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ENCOUNTERING DEMOCRACY: THE CITIZEN-WITNESS
IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY U.S. LITERATURE

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ENCOUNTERING DEMOCRACY:
THE CITIZEN-WITNESS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY U.S. LITERATURE

By

Aryn Bartley

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ABSTRACT

ENCOUNTERING DEMOCRACY: THE CITIZEN-WITNESS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY U.S. LITERATURE

By

Aryn Bartley

Encountering Democracy: The Citizen-Witness in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature explores literary journalism's contribution to global human rights witnessing, political theory, and ethical thought. It argues that the genre's representations of human suffering do not merely indict the immediate structures and practices that produce such suffering; works of literary journalism can also be read as meditations on the duties, rights, and very possibility of modern democratic citizenship. If deliberate witnessing is often imagined as an act of civic heroism (as evidenced in the nineteenth-century emergence of citizen-witnessing and the recent resurgence of the practice on the Internet), the dissertation examines texts that destabilize and complicate such imaginings. In particular, the works of James Agee, John Howard Griffin, Grace Halsell, Michael Herr, William Vollmann, Joe Sacco and Joan Didion point to the concurrent endurance and dissolution of modern faiths in vision, representation and the state over the course of the twentieth century. By encountering democracy as embodied practice, political rhetoric and philosophical limit case, these writers critically reevaluate the possibilities and limitations of good citizenship.

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To Brian O.

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Introduction

Encountering Democracy: The Citizen-Witness in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature

“We might think of literature, then, as the textualization of justice, the transposition of its clean abstractions into the messiness of representation. We might think of it, as well, as the historicization of justice, the transposition of a universal language into a historical semantics: a language given meaning by many particular contexts, saturated with the nuances and inflections of its many usages. . . . Literature, in this sense, might be said to be the very domain of the incommensurate, the very domain of the nonintegral. In its signal failure to make good its logic, to affirm the adequacy of any rational order, it denies us the promise extended by law and philosophy both. But for that very reason it is a testing ground no jurist or philosopher can afford to ignore.” - Wai-Chee Dimock

How do participants in a democracy gain an understanding of what democracy is and means? How do they learn how to operate within such a system? How do they come to desire, fight for, or give up on it? While modern democracy invokes a set of abstract concepts (e.g., citizenship, equality, justice, self-governance, and sovereignty), their possibilities and limitations must be imagined and played out in specific contexts. Such concepts are not only multifaceted and unstable; they are also the grounds for intense struggle and negotiation. In their introduction to *Materializing Democracy*, editors Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson attempt to reclaim democracy’s materiality, arguing that “practices of democracy produce emotion and thought, inflict pain and healing, engender memory and amnesia, and organize and limit community as well as political action. And

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this sort of democracy has material effects on subjects and citizens” (7). The book’s collected essays, they claim, attempt on the one hand to “understand the felt importance of democracy” and on the other to “stud[y] how democracy is made material – materially feasible and materially important and worth struggling for” (10). While I am invested in Castronovo and Nelson’s project to contextualize an often-abstracted idea of democracy, I am less interested in engaging in a phenomenological study and more interested in examining how such physical, material understandings are constructed in and by stories.

This dissertation assumes that “democracy” is brought into being through the processes of imagination and narration. Like Wai-Chee Dimock, I consider literature to be a productively “messy” location where abstract political concepts are “textualized” and “historicized” (10). In Dimock’s *Residues of Justice*, she responds to John Rawls’s construction of justice as a self-evident or “indwelling truth,” attempting to “make [justice] less immanent, less exhaustive, less self-evident both in its ethical primacy and in its jurisdictional scope” (5). Dimock argues that the “translation” of justice from concept into practice entails certain “losses” and “residues” (7) and, in analyses of works not only of political theorists but also of nineteenth century American authors, examines how “the problem of justice is given a face and a voice, a density of feature that plays havoc with any uniform scale of measurement and brings to every act of judicial weighing the shadow of an unweighable residue” (10). *Encountering Democracy: The Citizen-Witness in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature* seeks similarly to examine constructions of the “faces and voices” of democracy. It posits that democracy as an abstract term takes on significance only when imagined and narrated as a material, bodily, and discursive encounter.

