nonfiction.⁹

Meuret: Yes, but you are the only ones to hold on to “literary journalism.” Is it your signature?

Siegel: First of all, we are the only undergrad degree program in any kind of journalism program in the UC system, and the only undergraduate literary

journalism program in the country. What was happening is that the school of humanities back then invited all the departments to come up with proposals for new majors and new programs, and part of that was to attract new students into the humanities. And our English department, which is well-known for critical theory . . .

Wilentz: Yes, even Derrida, unbelievably . . .

Siegel: Here is how this happened: The person they put in charge of the committee to try and come up with proposals for new programs is a professor in the department of English, Linda Georgianna, who herself was a medievalist. She was casting about her ideas and it so happened, coincidentally, that her college roommate (when she went to college) was Madeleine Blais, who now teaches at the University of Massachusetts. She is a well-known literary journalist. It's just her happening to tell her proposal, and it was the beginning.

Meuret: Interesting to see how things come together. Are your students joining the program because they are disappointed with “legacy” or “traditional” journalism?

Wilentz: I don't think they think like that. I have a fairly clear view of who our students are. A lot of our students are sons and daughters of immigrants, so they don't think about “legacy” journalism.

Siegel: They are first-generation college students.

Wilentz: Yes, and they are the first persons in the family who speak English fluently. They may not have read a lot of English. They are not a class of first-generation students who are big readers, or who have read all the old English classics, and who “love” literary journalism. They are not like that. They are coming to this sort of “weird,” almost “ancient” study to them, but they know it also has excitement. And they get very excited about the reporting, except that it's hard, because they are also well brought up by immigrant parents who don't want them to get into trouble. So, they would not dare to ask an important person, “How much money do you actually make?”

Siegel: Or, “How old are you?” I cannot get my student to get ages into their stories because they are too shy or polite to ask, “How old are you?” Amy is absolutely right. But let me add that UCI's body of students is strongly children of immigrants—about sixty percent—but that's not everybody. A lot of them are in our program because we are the only undergraduate program in any kind of journalism in the University of California system. And often students are there because they want to do journalism and that's the only place to do it.

Meuret: It is a first entry point to journalism?

Wilentz: Yes, and they do go on. Those students will go on and some actually do journalism.

Siegel: Yes, they catch it. Besides my workshop, I teach a core course in the evolution of the field, the evolving ethics of the field, so I sit there with maybe fifty, sixty students, and I'm trying to define literary journalism and—you know, the subjective prism of the writer—and there's a certain segment of that class who is more conventional mainstream than we are—you know, "objectivity" is the god and "biases," the devil—so, these are people whom we introduce to the possibilities of literary journalism.

Wilentz: Sometimes I ask my students: Did you enjoy the class? And they say, "Yeah. It was really interesting, but it was more like an English class because we read books. I thought we read only articles." They read nonfiction books.

Meuret: You manage to make them read?

Wilentz: I wouldn't go that far. Some of them read, but usually it's the readers who read.

Siegel: As I tell my students, I don't know how you can be a writer without being a reader, and so yes, we are dealing with a generation that is not a reading generation in the way we were, but the foundation of our workshops is reading exemplary models, then peer review. We peer review each other, so there's that kind of reading, but we also X-ray exemplary models of literary journalism.

Wilentz: Also, you respond. I arrived there some thirteen years ago. When I first got there, I tried to sort of teach like a Harvard professor, because that's how I had learned. I dictated to them, I told them what to read, I expected them to do the assignments. That didn't work. So now I have conversations with them, even in my lecture classes, and although I will assign whole books, I also now assign two, three chapters, conclusions, and they can digest that.

Siegel: That's a compromise. You cannot get any of that close reading if you assign eight books, or whole sections. And I want the close reading.

Meuret: Increasingly we talk about the "demise" or "failure" of journalism. I suppose it is connected to the current climate and politics. Still, do you see even more enthusiasm on the part of students because we are in an age of activism? Are students keen on advocacy journalism?

Siegel: When we first started, the projections were way off. We thought we could gather just a few majors, and we were inundated from the start. Inundated. Where we slowed down was with the great recession, and the concurrent implosion in the field, in the profession. And now we are dramatically seeing increases again.

Wilentz: It's the Trump bump. All the name-calling of journalism has caused young people to look at journalism and say, it matters.

Siegel: I was provided with numbers with the latest applications for UC Irvine—I don't know how that will reflect, but there is a dimension of that that has to do with what is going on.

Meuret: The zeitgeist.

Wilentz: Yeah, the zeitgeist. It's all the digital stuff, social media, that is affecting journalism.¹⁰

Siegel: We have a lot of majors who are interested in journalism as a tool for social change and social justice, but we also have the artists, the poets who are just drawn to it, or to literature, as writers.

Wilentz: That's exciting. Sometimes it's older students who are getting to this program, who are much more interested.

Meuret: In one of your course descriptions, for the personal essay, you advise that the workshop is not "a psychological group session."

Siegel: We are against navel gazing. But most of it is under the supervision of Amy. It's pretty regulated.

Wilentz: And also "don't whine." It's not what we are here for.

Meuret: You currently have a minor and major component, and you are planning to create an MA degree. What would be the added value, compared to the undergraduate program?

Siegel: The main thing is the fact that the students in the undergrad program combine a series of three advanced workshops. In each one they write some kind of a narrative. Each one of those workshops is ten weeks long: Fix on a subject, gain some access for the reporting, climb into the reporting, come back out and start your draft. The greater advantage of a master's program is that you can work on a major project, perhaps even a book, over the course of an entire year. Other things, too, you obviously just take it up in terms of what your goals are, but the biggest advantage is that.

Meuret: You have a rich program. Students have electives—nature writing, true crime, digital and cultural narratives, travel literary journalism, race writing, and immigrant narratives—to name just a few. Do you also include other formats, like radio, or film?

Wilentz: We are small and underfunded.

Siegel: We are small. I also would love to have a workshop in photojournalism. Really, it's a matter of limited faculty, so we can only offer x, y, z, and we can do a, b, c. But that said, we have offered radio storytelling workshops. It all depends on who is around, who is available to teach. We've done a radio storytelling workshop that would be sort of a model for *This American Life* during class. As for film, there is a film and media studies department.

Wilentz: Often our students are double majors.

Meuret: Podcast?

Siegel: We do. What we do with all of these things, we incorporate them into the courses. If you go into the LJ 100 advanced reporting class, you'll see that one of the components is podcast, for instance, or even video, or documentary. We will also have master classes throughout the year in which we bring somebody in to run a one-day or a two-hour workshop. We brought a photojournalist from the *LA Times*, for instance.

Wilentz: And there is also Erika Hayasaki's digital conference every year or other year.

Siegel: The way we resolve the small-sized faculty and still commit to a whole class is, we try to enrich the curriculum with master classes or components inside the program.

Wilentz: Clearly, we haven't got anything like USC has. USC has broadcast, media, newsroom. To me, there is a lot of showmanship. There is a lot of reliance on hardware. They have great people there, of course. But our program is much more content based.

Siegel: Ours is much more specialized. It's great to have those resources. What really attracts students to literary journalism is the fact that we are smaller and specialized in what we do.

Meuret: Focused on the craft of writing.

Siegel: As much as we require that foundation of reporting, that's only half of it. We are equally focused on the writing.

Wilentz: And they're both hard to get the students to do.

Meuret: You seem to be close to the law school. You also have contacts with the history department. Now, to teach immersion, essential in literary journalism, do you work with sociologists or anthropologists? Are you trying to reach out to other departments?

Siegel: We should say that interdisciplinarity has been the priority of the entire university. There is a lot of encouragement to do that, and, for instance, the Center for Storytelling that we've been proposing, that's exactly what it's for, it's to transcend the boundaries of our own programs or our own schools even; in fact, transcend the campus and into the community.