The dissertation explores the intersection of three secular faiths of the modern world: a faith in the perfectibility of the state; a faith in the reliability of vision (objective or subjective); and a faith in the ability to represent ethically the suffering of others. The project of aligning the practices of the state with a democratic ideal, the reasoning goes, entails the observation and documentation of its effects and workings by good citizens. Confidence in the fluid intersection of ethics and politics is explicitly demonstrated in late nineteenth century journalism, resurfaces anxiously during the Civil Rights era, and has in recent years seen a comeback with the emergence of citizen-journalism on the internet. This dissertation is most committed, however, to tracking the ways in which these modern faiths are critiqued over the course of the twentieth century. I will consider in particular writers who undermine in their own works both vision and ethics and who, by doing so, mark the decline of citizen power. These writers entice readers to recognize not only state dominance, but also the mechanisms through which dominance is erased.

The modern faiths in vision, representation and the state converge in and are destabilized by one of the key figures whose images and narratives help to construct democracy's meanings: a figure I call the "citizen-witness." In recent years, the term "citizen-witness" has become somewhat of a buzzword, linked to the rise of digital technologies and the concurrent ease of circulating images, ideas and information around the globe. In common parlance, the term refers to the person who is accidentally present at a newsworthy event and who, in the absence of professional journalists, chooses to document the event in some way (with a camcorder, cell phone camera, by twittering, etc.). Their documentation then becomes part of the official record, often displayed in perpetuity on the Internet. Such figures contribute to what Arjun Appadurai calls

“mediascapes.”¹ If, as Appadurai argues, “Mediascapes, whether produced by private or state interests, tend to be image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements (such as characters, plots, and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places” (35), the images and narratives produced by citizen-witnesses actively help to design such “scripts.”

Citizen-witnessing as it is thought of today entered mainstream public consciousness (at least, in the United States) with George Holliday’s videotaping of the beating of Rodney King in 1991.² Since then, it has become a commonly accepted (if

¹ Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s concept of the nation as an “imagined community,” Appadurai coins the phrase “imagined worlds.” He argues that in a globalized world governed by what John Urry calls “disorganized capitalism,” communities span geographical and electronic spaces much larger than the conventional nation-state. In his exploration of contemporary “imagined worlds,” he thematizes as their “building blocks” five “scapes”: the ethnoscape, the technoscape, the financescape, the ideoscape and the mediascape (33). Mediascapes, Appadurai argues, participate in the construction of “diasporic public spheres” (22).

² This is not to say that citizen-witnessing did not occur prior to 1991. As the website for “Seeing is Believing,” a documentary about politically informed witnessing, notes, handheld film and video cameras were used to expose newsworthy events (including human rights violations and assassinations) from the 1960s on. The site mentions, for example, the civilian filmings of the assassinations of both John F. Kennedy and Yitzhak Rabin. Nevertheless, the global circulation and legal centrality of the videotape of the King beating was significant in that it changed how the mainstream public thought about the political potential of citizen-witnessing. As Alan Tieger, the prosecuting attorney in the subsequent case, claims: “The significance with the Rodney King case, I think, is that it represented a kind of breakthrough in public

ethically debatable) practice.³ Notable instances of citizen-witnessing in 2009 alone *included* news stations' use of civilian photographs of the landing of flight 1549 on the

awareness of the ways in which, and to some extent the legal ways in which, video can be used. Now those who might consider crimes have to know that, surprisingly, what they do can be preserved . . . and it can be . . . used essentially in a way that is beyond dispute" ("Seeing is Believing"). Indeed, video evidence produced by civilians was more commonly used in criminal trials after this point: "Photographs, satellite images, and amateur video have played a crucial role in the prosecution of war criminals at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). For example, video footage of the Serbian army invading a Bosnian Muslim town helped lead to the first conviction of genocide at the court in the case of General Radislav Krstic" ("Ethics, Bias, Controversy," 6).

³ Sabrina Harman, the woman who photographed maltreatment of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, described herself as a citizen-witness. In a nuanced character sketch of Harman, Philip Gourevitch and Errol Morris write that: "Harman said that she had imagined herself producing an exposé—to 'prove that the US is not what they think,' as she wrote . . . 'I was trying to expose what was being allowed'—that phrase again—'what the military was allowing to happen to other people,' Harman said. In other words, she wanted to expose a policy; and by assuming the role of a documentarian she had found a way to ride out her time at Abu Ghraib without having to regard herself as an instrument of that policy" (8). Harman's choice to photograph such brutality (and to include herself in such pictures smiling and flashing the thumb's up symbol) was met with near universal moral outrage. Relatedly, according to Ron Ross, Tearah Moore's choice to twitter about and photograph the Fort Hood shootings has been criticized by some on both professional and ethical grounds: "Some people have criticised her for making the reports. She was disparaged for getting some of her facts wrong and some critics say that she should have either gotten out of the way or set down her cell phone and helped out. Many think she should never have pointed her cell phone camera at the victims and then uploaded the pictures to some website." Such criticisms point out the thin line between documentation and voyeurism, an ethical conundrum brought again to the fore when, in

frozen Hudson River and the circulation on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube of images and text recording the bombings in Mumbai, the murder of Iranian civilian Neda Agha-Soltan during a political protest, and the Fort Hood shooting.⁴ Conventional usage of the term implies an immediate non-professional response to an unexpected event, a spontaneous performance of the civic impulse. Yet citizen-witnessing can include as well deliberate witnessing, or what is called “citizen journalism.”⁵ Citizen journalism (otherwise known as “open source,” “participatory,” or “grassroots” journalism) refers to the recording and circulation of immediate written, photographic or video documentation by non-journalists.⁶ Some writers associate citizen journalism with the digital age⁷; and

October 2009, multiple people watched and took photographs as a young woman was gang raped outside of Richmond High School in California (CBS.com).

⁴ See “U.S. Airways Crash Rescue Picture: Citizen Journalism, Twitter, at Work,” by Dan Frommer; “Breaking the New News,” an interview with Rachel Sterne; “A Twitter-powered Revolution” by Mike Geoghegan; and “Attacks on Murder Witness Aimed at Citizen Journalism” by Ron Ross.

⁵ Citizen journalism has sometimes been considered the formalization or next step of spontaneous citizen-witnessing. “Seeing is Believing,” for example, argues that Holliday’s video helped to institutionalize citizen-witnessing. It spurred Peter Gabriel, for example, to found Witness, a non-profit human rights organization which provides activists around the world with handheld cameras. It does not inherently suggest a temporal development, however, as citizen-journalists have been around for years (Chris Daly of Boston University cites Thomas Paine as an early example of a citizen-journalist (Goode)).

⁶ See “Citizen Journalism: A Case Study,” by Bentley, et.al., 241 and Goode’s video “What is Citizen Journalism” for definitions. Others define the term through a description of included practices. The BBC’s Richard Sambrook, for example, claims that citizen journalism can include a variety of practices, ranging from serving as an eyewitness to posting on a blog, breaking the news on the net, or sharing expertise (Goode). “Seeing is Believing” emphasizes video documentation like “The Wrath of Grapes,”

indeed, the rise in global access to the Internet has facilitated the development of websites in which those enduring violence or substandard living conditions can document their experiences for a wider public.⁸

Advocates of citizen journalism often argue that to witness, document, or circulate information is to perform an inherently or implicitly democratic act of good citizenship. Such claims are based on various aspects of citizen journalism, ranging from motive to audience to effect. Some argue that as a form of alternative media, citizen journalism is better able to access and expose images and texts that can destabilize undemocratic governments' claims to power. Mike Geoghegan, for example, claims in an article about Twitter that "Technology, once the feared ally of despotic communist and

produced by Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers of America, and the secret taping of prison conditions in El Salvador by the country's Human Rights Commission.

⁷ Bentley, et. al., for example, locate the beginning of internet-based citizen journalism in the launching of Korea's OhMyNews in 2000. By 2004, they write, the publication had more than 32,000 contributors (239).