Meuret: Something more organic?

Wilentz: More general than what is expected of journalism.

Siegel: Yes, the idea is that people have stories to tell, but they don't know how to tell them. We talk of sociologists, but also of scientists, doctors. This is exactly what we are trying to do.

Wilentz: And criminology.

Siegel: Yeah, criminology. I did an experiment in my workshop. A student who was not even a major or in the school of humanities wanted to enroll in our workshop. But this was a student who was a major in criminology,

a bright and accomplished student. I rolled the dice. She brought an original, different perspective but also had instinctive storytelling talent, because she is a reader. And she has now added literary journalism as a minor. We work closely with the academy and the public. We feel a great affinity with, certainly, historians. Some of our workshops are not only based on reporting. I teach a workshop which is mainly archival research, rather than reporting out on the streets.

Wilentz: Next year, maybe, I'll teach the lyric essay, because all the time when they are reporting a story or when they are doing their personal essays or memoirs, I'm trying to get them interested in intellectual aspects of what they are reporting. So, if they are reporting a story about a dad, who is an alcoholic, and the grandfather was too, I tell them, what if you can take a breather and do some research online, and in the medical school, about addiction and alcoholism, and add that to deepen the story. If I teach the lyric essay, then I could combine the personal, the research, and the reporting. I mean, we always try to get them to do a certain in-depth research on their reporting stories.

Siegel: What we are often trying to do is to propose that they think of their stories on at least two levels, as having a foreground and background, a narrative track that is running through a world, and we want them to use that narrative track as a window onto that world. So, you need to research not only your foreground, narrative track, but the world that it opens up onto. The best of them get that. The writing part of it has to do with the weave. If you sat in the first week you would never think that anybody would be able to tell a story. The two words I hear are "stressed" and "overwhelmed." But writing is rewriting, and at the end of the day, it's amazing to see how many of them pull it together.

Meuret: The problem with training is that it is about tools and techniques, yet there's much more to it than that. How do you deal with ideas?

Wilentz: Barry says, writing is rewriting, rewriting. I tell them writing is thinking. You have to think. And you hate it. You don't want to have to think: what is my story about?

Siegel: I try to get them to keep their hands off the writing and think it through. I usually tell them the two biggest reasons for having a problem writing the story are: there is a problem with the reporting, or I haven't figured out what my story is about, or both. So we try to force them to go there and try hard.

Meuret: You cover almost every topic or area of interest. What about gender?

Wilentz: We should do that, because really, practically, every class I teach

is about gender. A lot of my students are interested in this. One of the things about gender is that you may teach it or not teach it, per se, yet your students bring it to the table, to the reporting.

Meuret: You cover race, immigrant narratives, as well as nature and travel writing.

Siegel: Hector Tobar, who has joined our program part-time, is also in Chicano, Latino studies. He's added a whole other dimension to our program in the last couple of years.

Wilentz: We try to stay current, and we try to give our students the opportunity to write about the issues that they care about, but we are still trying to be classic, also.

Siegel: We have no apologies about that. The storytelling, what you are focusing on, the elements of narrative, are the main elements. Certainly, they propose what they will write about. Our job, in terms of what we are evaluating, has to do with the stuff they need to be able to write. In my workshops, students peer review each other's story proposals. In the winter, I teach the larger classes, and I have all the majors in front of me, and I've done it for years, so you certainly can see the evolution of the students. I do hear gender every now and then and, in general, identity.

Wilentz: And I've had to change all book lists for classes, because the classics are often, you know, just barely postcolonial British men. I have eliminated so many of them, even Bruce Chatwin, who's a good gender-fluid person. And so, I've had . . . it's hard for me because a lot of the younger people's writing . . . okay, you're really interesting, but do I really love your writing? Is the writing good enough? But I feel it is so important for my students to see that their view is represented, their kind of person is represented. That is more important for them in their growth as journalists, to see and read, than me to represent my own perfect grammatical . . .

Siegel: That's why we have a wide range of classes. I teach history, the evolution of the field's history, and I say at the start of the class, "Okay, there's going to be a lot of dead old white men in here, because that's how it started. So, we are going to start with Jack London, Stephen Crane, George Orwell." That's right in the first week. That's the canon, but then it's an ethics class, and so they jump in, they denounce it. And more and more, in recent years, you see them willing to do it.

Wilentz: Actually, that's really fun to have the canon, because then they get angry. It's a rather conservative group of kids, traditional and family based. I taught a class on the literature of journalism, so journalists writing about being a journalist, fiction, and nonfiction. I was surprised to see how many of them would start with the n-word that we are not allowed to say in America.

And I would just start to eliminate canonical works because they were just too unacceptable.

Meuret: Are you including “new new journalists” like William Langewiesche or Susan Orlean?

Siegel: Oh yeah. We had Susan Orlean come to campus. We’ve had Ted Conover, too.

Meuret: So, you are expanding the canon. Do you teach any foreign writers?

Siegel: We can do more of that.

Wilentz: I wanted to teach Kapuściński, but then he made too much stuff up. I am teaching an African writer [Helon Habila] in my climate literature class, this coming term. He’s Nigerian. I’m excited about that. I feel there are certainly way too many English ones.

Siegel: [Svetlana] Alexievich, a literary journalist winning a Nobel Prize. We could do more.

Wilentz: In America, you don’t have to have foreign writers. I teach a lot of Asian-American writers.

Siegel: We cross lists, but we don’t have to go abroad . . .

Wilentz: . . . to get all these different points of view.

Siegel: Send us a reading list, please!

Meuret: Interestingly enough, the success of literary journalism in the U.S. has had an impact on the publishing industry in France. Journalists such as Florence Aubenas or Emmanuel Carrère are translated into English. It’s a fairly new trend.

Wilentz: It’s so interesting to me. In the American publishing industry, it has always been true that it is much easier to sell nonfiction than fiction. And I believe the opposite is true in France.

Siegel: Publishers can evaluate a nonfiction book proposal based on the subject matter, whereas for a novel, it’s got to be *you*. They cannot look at the book and determine the marketability.

Wilentz: Seriously, you can give them two proposals: One would be a biography of the supermodel Kate Moss, and the other would be the book by Mary Gaitskill, when she was not known, called *Veronica* (2005), about a supermodel. They will take the biography about Kate Moss immediately. The hook is the real story.

Meuret: They have to sell.

Wilentz: How often do you see, written under the title of a novel, *basé sur une histoire vraie?* [based on a true story]—not that often. But here, it is “inspired by” or “based on”; it has to be real. I’m currently listening to *Le Lambeau* (2018) [*Disturbance: Surviving Charlie Hebdo*, 2019]. It’s such a

good book, it has just been translated, but I'm listening to the French version.

Meuret: Are you teaching an L.A. canon? You both write on Los Angeles.

Wilentz: A great book is *Writing L.A.* by David L. Ulin.¹¹ It's a collection of excellent writing.

Siegel: He's great. In fact, he taught a course for us called Writing L.A. There's a canon of historians who have written about L.A., but then you also have Joan Didion, Raymond Chandler . . . fiction writers.

Meuret: Rebecca Solnit?

Wilentz: Solnit is more Northern California. She is so exceptional. She is a big theoretical influence.

Siegel: Solnit is absolutely incredible, the way she weaves together different dimensions.

Meuret: She has great ideas: *Getting lost*, we no longer ever get lost. Or *Wanderlust*.¹²

Wilentz: I like the idea of sending students out to the world.

Siegel: The fundamental thing that they experience in our program is that they are pushed beyond their known world, asked to make sense of that foreign world, and come back with a coherent compelling story about it. That makes it unique.

Wilentz: A lot of them live in some island communities of their own groups. Some feel so tied to their world here.