⁸ See, for example, the website Virtual Gaza, where, from December 2008 to January 2009 scholars at MIT collaborated with media activists and residents of the Gaza Strip to document conditions in Palestine. Virtual Gaza describes itself as "a space where ordinary Palestinians under siege can describe their experiences in their own words, and where the destruction of the Gaza strip can be documented by those experiencing it directly" (<http://virtualgaza.media.mit.edu/about/english/>). Another example is a website founded by Kenyan activist and blogger Ory Okolloh in the violent aftermath of the 2007 national elections. As Jessica Weiss reports, "Ushahidi - which means 'testimony' or 'witness' in Swahili, [is] a site allowing witnesses to send reports of violence via SMS, email or a Web form to one integrated Google Mashup tool. Through Ushahidi, incidents were shown on a map that identified the precise location where a specific act of violence had occurred. A corresponding description detailed each incident."

fascist regimes, has now advanced to the point where it is now the ally of democratic citizenry the world over,” and Virtual Gaza, a site where residents of Gaza can share stories that might not otherwise be available, exhorts participants to “help break the [Israeli government’s] information blockade.” Others, such as the founders of the National Association of Citizen Journalists, a training site for would-be practitioners, allude to the First Amendment. Yet more, such as Ethan Zuckerman, co-founder of GlobalVoicesOnline.org, focus on the community-building potential of sharing testimony: “[Citizen journalism] gives people from very very different parts of the world the opportunity to interact with one another.” Such arguments implicitly or explicitly draw on Habermas’s theory of the public sphere. As Lou Rutigliano points out, “despite valid criticisms (Fraser, 1993) that the public sphere was ever democratic, Habermas’s overall argument that the public sphere exists in the mass media and that the mass news media do not facilitate a democratic and participatory public sphere was echoed by the civic journalism movement . . . The civic journalism media reform movement also believed in the existence of [mass participation by the public]” (226).

In the cases I describe above, the term “citizen” performs two functions. On the one hand, it stands in for the term “civilian,” distinguishing such a witness from the professional witness (like the journalist) and emphasizing the accidental nature of his or her spectatorship. On the other hand, it suggests a latent or explicit assumption that to choose to witness – in other words, to document an event and circulate information to the public – is an act of what can be considered, in an intimate merging of ethics and politics, good citizenship. This mode of good citizenship is grounded in a faith in the possibility (if not the actuality) of universal or global access to the rights and duties of citizenship. It

both assumes that the citizen can shape the political landscape and points toward a democratic future. In my usage of the term I will retain the latter association of the term and discard the former to draw out a political and ethical framework of witnessing that can occur across the professional/non-professional divide.

In the rest of this introduction, I will work through the histories of various key terms and practices with which the dissertation engages. The first two are the halves of the term “citizen-witness;” the last is the specific genre I consider, literary journalism. Along the way, I will chart more closely the lines of inquiry of the larger work.

Citizenship

Judith Shklar describes four “distinct though related” meanings of the term “citizenship,” including nationality, social standing, active participation, and republican citizenship. I read such terms as corresponding loosely to passive, liberal, rights-based citizenship and active, republican, duty-based citizenship. Political theorist Kimberly Hutchings nicely charts the distinction between liberal citizenship and republican citizenship and in what follows I will draw on her work as well as Shklar’s.

Citizenship can be read as a passive state of belonging to a particular nation and therefore claiming certain rights. Lockean liberal citizenship, Hutchings explains, is grounded on the idea that political life is an extension of natural law; as Andrew Linklater has written, “the Lockean model of political right is grounded on the simultaneous distinction and connection of man with citizen” (qtd. in Hutchings 6). Such a model of citizenship, if it “has potentially revolutionary implications,” also can produce “a much more static and statist model of the liberal polity, one which is satisfied by the

passive enjoyment of individual rights but which minimizes the active involvement of the individual in the political order as opposed to civil society” (7). Rights-based citizenship may also be associated with social recognition: what Shklar calls civic dignity, or standing. While to possess rights and recognitions may be seen as normative to those who have them, their social and political importance is only clear when such rights and recognitions are absent.⁹

If “citizenship” can be read as a passive state invoking certain rights and recognitions, it can also signify a series of implied actions, duties, and responsibilities to the social order. Rousseauvian republicanism draws on Hobbes in opposing a state of nature to the social contract. The citizen in this line of thinking must continually (re)produce the social order through active participation. “Rousseau’s model of the social contract state,” Hutchings writes, “involves elements of strong democracy as well as very high expectations of citizen commitment to the community’s good” (9). To perform such duties is to engage actively in the act of citizenship in what Shklar calls a “good” or “ideal” way. When discussing good citizenship, Shklar puts the distinction thus: “Citizenship as nationality is a legal condition; it does not refer to any specific political activity. Good citizenship as political participation, on the other hand, concentrates on political practices, and it applies to the people of a community who are consistently engaged in public affairs” (5). She argues that to be a good citizen is not necessarily to be a good person; in fact, she writes that “Good citizens fulfill the demands

⁹ As Shklar points out about citizenship as nationality: “To be a stateless individual is one of the most dreadful political fates that can befall anyone in the modern world” (4). Similarly, she writes that “people who are not granted these marks of civic dignity feel dishonored, not just powerless and poor. They are also scorned by their fellow citizens” (3).

of their polity, and they are no better and no worse as citizens than the laws that they frame and obey” (6). The second kind of active citizen is the one Shklar calls the “ideal republican citizen:” the person “who live[s] in and for the forum” (11).

The citizenship I discuss in this dissertation is more aligned with active, republican citizenship than with a more passive, liberal citizenship, although the texts I discuss implicitly examine the relation between the two modes. The good citizen to which I refer falls somewhere between Shklar’s two types of active citizens. Not content merely to abide by duties in regards to the law, but not necessarily living as a perfect and idealized figure “in and for the forum,” my usage of the term is perhaps more akin to that of Michael Schudson, who in *The Good Citizen* sees the term as signifying “a person who admirably carries out the responsibilities of citizenship” (315). Here, the term takes on a moral and ethical charge. Unlike Shklar’s good citizen, whose “goodness” does not resonate on an ethical or moral level, the “admirable” nature of Schudson’s good citizen transcends the civic.

As Schudson’s book makes clear, definitions of what acts signify good citizenship vary by time and place.¹⁰ I use the term to describe a person who values ideals of fairness and justice, evaluates whether the political system and the material conditions

¹⁰ He, for example, traces four historically specific modes of good citizenship in the U.S., each of which grounds itself on various ideals: “the ideals of republican virtue, party loyalty, informed citizenship, and rights-conscious citizenship” (10). While he ties each mode to specific historical moments, he does not suggest that when certain modes begin others end. For example, while he links the development of the “private, rational ‘informed citizen’” to a widespread attack on political parties at the end of the nineteenth century, he argues that this figure “remains the most cherished ideal in the American voting experience today” (6).

which it produces evince such ideals, and advocates for social and political transformation within the context of democratic practice. While the figures I will consider circulate within different kinds of social spaces at different times, and while they differently evaluate their own civic practice in relation to ethical norms and the context of the state, each seeks to observe and represent – to encounter – democracy.

In using the term “citizen-witness,” I emphasize the active aspect of citizenship in order to acknowledge a range of practices that mobilize the acts of watching and narrating in the service of democratic ideals. In this usage, the term “citizen-witness” no longer makes a professional/non-professional distinction: indeed, the citizen-witnesses I examine are primarily the professional journalists and writers that conventional uses of the term preclude.¹¹ Instead, citizen-witnessing comes to designate those practices of

¹¹ The expansion of the term offers the possibility for a more sustained recognition and theorization of the particular civic assumptions operating within a range of texts, an increased understanding of the effects of such assumptions across specific publics, and an analysis of their resonances with a range of earlier print texts. Such an expansion of the usage might encompass, for example, the voluntary witnessing attendant to the global politics of solidarity. In his 2005 book *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Paul Gilroy locates “[t]he growing band of people who opt to bear active witness to distant suffering and even to place their lives at risk in many parts of the world as human shields” as representing in a positive way the “undoing of identity politics.” In Gilroy’s formulation, such witnesses use their bodies both actively and passively as symbolic rhetoric. They publically perform the act of watching, using their ability to see and record to draw public attention to injustice, and at times employ the appearance of their bodies to expose the ways racialized and gendered bodies in specific social spaces are differentially treated. The acts of the nonviolent witness, Gilroy argues, point out the incompatibility between the rhetoric of supposedly democratic states and the “racism and ethnic absolutism” that characterizes political practice in such states, thereby standing in