Siegel: Now to just add a wrinkle to what I just said, increasingly what we are seeing, and that comes across in our conversations with students, particularly in the ethics class, is, "Are we allowed to write about the Other?" We are going to address that next.

Meuret: I experience the same problem when I'm teaching African American literary journalism. Students increasingly question our legitimacy.

Siegel: This is the white privilege going into this. We teach Joseph Mitchell and one of his pieces, "Mr. Hunter's Grave,"¹³ a classic. Students challenge his legitimacy as a white man going into a Black community.

Wilentz: And then inventing it!

Siegel: The other one that comes up, and that we are also teaching, is the famous Gay Talese profile of the boxer Floyd Patterson, "The Loser."¹⁴

Wilentz: You have to read William Styron on Nat Turner; it's all about legitimacy. Could he write it in the first person? Styron wrote about Black men because he was friends with James Baldwin.

Siegel: These are legitimate questions, but then my question back is, if we can't push beyond our own world, how can we do what we do?

Richard Keeble's recent exhortation to not only ditch our obsession with evaluating literary journalism as a genre or discipline, but to implement radi-

cal responses to democratize it, and help it thrive, has certainly hit home.¹⁵ Being part of this conversation, it is obvious to me that Siegel and his team at UCI have nailed it. Because they understand that the “imaginative impulse lies behind the journalistic bug,”¹⁶ and work hand in hand with both scholars and practitioners, and, most importantly, cater to a diverse audience in a collaborative manner, their program is a most welcoming venue to learn and be critical of literary journalism. Surely there is always room for expansion, as diversity also means joining a global conversation, with its own exciting encounters, challenges, and promises.

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Notes

¹ See, for instance, Keeble's illuminating article, "Literary Journalism as a Discipline and Genre: The Politics and the Paradox," 83–98. I might even venture to use the term *indiscipline*, not because literary journalism is an unruly field but, rather, in the sense that David Ferris confers to the term in his discussion of the ontological status of comparative literature in postmodernity. Indeed, according to Ferris, the profound attachment of comparative literature to alterity is conducive to its intrinsic logic of disruption. I would argue that literary journalism studies share similar idiosyncrasies with comparative literature. See Ferris, "Indiscipline," 78–99.

² For a comprehensive survey and discussion of literary journalism in education, see Neely and Lewis, "Literary Journalism and the Pedagogy of Liberal Education," 449–64. While their chapter focuses primarily on the offerings in literary journalism education in the United States, they also include information collected from respondents from twenty-seven other countries.

³ The UCI program in literary journalism can be found at <https://www.humanities.uci.edu/litjourn/>. See UCI, Literary Journalism.

⁴ Dow and Maguire provide similar and other examples in their introduction to the *Routledge Companion to American Literary Journalism*, 1–14. UCLA Extension's Literary Journalism I, introductory course in literary journalism, can be found at <https://www.uclaextension.edu/writing-journalism/creative-writing/course/introduction-literary-journalism-writing-x-42418e>.

⁵ The leader of the Literary Reportage program at New York University is Robert S. Boynton (<https://journalism.nyu.edu/graduate/programs/literary-reportage/>). For Boynton's view on teaching literary journalism, see his keynote address at the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies annual conference organized in May 2013 at the University of Tampere, Finland. The text was published as "Notes toward a Supreme Nonfiction: Teaching Literary Reportage in the Twenty-First Century," 125–31. Boynton also wrote the foreword to *The Routledge Companion to American Literary Journalism*, xix–xxi.

⁶ See Siegel, *Dreamers and Schemers*. His earlier books include *A Death in White Bear Lake* and *Manifest Injustice*. More information is available at <https://barry-siegel.com/>.

⁷ Amy Wilentz has essentially written on Haiti. Her latest books are *Farewell Fred Voodoo*; *The Rainy Season: Haiti Then and Now*. Her work can be found at <https://amywilentz.com/>.

⁸ In particular, see Garcia, "Literary Journalism at UCI."

⁹ The University of Iowa offers a number of creative writing courses and workshops, as presented at <https://writersworkshop.uiowa.edu/>.

¹⁰ As Barry Siegel also said elsewhere, "The nature of the business model for journalism has kind of imploded since the first year. Obviously, the internet has just changed everything. Newspapers were full of advertisements that now appear online. A huge change is simply the shift to the digital world. The opportunities for students are different—there are still great opportunities, but they're different. I faced a situation where you had to climb a fixed ladder with gatekeepers, whereas

now, if you write something great, you can just put it out there and it gets noticed. So there are exciting new opportunities. One of the things we've done is mix more digital and multimedia. We have to adjust to the changing world and help prepare our students." Garcia, "Literary Journalism at UCI," para. 9.

¹¹ Ulin, *Writing Los Angeles*.

¹² See Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*; *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*.

¹³ Mitchell, "Mr. Hunter's Grave," 50–95.

¹⁴ Talese, "The Loser," 65–70, 139–143.

¹⁵ Keeble, "Literary Journalism as a Discipline and Genre," 93–96.

¹⁶ Keeble, 96.

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Book Reviews . . .

Nancy L. Roberts, Book Review Editor

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The Uses of Literary Journalism: From History to Future Directions

The Routledge Companion to American Literary Journalism

edited by William E. Dow and Roberta S. Maguire. New York: Routledge, 2020. Notes. Bibliographies. Index. Hardcover, 580 pp., USD\$176; eBook USD\$43.16.

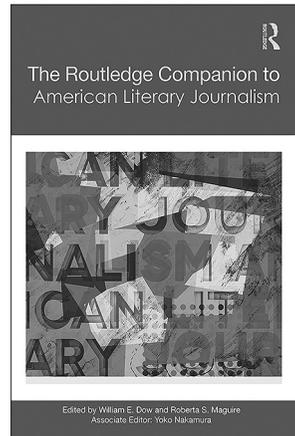
Reviewed by Susan L. Greenberg, University of Roehampton, United Kingdom

This collection is identified as a companion to literary journalism studies in the United States, rather than as an explicitly global survey, but its scope and depth give the work a much broader relevance. It is a *tour d'horizon* that presents recent findings and ideas, situating the discussion in the evolving language of its field while also linking to much broader debates about narrative nonfiction and the current state of literary and media theory. It is both a general reference tool and a thought-provoking work of current scholarship.

Section headings help the reader navigate the thirty-five chapters, offering historical perspectives, cross-cutting themes, theoretical frames and debates, and new directions for inquiry. Each chapter is short and focused, moving outward from specific individuals, publications, or periods to tease out a general insight, or inward to anchor a broad issue to concrete examples. The following highlights are inevitably selective, due to the constraints of a book review, but they indicate how readers might navigate an individual path through the varied material.

For this reviewer, the note of ambition is struck in the very first chapter when Colin T. Ramsey offers a new origin story for literary journalism, its earliest moment yet, by drawing out the importance of letters to both journalism and literature in the eighteenth century. The ambition is sustained even when it reaches more familiar topics from history, such as the New Journalism. Here John J. Pauly—to whom the book is dedicated—weaves a whole cloth of the era, a connected world of journalism and literature in which writers experience difficult practical choices. In the process readers are reminded of the material conditions of the literary market and the social status connected to each genre: in this case, the beguiling kudos of fiction.

Susan Keith's look at counterculture publications of the 1970s gives a historical treatment to a current topic, the consideration of literary journalism as "alternative" media. Keith recognizes upfront that the production of literary journalism requires money and time, factors in short supply in the examples studied here. Her account is a reminder of the ways in which 1970s counterculture has influenced the pervasive



digital culture of today, including its anti-editing rhetoric and the oppositional positioning of “passion” against “writerly style.” Keith draws on a range of definitions for “Alt Media,” emphasizing either their economic and organizational divergence from “hierarchical” commercial models or the ability of the content to “question dominative social relations.” While such definitions apply to the alternative media of the 1970s, one can ask if the same is true for the dominant “alternative” outlets of today such as RT (formerly Russia Today), which are state sponsored.

In part three’s focus on “disciplinary intersections,” Kathy Roberts Forde’s attention to the potential affinities of literary journalism and book history are of particular interest. Her analysis also zeroes in on a key difference: while book history privileges the reader, “historians of any form of journalism necessarily conceive of readers as publics” (316). Evoking Michael Schudson’s argument that the history of U.S. print culture should reflect what print means to people, Forde draws a parallel: “what literary journalism means to the public is what matters most for literary journalism studies” (316). This opens up, in turn, a debate about the uses of Jürgen Habermas’s “public sphere” and Jeffrey Alexander’s “civil sphere” to explain how literary journalism operates in public life.

In part four, on new directions, Roberta S. Maguire is persuasive in making the case that generalizations about U.S. literary journalism are not transferable to the work produced by African Americans, because the subjective voice as a distinguishing marker does not exist in that journalistic tradition. Instead, subjectivity is at the heart of the entire African-American press, because of its role in providing a voice for people who were otherwise “spoken for” by others. As one writer is quoted as saying, “The black press was never intended to be objective because it didn’t see . . . the white press being objective” (401). The insight leads to a nuanced analysis of craft issues such the use of the second-person point of view—usually a rare choice because of its inherent instability—to foreground subjectivity.

The section on new directions includes Robert Alexander’s examination of literary journalism’s potential as a fitting genre for ecocriticism. One possible affinity identified in the chapter is the use of “slow” techniques such as immersion: for example, as a potential technique for intuiting the communications of nonhuman animals, just as it helps to intuit otherwise inaccessible information about other people. Alexander also describes as a “powerful resource” literary journalism’s “ability to shift among various rhetorical modes, between different spatial and temporal scales, and to link the abstract and unseen with the concrete” (487).

Pascal Sigg provides a rare focus on postmodern theory and its potential to inform literary journalism studies. He is right to argue that post-structuralist ideas about reality deserve a nuanced analysis, and the chapter provides some grounds for the argument that the big beasts such as Derrida do not deny reality as such. Sigg goes on to provide an enjoyable close reading of several less predictable nonfiction authors from the last twenty years. However, this pleasantly provocative argument would be stronger if it anticipated a wider range of opposing arguments. One might ask, for example, whether Derrida can be considered a champion of rhetorical theory when any talk of the rhetorical concept of “agency” causes his intellectual descendants to

react like Superman with a rock of Kryptonite. The main objection, in brief, is that whatever interpretation is offered here, the postmodern school as a living practice still poses its own obstacles to nuance about reality.

There is so much more of interest in this collection; my own ersatz tastes prompt a mention of ethnography as a journalistic method (Gillespie), rock journalism as a literary genre (Schack), the relation between words and images (Marino and Jacobson), the inherent disruption of nonfiction narratives (Hartsock), and the uses of the first person (Phillips).

If I have a bugbear about the collection, it is the recurrence of tropes that refuse to die. It is hard to fault such ideas, especially in a multiauthor work, because of their very pervasiveness. But I look forward to the day when references to narrative storytelling techniques as “fictional” or “like a novel” cease to be the default. And to the time when any reference to objectivity adds an automatic disclaimer, citing Thomas Nagle’s distinction between objectivity and neutrality. Too often, people cite each other’s definitions in a circular way and too much weight is put on the term in its weakened form, divorced from its origins and use in science and philosophy.

But that is another discussion. Meanwhile, I salute this collection’s cool nerve and ambition.

Nigerian Identity Positioned

At the Crossroads: Nigerian Travel Writing and Literary Culture in Yoruba and English by Rebecca Jones. African Articulations 7. Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: James Currey, an imprint of Boydell & Brewer, 2019. Bibliography. Index. Hardcover, 312 pp., USD\$56.

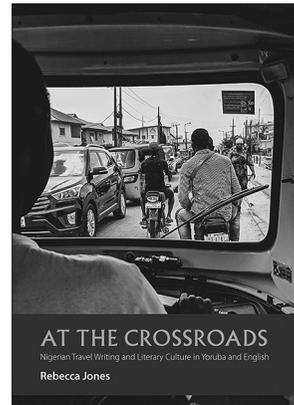
Reviewed by Beate Josephi, University of Sydney, Australia

Audience matters and, in the case of *Literary Journalism Studies*, its readers are presumably most interested in travel writing as a form of literary journalism. This is why it needs to be said first off what Rebecca Jones's *At the Crossroads* does not do. Her book only implicitly deals with the development of travel writing, but it does not address literary travel journalism, in the Yoruba nation, or later Nigeria. Nor does it discuss literary culture from a literary perspective, and questions of literary merit are not raised. Jones is at pains not to judge the writings from her white European perspective.

Travel, for Jones, is the tool to trace the changes in the self-described Yoruba or Nigerian identity. Travel, or movement, leads to encounters which help to establish the boundaries of self and other. Any text that includes travel is used for this purpose, be it travelogues, diaries, poetry, letters, articles in newspapers, fictional texts, or texts intended as travel guides, and, in the last decade, web publications. In this, Jones follows the understanding in parts of the Yoruba region where any narrative was once seen as a journey the storyteller embarked upon and took the listeners with him. For African travel writing, Jones wishes "a reversal of the colonial gaze, rendering Africans the subject of the travel narrative, rather than objects of the traveller's gaze" (268). This, however, is a challenge, inasmuch as African writers have to maneuver within the genre in its Western manifestations.

The book is chronologically arranged. It was intended to cover Nigeria's first century from its amalgamation as a colony in 1914 to its centenary in 2014 but extends via an epilogue to 2018 to take in websites and blogs. Jones makes clear that she does not aim at a comprehensive history of southwest Nigerian travel writing but wishes to make connections across literary genres and forms in order to follow up the ever-evolving modes of subjectivity.

When British colonial rule shaped what is now Nigeria, currently the seventh most populous country in the world, they placed 250 ethnic groups and 500 distinct languages within its borders. Yoruba, in the west, is one of the three largest groups and the country's capital Lagos is within its land. The others are the Islamic Hausa to



the north and Igbo in the east. Nigeria gained independence in 1960 but was torn apart by the Biafran civil war from 1967–70. It took another twenty years before stable democracy was achieved.

Given Nigeria's ethnic heterogeneity, choosing Yoruba writers provides Jones with the opportunity to explore commonalities and difference within Nigeria itself, and to follow the shift from an explicit Yoruba to a less ethnically defined Nigerian perspective. The first writer to be discussed at length is Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a distinguished West African Christian of the nineteenth century. Initially captured as a slave, he later widely traveled present-day Nigeria for missionary work, noting his travels in journals and letters. Crowther's work stands in the tradition of European travel writing, aimed at an audience in Victorian Britain. Later Yoruba authors, such as Nobel Prize-winner Wole Soyinka, decried Crowther's colonial mentality that led him to denounce his African brothers as "backward, heathen, brutish" (44) and focus on cannibalism. Crowther, however, also translated several books of the Bible into Yoruba, thus making both languages part of the beginnings of Yoruba print and literary culture.

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, newspapers played an important role in establishing a Yoruba print tradition. They also served as platforms of travel accounts, often serialized, with new road, rail, and steamer networks connecting Lagos to its hinterland and the southern Nigerian coast. When analyzing these narratives, Jones's main intent is to locate the self-representation and positioning of the writer, as is also the case with Isaac Delano's 1937 *The Soul of Nigeria*: "*The Soul of Nigeria* can be read as co-opting the travel book genre, situating itself within the field of imperial representation of the world, speaking in terms that the British can understand, while retaining an 'authentic' sense of the 'native', positioning the author both inside and outside his or her own culture" (97).