observation, documentation, and narration that are committed to representing and evaluating the performance of democracy in the context of various political, economic, and technological transformations. Such transformations include, in the late nineteenth-century, the cementing of the liberal bureaucratic state, industrial modes of production and corporate capitalism – as well as the increasing incorporation of photography into the news. The aftermath of WWII sees the development of weapons of mass extermination, the rise of human rights discourses, the intensification of anti-colonial revolutions and rhetorics, and the Cold War. Television communication emerges. By the end of twentieth century, citizen-witnessing takes place in the context of the institutionalization of U.S. military and economic power, the seeming triumph of global post-Fordist capitalism, and the rise of digital technology.

The acts associated with good citizenship expose the varying ways democracy is translated into practice in specific socio-political contexts. As Shklar points out, “Good citizenship simply is not separable from the sort of society in which it functions” (12). If the figure of the citizen-witness appears in a variety of national settings, this dissertation narrows in on the figure as it emerges in U.S. literature. Citizen-witnessing texts stage in a variety of historically and geographically specific contexts many of the most significant questions, concerns, and debates in the United States about what it means to be a good citizen, both nationally and globally. Taking as a backdrop the self-positioning of the U.S. as a revolutionary democratic state, its use of democratic discourses to authorize its intervention in various liberatory political struggles, and its eventual rise to the status of

opposition to such practices (79-80). Such an act interprets and performs a certain understanding of “global citizenship.”



superpower in a globalized setting, I am interested in the way these narratives imagine the role of the citizen and state over the course of such transformations.

In *Encountering Democracy*, I explore the ways citizen-witnessing narratives imagine the possibilities for the “good citizen” to act on her/his good will and to transform the workings of the professedly democratic state. Such texts model the ethical encounter – not as abstract and decontextualized – but as embodied in specific politically charged spaces. In particular, I will examine how they pose questions about ethical responsibility and political efficacy in instances where the ideals of democracy (equality, justice, self-representation) seem to be failing. Each chapter focuses on a historical moment and location when the state’s relation to the well-being of the populace is being negotiated. In the first part of the dissertation I discuss texts that engage with the Progressive-era city and the South in both the 1930s and 1950s. These moments and places are the targets of public debates over the role of the U.S. state in monitoring poverty and racism. In the second half of the dissertation, I focus on the way the increasingly powerful U.S. state crafts itself as the arbiter of global democracy. The texts I will examine in this section monitor war zones in Vietnam, Afghanistan, El Salvador, and Bosnia.

I look at the narratives of a subset of citizen-witnesses: namely, privileged and altruistic observers who deliberately explore and document goings-on in social spaces previously unfamiliar to them. The narratives of such citizen-witnesses can be read as democratic theory because they stage in provocative ways the successes and failures of democracy in practice and raise for their readers and spectators often thorny debates and questions about the possibilities and limitations of good citizenship. I choose to explore

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the narratives of witnesses whose race, class, gender, and/or nation (they are primarily white, middle-class American men and a few white, middle-class American women) lend them a degree of social privilege, but who are nevertheless altruistically minded. As representatives of a privileged class, these figures point out the disjunction between democratic theory and political practice. Maintaining ideal access to the rights of citizenship when many others are explicitly or implicitly denied them, these writers grapple with the meaning of and possibility for civic duty on national and global scales.

Each text attempts to negotiate the relation between the citizen and the state, between ethics and politics. All of the texts interrogate the collusion between the state and regimes of objective vision. As the twentieth century stretches on, and the citizen is stripped of power, these writers increasingly question their own practice. Can the witnessing of the social space be an act of good citizenship, and under what conditions? Can the representation of the suffering of others be a form of ethical practice? By offering implicit answers to such questions, these narratives engage with another related question: what form(s) might democratic community take?