The texts written prior to independence are interrogated as to the extent to which they engender Yoruba-ness or African-ness in differentiation to British colonial imagination, especially as this mindset was intent on uniting very disparate regions. These contested identities show in Delano's own position, where slippages between "Yoruba," "Nigeria," and "Africa" reveal instabilities similar to the way communal identities were perceived in that era.

Chapter four is devoted to the novels of O. D. Fagunwa, written in the late 1940s and 1950s in Yoruba, and one of which, *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, was translated by Wole Soyinka. Fagunwa's novels are not set in a particular historical period, unlike more realist narratives in the lead-up to independence. Fictional travel writing of the time depicts a polyglot nation in which Yoruba and Hausa speakers coexist but are unable to understand each other's language.

Post-independence, these fractures in a vastly heterogeneous country broke into the open, when the Igbo region of southeast Nigeria sought to become the independent nation of Biafra. Jones chooses to focus on the unifying efforts post-civil war and has picked, among others, texts written by participants of Nigeria's National Youth Service Corps (NYSC). These narratives point a way towards a multi-ethnic and de-tribalized Nigeria and are also the first among the selected texts written by women,

thus introducing the gender perspective. They show “ ‘worlds in collision’ mediated through the figure of the unmarried ‘sexually self-determining woman,’ who is punished for her sexuality . . . [they] also seem to dramatize a broader anxiety about the shift from home to the national space, and thus about the meaning and dangers of the nation itself” (178).

For the twenty-first century, Jones turns to tourism journalism and to diasporic travel narratives, written by those born outside Africa and returning to the land of their fathers. Noo Saro-Wiwa’s travelogue, *Looking for Transwonderland* captures both conventional tourism and personal story. A writer for Rough Guides and Lonely Planet, she is also the daughter of activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was executed by the military government in 1995. Her travels, although ambivalently, instill in her a new sense of belonging.

The book’s epilogue engages with an online travel writing journal, *Fortunate Traveller*, of which Jones is a cofounder, and which may have been the instigation of her 300-page long, in-depth study of Yoruba and Nigerian identity as expressed in travel writing. *Fortunate Traveller* and other projects, such as “Borders Within,” continue the quest for mapping this highly diverse multi-ethnic nation. The traveler, for Jones, is a liminal figure, standing at the crossroads, able to move between space and cultures, “translating parts of Nigeria, or Nigerians, to each other” (259).

Desire Decoded at Some Cost to Sources

Three Women

by Lisa Taddeo. London: Bloomsbury, 2019. Hardback, 307 pp., USD\$15.99.

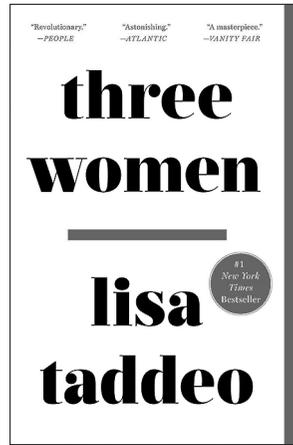
Reviewed by Julie Wheelwright, City, University of London, United Kingdom

Author Elizabeth Gilbert has heartily endorsed Lisa Taddeo's unexpected best-seller, *Three Women*, which chronicles the complex sex lives of its subjects, describing it as "a masterpiece at the same level as *In Cold Blood*." It is an intriguing parallel since this immersive work, composed entirely of interviews that Taddeo conducted over eight years, adheres to many conventions of literary journalism. Her immersive reporting has produced astonishingly detailed accounts as the women tease out questions about longing, about their struggle to express their desires and the powerful social opprobrium they face over their choices.

The stories are told in parallel narratives as each woman describes the arc of a conflict. For Sloane, who runs an up-market restaurant in New England with her husband, the drama focuses on the sex they enjoy with other couples. Sometimes Sloane meets men and records the experience for Richard; sometimes they involve another woman, sometimes a man. There are rules and codes of practice which are breached when Sloane begins an affair, outside of Richard's control or approval, with Wayne, a married chef.

Months after the affair has ended, Wayne's wife confronts Sloane when they meet in a local supermarket. This finely etched description of their painful conversation dwells on their respective power over men, and about how women do "terrible things to one another" (279). But in Taddeo's rendering, and because we, the readers, feel we possess such intimate knowledge of Sloane, we understand that by allowing Richard to dictate the terms of her sexual experiences, she has violated an unspoken contract of sisterhood. As Taddeo writes, "'You're the woman,' Jenny repeated. 'Don't you know you're supposed to have the power?'" (283). Sloane is aware of her power but regards it as "a prescription, there is an exact way to get dressed to get what you want. It's not about being sexy. It's about being everything before the man thinks of what he wants" (280).

Lina, mother of two small children and married to the dullard Ed, yearns to be everything for Aidan, a high-school boyfriend with whom she reconnects on social media. Aidan works in construction, is also married with two children, but when Lina meets him in cheap motel rooms and riverside parking lots, she feels, finally, deeply satisfied. She shares with Sloane the realization that her seductive power lies in



her ability to generate, and perform, a fantasy. As Lina tells her girlfriends, “I roped him in . . . like a cowgirl. I roped him in using Facebook” (171).

Lina’s disclosure of sexual pleasure to her girlfriends is telling since because Taddeo’s subjects all come under harsh scrutiny from disapproving friends and colleagues. After Lina endures a gang rape in high school, her small Indiana town reads her trauma as promiscuity, and it wrecks a budding relationship. Maggie—who at age seventeen was groomed and seduced by Aaron Knodel, her English teacher—suffers a similar fate. When Mrs. Knodel reads a text message from Maggie to her husband, Aaron’s steady stream of affection abruptly ends, leaving his student bewildered, shamed, and deeply hurt. Only years later, when Maggie hears in the local news that Mr. Knodel has won a prestigious “teacher of the year” award, does she decide to press criminal charges in a case that is dismissed as a mistrial. The high school reinstates Knodel, with back pay, and he suffers no consequence of his actions. Maggie, meanwhile, is described in the press as “troubled” and is shunned (201).

A half-century earlier, Taddeo’s Italian mother understood that as a girl with “only a fifth-grade education and a dowry of medium-grade linen dish towels,” no one cared about her welfare (1). As a young woman in Bologna in the 1960s, she was followed through the streets every day by a masturbating man. For Taddeo, the North Dakota court’s failure to give Maggie justice reveals how little has changed: writing in the wake of the Me Too Movement, Taddeo argues, “Even when women are being heard, it is often the right types of women who are actively heard. White ones. Rich ones. Pretty Ones” (299). At the local high school in Fargo where Knodel taught, his female students, in t-shirts and cut-offs, lined up in the street to support him during the trial.

Taddeo bravely probes this forbidden and complex aspect of women’s desire. Although the theme of sexual jealousy runs throughout the women’s stories, it is a conversation with her mother, dying from cancer, that drives home its bitter potency. As the mother whispers to her daughter from her hospital bed, “Don’t let them see you happy,” and when Taddeo asks, “Who?” she replies, “Everyone . . . Other women, mostly. . . If they see you are happy, they will try to destroy you” (297). On girls’ nights when Lina spills over with happiness after a visit with Aidan, “those were the nights when the other women drummed their fingers and tried to drown out her glee” (300).

This is undoubtedly a vivid and illuminating work of narrative nonfiction. But the comparison with Capote, perhaps unintended by Gilbert, points to its ethical entanglements. Just as Capote became involved, even dangerously so, with his subjects, one wonders about the impact of Taddeo’s interviews, which spanned nearly a decade, on Maggie, Sloane, and Lina. In some cases, she even moved into her subject’s town or city to gain better access. The intimacy that Taddeo creates by giving mundane and exquisite details about their lives, also creates disquiet at hearing their inner thoughts.