Witnessing

At this point, I would like to consider more thoroughly the second half of the term “citizen-witness.” While in the dissertation I primarily address works of political journalism, I would like to place journalistic practice under the umbrella term “witnessing” to grapple more explicitly with the intersections between journalism,

historiography, religion and law.¹² The term “witness” is conventionally associated with three variants of the figure: the legal witness, the religious witness, and the human rights witness,¹³ often dubbed either a “victim” or a “survivor.”¹⁴ Narratives by human rights witnesses, which include slave narratives, Holocaust narratives, testimonios about military violence in Latin America,¹⁵ postcolonial *bildungsroman*, narratives recounting

¹² Jeff Allred has argued that examining documentary under the framework of “witnessing” risks “conflate[ing] secular, juridical practices with religious fervor and evangelism.” He argues: “One finds a hagiographic strain in criticism on documentary that shrouds the ‘concerned’ photographer with an aura of progressiveness and charity that flows to the zealous reader/ convert” (18). I see this tendency (which, as Allred points out, emerges from the “semantic slipperiness” of the term) in much work on witnessing, and indeed, I have framed the dissertation in terms of modern, secular “faiths” in vision, the state, and representation. Nevertheless, I hope to avoid in my own work the semi-religious valorization of witnessing by analyzing the way the figure of the witness is constructed in various texts (written and visual, primary and secondary). The dissertation takes seriously projects that question, critique, and contextualize such faiths.

¹³ I adapt Allen Feldman’s term “human rights narrative” to more specifically describe the figure often called only the “witness.” Feldman describes the human rights narrative as “biographical narrative, life history, oral history, and testimony [produced] in the aftermath of ethnocidal, genocidal, colonial and postcolonial violence” (163).

¹⁴ This is not to suggest that such categories are mutually exclusive. Work on truth commissions in particular has explored the intimate links between human rights witnessing, legal witnessing, and religious witnessing (see Feldman). Chapter Five will explore the citizen-witness’s reliance on associations with the legal witness, and what happens when the legalistic aspects of civic witnessing are denied.

¹⁵ In his introduction to *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*, Georg Gugelberger recounts the two most well-known definitions of testimonio, scribed by John Beverley and George Yúdice. Testimonio can be described as an urgent first-person narrative (often transcribed from oral to written form)

violence against women, and truth commission testimonials,¹⁶ have garnered much public and intellectual attention.¹⁷ Such interest is intimately tied up with the ongoing negotiations in, transformations of, and conflicts over the discourses of modern democracy.

Witnessing can be contextualized in relation to social, political, economic, and technological transformations specific to the latter half of the twentieth century. Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, for example, argue that without attention given to the post-WWII commitment to the ideal of universal human rights the significance of testimonials

that recounts a real-life situation involving, according to Beverley, “repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival” (9).

¹⁶ The practice of instituting truth commissions to expose government violence through the public airing of survivor and perpetrator narratives was initiated in Uganda in 1974 and grew to prominence in Latin America in the 1980s. In *Unspeakable Truths: Confronting State Terror and Atrocity* (2001), her expansive work on truth commissions, Priscilla Hayner writes: “a truth commission may have any or all of the following five basic aims: to discover, clarify, and formally acknowledge past abuses; to respond to specific needs of victims; to contribute to justice and accountability; to outline institutional responsibility and recommend reforms; and to promote reconciliation and reduce conflict over the past” (24). She notes that “[i]n virtually every state that has recently emerged from authoritarian rule or civil war, and in many still suffering repression or violence but where there is hope for a transition soon, there has been interest in creating a truth commission – either proposed by officials of the state or by human rights activists or others in civil society” (23). The most famous truth commission is South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established in 1995. Similar projects have been undertaken in Australia and Canada to effect a public discussion of the states’ colonial oppression of aboriginal peoples.

¹⁷ I do not mean to imply that all such narratives function in the same manner, nor that such witnesses endure comparable situations. Nevertheless, all describe everyday life under the control of social or political structures that openly violate ideals of democracy and universal human rights.

from the Holocaust, truth commissions, anticolonial struggles and testimonios would be illegible. As Schaffer and Smith point out, the “memoir boom” of the mid-late twentieth century participates in material and discursive struggles over democratic theory and practice.¹⁸ They write:

In the aftermath of the processes of decolonization movements and Cold War *realpolitik*, over sixty human rights treaties, declarations, and Conventions have come into effect to address specific rights. For the last fifty years, differences in philosophical perspectives related to negative, positive, and group rights, as well as disagreements about appropriate interventions and modes of redress, have been rehearsed in local, national, and international venues. Campaigns have ensued. Conventions and Declarations have taken shape after heated negotiations. The reach of rights discourse has extended beyond the institutional settings of the