Taddeo describes her criteria for selecting her subjects, of whom only three agreed to have their names and details published: “What I perceived as these women’s ability to be honest with themselves and their willingness to communicate their sto-

ries in ways that laid bare their desire” (x). The book aims to “convey vital truths about women and desire . . . it is these three specific women who are in charge of their narratives” (x).

But are they? Does Maggie, perhaps through the book’s publication, finally find a platform from which she can claim justice against an exploitative teacher and bind the wounds of her teenage self? And what of the third parties damaged in Sloane’s story—did they also have a say in the exposure of their sex lives? Even Lina, despite her outward brightness, reveals that even in a “perfect moment” Adrian “is terrible to her. It’s not that he’s outwardly cruel but he never considers her heart” (268). The public airing of such painful realizations makes for gripping reading but perhaps at the subjects’ expense.

Invisible People's Felt Lives, with a Dash of Gonzo

The Undocumented Americans

by Karla Cornejo Villavicencio. New York: One World, 2020. Hardcover, 208 pp., USD\$26.

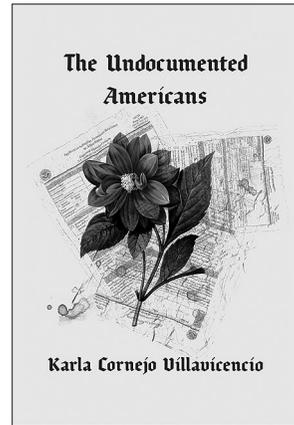
Reviewed by Lisa A. Phillips, SUNY New Paltz, United States

When Karla Cornejo Villavicencio was fifteen years old, her father, an Ecuadorian immigrant, grew depressed about how he was being treated at his restaurant job. He had an abusive new manager who called the delivery men “wetbacks and spics” and threatened to alert ICE. Having just watched *All the President's Men* for the tenth time, she telephoned the restaurant and told the owner she was a newspaper reporter who had received a tip from a customer about racist abuse in the kitchen. Would he comment? He begged her not to write the article. “It’s a pretty good story” (135), she mused. The ruse worked. The new manager was fired. Her father’s mood lifted.

The injustices in the lives of undocumented immigrants, particularly in the Trump-era cauldron of racism and vulnerability, remain a powerful story. In *The Undocumented Americans*, Cornejo Villavicencio finally tells it. Her youthful mission to save her father from despair matures into an adult quest to portray the lives of undocumented immigrants, her own included, to stave off the blunt dualistic thinking of a nation that perceives them as either demon-criminal-lazy resource drains or preternaturally hard workers, martyring themselves to exploitative, precarious working conditions so the next generation can thrive.

Using a participatory reporting method that evokes what cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo calls “deep hanging out” (Clifford, 1997, 56)—participatory, informal immersion in a culture—Cornejo Villavicencio creates nuanced and empathetic accounts of day workers on Staten Island; Ground Zero cleanup workers still contending with the physical and emotional impact of the chaotic 9/11 recovery effort; and families in Flint, Michigan, who cannot get clean water without a state ID. In Miami, she takes readers inside the world of underground pharmacies and healers serving the undocumented community. In New Haven, Connecticut, where she is pursuing a PhD at Yale, she bonds with two teenage girls whose father is in sanctuary in a local church, one of the few places ICE will not forcibly enter.

Cornejo Villavicencio no longer has any use for the hard-boiled reporter persona



that emboldened her as a teen. She states from the outset that because she is an undocumented American herself, “it feels unethical to put on the drag of a journalist” (xvi). Yet she resisted writing the memoir literary agents clamored for after she published an anonymous essay in the *Daily Beast* on being an undocumented soon-to-be Harvard graduate. *The Undocumented Americans* is a powerful hybrid of first-person, creative nonfiction grounded in thorough reporting. She threads the narrative with reflections on her own life as a DACA recipient with a complicated upbringing. When she was a toddler, her parents left her in the care of her relatives for years while they built their lives in the United States, the abandonment leaving a lasting imprint on her psyche.

Her style is a heady combination of punk-rock rage, poetic speculation, and mad pride. “Y hermanxs, it’s time to fuck some shit up,” she announces in the book’s introduction. Other terms of engagement include her translation method, which is literary, not literal, and meant to capture nuances of character, mood, and intellect. She uses pseudonyms and rips up her notes once she has used them to ensure her sources’ safety and keep their trust. She warns readers that she is “just crazy enough” for the task of writing the book, because “if you’re going to write a book about undocumented immigrants in America, the story, the full story, you have to be a little be crazy” (xiii–xvii).

Cornejo Villavicencio means this literally. She lists her multiple mental illness diagnoses and points to extended parent-child separations and time in immigrant detention camps as traumas that cause “permanent psychological and physical changes” in the brain (61). She uses her condition to bond with her subjects, exchanging confidences about symptoms and medications.

But she is also referring to the literary connotations of crazy: passionate, impractically determined, uninhibited. On a trip to Florida to explore how undocumented immigrants, who cannot purchase health insurance, cope with illness and healing, she purchases antipsychotic medication without a prescription at an underground pharmacy and participates in a Haitian “vodou cleansing” (82) meant to protect her undocumented friends and family members from deportation. Out drinking with the women who have guided her through this furtive world, they glibly swap stories in her presence of the hazards of housecleaning—toxic chemicals, psychological abuse from employers, the hazard of deportation from a misstep as quotidian as inputting the wrong PIN number into a home security system, and nightmares about concentration camps. When “Sweet Home Alabama” comes on the bar radio, one of the women loudly sings along, drawing the stares of several white patrons. Nervous, Cornejo Villavicencio imagines one of them rising from his perch, gunning her group down, and walking over their bodies. She fights back her fear by embracing the irony of her companion’s love for a Southern rock classic about homecoming. She joins in the singing and spontaneously pours a drink over her head: “The girls cheer and I let out a bloodcurdling scream. My first ever” (94).

While writing this review, I toyed with the phrase “Latinx Gonzo” to describe the brash center-stage presence of Cornejo Villavicencio’s narrator. But the phrase does not seem quite right, given the vast difference in what is at stake in each writer’s

work. Hunter S. Thompson's Gonzo journalism revels in the performative and in the game, with points scored for theatrical exposure of hypocrisy, gritty sexual and violent detail, a flash of fiction to catalyze his facts, and the bravado of relentless immersion—he rode with the Hell's Angels until they stomped him to the ground to get rid of him. Cornejo Villavicencio and her subjects, in contrast, spend their days resisting being stomped to the ground. Her barstool scream may be catharsis, or performance for the sake of a dramatic story, or both. In any case, the outcry has a clear message: *We should not have to hide or be afraid. Sometimes we are outrageous because our lives are outrageous. Go ahead and stare.*

When Cornejo Villavicencio engages in fictive speculation—another Gonzo trademark—her aim is to awaken the reader to what is unknowable about undocumented lives, not to goad with satire, as Thompson did. Her chapter profiling Latinx day laborers on Staten Island focuses on their willingness to do volunteer clean-up work after Hurricane Sandy hit in 2012, despite risks to their own health and safety. The first responders hoped—in vain, as it turned out—the community's gratitude would make them less vulnerable to exploitation by their employers. The chapter concludes with a detailed imagining of the final hours for a homeless alcoholic who drowned in a basement in the storm. None of the other laborers wanted to talk about who he was, so Cornejo Villavicencio recreated him as a man who found solace in his last moments with a wounded stray squirrel. She describes how he stroked the squirrel as the water rose, because “no creature should have to die alone” (29). She thus blesses him with a humanity readers would not otherwise see in a news brief about his death or a rote count of storm fatalities.

The Undocumented Americans was published in late March 2020, as the globe shuttered doors and borders against the COVID-19 pandemic. Immigration injustices, like many pressing issues, fell off the public's radar. There is a real worry that the unfortunate timing may have diminished the impact of this short but mighty book, which has the potential to transform writing about immigration in the way that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* transformed writing about poverty. Like James Agee, Cornejo Villavicencio insists on the necessity of the literary in portraying the complexity, paradoxes, pain, and beauty of disenfranchised, soulful human beings. Dry facts and literal translations are not enough. Art must step in.

A Woman through the Berkshires Ceiling

Rebel Cinderella: From Rags to Riches to Radical, the Epic Journey of Rose Pastor Stokes by Adam Hochschild. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Hardcover, 303 pp. USD\$30.

Reviewed by David Swick, University of King's College, Canada

Adam Hochschild was looking for something else when he bumped into a photo of Rose Pastor Stokes in a U.S. delegation to Moscow in 1922. Why, he wondered, was a member of one of the wealthiest families in the United States celebrating the fifth anniversary of the Soviet Union? The answer to that question is his tenth book, *Rebel Cinderella*. To write it, he read thousands of letters, a diary, two memoirs, and dozens of surveillance reports by agents working for what would become the FBI.

Hochschild is fascinated by character, by the jumble of influences that guide motivation and action. Often his books feature a great number of compelling people; this time he focuses primarily on Rose. She deserves a book of her own.

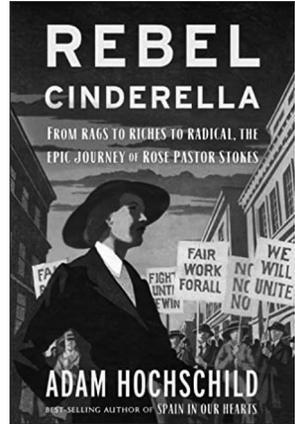
Rose Pastor was born in czarist Russia in 1879; her family emigrated to the United States, settling in Cleveland. When her father abandoned the family, Rose, the eldest child, became the breadwinner for her mother and six siblings. Her job: rolling cigars, for sixteen hours a day (139). This hard work lasted twelve years. When it started, she was eleven.

Despite having only two years of schooling, Rose was smart and spunky. At about twenty she sent a letter describing her work to a New York newspaper—and was asked to start an advice column for young women. A couple of years later, the paper asked her to move to Manhattan. At twenty-three, she did.

Her interviews included Graham Stokes, the scion of one of the richest families in the country, and a rare wealthy man expressing support for the working class. They dated, then in 1905 married, shocking the East Coast Protestant establishment, and thrilling the popular press. The media embraced this unexpected couple—especially Rose. For several years, at the peak of her fame, U.S. newspapers wrote about her more than any other woman.

Hochschild's voice is avuncular, even grandfatherly. He sounds like a wise man, just down from the mountain, revealing discovered wisdom. His voice—touched with small asides, and never making the focus himself—makes his storytelling intimate and profound.

Rose's in-laws' one-hundred-room Berkshires summer home was at the time the



largest private house in the country (4). Rose was not comfortable there or in the family's Madison Avenue mansion, next door to J. P. Morgan, so Graham's mother bought the couple a smaller home of their own, at 88 Grove Street in Greenwich Village. (The house still stands, across the street from the Stonewall Tavern.) Greenwich Village was an activist hotbed, and the couple moved in a circle that included Emma Goldman, John Reed, and Socialist Party presidential candidate Eugene Debs.

Between 1905 and 1920 the United States was torn by a mighty struggle to decide its direction. How democratic, and how capitalist, would it be? Would power be shared by many, or remain in only a few hands? Rose and Graham started speaking at labor rallies—at a time when rallies filled Carnegie Hall and Madison Square Garden. Early in their relationship Graham was the obvious leader. But it was Rose, overcoming shyness, who best connected with crowds. A poised and powerful speaker, she had the ability to make every listener feel she was talking directly to them. She also had a nose for hypocrisy and no fear of breaking convention. “How can you love God, whom you have not seen,” she asked one audience, “if you do not love your fellow man, whom you have seen?” (145).

Many young idealists at the time joined the Socialist Party; Rose and Graham did too. Its platform sounds mild today: a ban on child labor; an inheritance tax; unemployment, medical, and old-age insurance; a living wage (134). Still, opposition was fierce. Millions of dollars were spent by powerful people—including some of Rose's relatives. Much of the money went to private detectives and goon squads; the result was violence and murder. Even so, Debs in 1912 received more than 900,000 votes. Supporters of an egalitarian society had reasons to believe that history was moving their way. Then came World War I.

Seeing an opportunity to boost the war effort while at the same time destroying unions and other progressive movements, the U.S. government created a massive propaganda machine, the Committee on Public Information. Hochschild is known for deep and thorough research and, like all of his books, *Rebel Cinderella* offers astounding facts and statistics. The Committee sent 75,000 speakers to movie houses and lecture halls and produced 77 million pamphlets. This had the desired effect. “A patriotic frenzy filled the air,” Hochschild says, “and provided the excuse to continue the war at home against organized labor and dissent” (200).

A vast, oppressive, institutional machine versus a small number of people working to create a fairer, saner world is a recurring motif in Hochschild's excellent books. In *King Leopold's Ghost* (1996) he considered the fight to end Belgium's gruesome reign in the Congo. *Bury the Chains* (2005) looked at the people who committed their lives to ending the British slave trade—and those fighting to keep it. Some writers handling such grisly topics move to sarcasm, fury, or denunciation, but that is not Hochschild's way. He is a master of tone—even when examining the muck and terror of appalling cruelty, his voice stays eminently civilized. His tone is fine, compassionate, and smooth. In staying calm, he radiates authority. His theory may be: when you are on the side of the angels, there is no need to raise your voice.

During the war many of Rose and Graham's friends were jailed, beaten, or deported. “Across the country,” Hochschild says,

vigilante groups sprang up with names like the Sedition Slammers and the Knights of Liberty. The largest was the [250,000-strong] American Protective League, or APL, which had the support of the Justice Department. . . . Its ranks filled with businessmen who hated unions, nativists who hated immigrants, and men too old for the military who still wanted to do battle. (182)

Literary journalists and literary journalism scholars will note that while Hochschild offers insights and raises thoughtful questions, he sticks to telling Rose's story, and the story of her era. He provides facts; readers can decide what they mean. During the war, the rich got richer. By its end Britain was spending half its military budget in the United States, and on every sale the company acting as Britain's agent, J. P. Morgan & Co., received a one percent commission. Wartime pressures showed in the marriage. Graham began supporting the government, to the point of betraying friends he thought might be German agents. Rose fought on, with increasing determination. After the war she even stayed loyal to the Soviet Union, long after most of her friends had denounced it for abandoning socialist ideals. Why did she stick with the Soviets, despite overwhelming evidence of atrocities and corruption? Ultimately, Hochschild believes, Rose's character included this kink: it was almost as if she was "seeking a kind of martyrdom" (137).

Brave, intelligent, and achingly idealistic, Rose was a truth teller at a time when this was dangerous and rare. She believed that the United States was built on sand, that its foundations needed repair. After she and Graham separated, but before the divorce was finalized, she was found to be involved in an affair. Confronted by a reporter, she refused to be scandalized. "Love is always justified," Rose said. ". . . The real scandal—the wife who gives herself to the husband without love and the husband who gives himself to the wife without love—the real breach is given a veneer of sanctity by the church and covered with a cloak of decency by the law" (234). When she and Graham divorced, against the advice of her lawyer and friends, Rose declined to ask for alimony (236). In her final years she was often destitute.

Rose and Graham both wrote memoirs (his was never published). Graham spent sixty pages describing generations of his family's business dealings, but never once mentioned Rose. She, in contrast, charted their relationship from happy start to disillusionment and divorce. Rose told an acquaintance that during their final years together Graham had "reverted to type." "Given her fervent belief in the Soviet Union," Hochschild says, "he might well have said the same thing of her" (238).

Was something else at play in their relationship? For years Graham called Rose "girly," and with dismay he watched her grow more confident, assertive, and independent-minded. If this is what most upset him, Hochschild says, "that was a feeling he shared with men from all classes, not just his own. In his era, a truly egalitarian relationship may have been even rarer than one across the barrier of class" (239).

The title of this eminently readable book is imprecise. The Cinderella myth always ends happily; this true story does not. When, at fifty-one, Rose was diagnosed with cancer, her friends, including Upton Sinclair, went to Graham. He refused to help.

A literary journalist and historian who has spent decades increasing awareness about both the heroic and rotten roots of U.S. society, Adam Hochschild ends *Rebel Cinderella* with a wistful look at our own time.

As this book goes to press, the number of billionaires in the United States has increased more than tenfold since the year 2000. And no nation on earth has such a staggering gulf between the salary levels of its CEOs and those of their workers. . . . The net worth of the average American family, by contrast, is less than what it was 20 years ago. You do not have to believe in either magic or communism to hope for an alternative. (245)

Common Ground in the Heartland

American Harvest: God, Country, and Farming in the Heartland

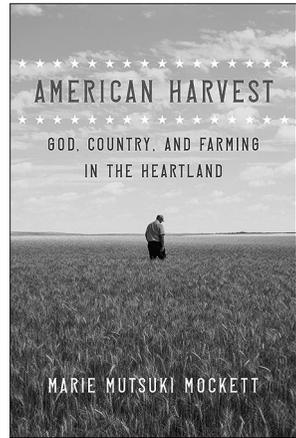
by Marie Mutsuki Mockett. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2020. Hardcover, 408 pp., USD\$28.

Reviewed by Elaine Salisbury, University at Albany, State University of New York, United States

The “amber waves of grain” in the 1890s patriotic song “America the Beautiful” was written with the wheat fields of middle America in mind. Christian European immigrants largely planted these fields, which cover millions of acres beneath “spacious skies,” and they still tend them. God and country are intimately intertwined with patriotism and the hard work of growing the third-largest crop on U.S. soil. But while the grain is nearly ubiquitous in the U.S. diet, not many U.S. citizens think about who grows it. And, if they do, those thoughts are often not kind. “It seems like whenever we interest the national news media . . . like when there is a tornado . . . they seem to pick the most ignorant hick out there to put on camera,” said one Oklahoma pastor in Marie Mutsuki Mockett’s ambitious 2020 memoir, *American Harvest: God, Country, and Farming in the Heartland* (196).

In her memoir, which is also a travelogue, Mockett takes part in a five-month odyssey through the wheat fields of the Great Plains to better understand the mostly conservative, Christian, white farmers who grow the staple. These farmers, many of whom believe the Bible to be infallible, have a worldview that is vastly different from that of the cosmopolitan crowds who consume their harvest, or decry it for its genetically modified seeds and synthetic fertilizers. For the latter, the all-natural stamp on food signals goodness and purity, but the use of the terms is “almost certainly a product of our profound alienation from the natural world,” Mockett writes on page 198, quoting Eula Biss from her book *On Immunity: An Inoculation*.

Mockett’s journey through a part of the country that many U.S. citizens experience only from the window of a plane could not be more relevant in today’s hyper-politicized environment, where an “us” versus “them” mentality has literally spilled out into the streets. Even the term “heartland” in the title will come across to some as politically charged, perhaps rightfully so. The term, which has often been used to refer to the middle states of the United States, is often associated with white, conservative Christian cultural values at the expense of others who populate the region. Former Democratic presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg learned this after his January



2020 tweet when he referred to the country's need for "a president whose vision was shaped by the American Heartland rather than the ineffective Washington politics." According to a CNN article at the time, thousands criticized the former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, a state where wheat is the number-three crop, that his use of the term suggests heartland values "were more important than the values of urban or coastal or southern parts of the country" ("Heartland' Values?," para. 3, 4).

Mockett, however, is well positioned to explore this part of the United States. Born to a Japanese mother and a U.S. father and raised on the California coast, she, in her words, does "not precisely look as if I am from any one place. I could be from anywhere too" (310). Her family in Japan runs and owns a Buddhist Temple. Her father's family owns a 7,000-acre wheat field in Nebraska, which during her childhood Mockett visited every summer for the harvest. She had been aware of the admiration her father, an artist and creative type, held for the church-going farmers who planted and cut the fields. These farmers, Mockett recalls, solved problems, fixed equipment, and worked long until after the sun had set. It was not until Mockett became an adult living in New York City that she became aware of the condescension many urbanites held toward this farming population. "I know what I am supposed to think," she writes. "Mall towns, white, ignorant, superstitious—but I don't think these things" (9).

Mockett thoughtfully explores the origins of these assumptions and contemplates what she sees as a growing divide between "country and city." Her reliable guide is Eric Wolgemuth, an evangelical Christian who has been harvesting her family's wheat for decades. In his repeated trips from his Pennsylvania home to the Great Plains to harvest wheat, he too has come to worry about the divide that "once just a crack in the dirt, was now a chasm into which objects, people, grace, and love all fell and disappeared" (24). Wolgemuth invites Mockett to join him for the summer 2017 harvest to share his part of the United States.

Wolgemuth is one of about 450 "custom harvesters" who trek across the plains with oversized loads of equipment and machinery to cut wheat. He is among the more successful harvesters, in charge of nearly a dozen crew members of young Christian men and four semitrucks, whose flatbeds haul combines, tractors, and grain hoppers across a multitude of state lines. The crew, writes Mockett, is intensely loyal to each other and to the farmers who depend on them, using a combination of "skills requiring nothing short of primal masculine mastery" (19).

Mockett's journey is as physical as it is intellectual. By her own admission, she has no discernible skills for harvesting or for cooking for a crowd, a task which is remarkably managed three times a day by Wolgemuth's wife. The team starts in Texas, where the United States' wheat ripens first, and then heads north, wending its way to Montana. They work at the mercy of nature: Wheat ripens at a rate of twenty miles a day, and the weather frequently kicks up hailstorms, rain, and tornadoes. Hordes of wild pigs ransack valuable crops, and Mockett, who has never fired a gun, finds herself taking part in a hunt. When the crew rests on Sunday or is delayed by weather, Mockett visits small towns that have been hollowed out by the difficult economics of farming. She attends church services and talks with pastors and members of a variety

of conservative Christian faiths. Along the way, she finds communities clinging to a way of life that is literally, for them, a biblical calling.

A large part of her exploration comes from the conversations she has with the crew. She shares with them her struggle to understand their Scripture in today's world. How can they, she asks them, not believe in evolution but accept genetically engineered crops? Would the concept of God change if Mars were colonized? What do they think of geology in the context of the age of the earth according to the Bible? Wolgemuth and his son are the ones who take the most interest in these questions and their well-considered responses are often surprisingly inclusive and grounded in love. Other members of the crew are less forthcoming, out of fear she will misrepresent them.

Many works of narrative nonfiction come to a decisive end or carry a clear message about a singular issue. Such books make for a relatively "easy" linear discussion for book clubs and classrooms. Do not expect this for *American Harvest*. Mockett's memoir is as far ranging as the wheat plains themselves, raising issues of race, identity, faith, and the displacement of Native Americans. Too, she contemplates the science behind modern agriculture in the context of United Nations warnings of food shortages in our lifetimes. But if one were to draw an overarching lesson, it would be to convey to all citizens of the United States the importance of taking a journey similar to Mockett's, to find the "others" in our own lives and spend time with them, because with knowledge comes understanding and, hopefully, common ground. In this case, it is the soil upon which we all depend.

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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