¹⁸ The “memoir boom” encompasses narratives that are explicitly engaged with the personal effects of political conflicts such as civil war and genocide. Georg Gugelberger locates the rise of Latin American testimonio in 1966 with *Biografía de un cimarrón/ The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, Miguel Barnet’s record of Esteban Montejo’s life story, and notes that many testimonios followed in the next two decades. Testimonials by Holocaust survivors emerged in the 1970s, and in the late 1970s and early 1980s a “systematic collection of audiovisual testimonies” began (Wieviorka 96). Academic interest in witnessing and testimony has accompanied public interest. Gugelberger notes the rise in academic interest in the testimonio in the late 1980s and the 1990s marked the continuation of a public and critical interest in Holocaust narratives. Recent years have featured (at least) three special issues in academic journals: the first in *Biography*, focused on human rights narrations (2004); the second in *Poetics Today*, focused on “The Humanities of Testimony” (2006); and most recently, a 2009 issue of *Humanities Research* titled “Decolonising Testimony: On the Possibilities and Limitations of Witnessing.”

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United Nations and the official bodies of nation-states responding to rights initiatives to formal NGO networks and informal meshworks of advocacy—the dense and nonhierarchical flows of connections among groups and peoples working on behalf of human rights that transcend national boundaries (Harcourt). Within these global information flows, the very meaning of a human right, and the foundational assumptions supporting it, have been challenged, critiqued, and redefined. At the heart of these debates, voices of dissent have prompted ongoing critiques of human rights discourse, frameworks, and mechanisms for implementation.

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I would like to argue, further, that the contemporary embrace of witnessing within the U.S. accompanies, first, a decrease of faith in the state within the U.S., and, second, an increased sense that the mainstream media and entertainment industries collude with the state to cover up or “spin” antidemocratic practice.

Many critics writing about the first Gulf War have criticized the way “smart bombs,” which record for passive television spectators their path until the moment of impact, literally erase the violent aftermath of war on human bodies.¹⁹ While visual technologies have always been manipulable and manipulated, photographic images of war and suffering were until recently considered to be fairly straightforwardly representations of reality. Digital technologies such as Photoshop, as well as by-now banal controversies over manipulated photographs, have destabilized public trust in the image.

¹⁹ See, for example, Paul Virilio’s *Desert Screen* and Judith Butler’s *Feminists Theorize the Political*.

Alongside a decrease in faith in the image comes the loss of faith in the state. Conspiracy theories about events ranging from the Kennedy assassination to 9/11 are merely the most extreme manifestations of such skepticism. A public sense of government secrecy over the causes of historical events is paired with (and may be read as a displaced recognition of) the erasure within the United States about the state's actions abroad. Sunaina Marr Maira writes about the "historical amnesia" that disavows U.S. imperialism, arguing that "One of the primary features of U.S. culture is the consistent denial of empire because unlike earlier European empires, the United States has tried to distance itself from direct colonization and to shroud its interventions in other sovereign nation-states in secrecy" (56). Historical amnesia for Maira is both political and psychological. Noting that historical amnesia is "supported by an apparatus of secrecy and enabled by a policy of covert actions" (57), she also claims that "There is always at the heart of empire a denial of knowledge of the workings of imperial power to suppress the guilt that comes with the awareness of its impact while enjoying its benefits and privileges" (56). The secrecy surrounding the conditions within the Guantánamo Bay detention center, as well as the general public's lack of awareness or outrage about the detainment of Arab-Americans after 9/11 are just a few examples of these processes.

The imagined loss of the reliability of the image, therefore, pairs with discourses that parade democratic rhetoric while institutionalizing a kind of civic blindness about antidemocratic structures and practices. I want to argue that for citizens who identify with the political left (liberal or radical), the witness represents the hope of resistance against the betrayals of both the image and the state. Both the sensory body of the seeing witness and the authenticity of narrative seem to hold a privileged access to an

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otherwise inaccessible truth and become the ground for a “salvational” faith that a truly democratic community might yet come to exist.²⁰

Yet if the interest in witnessing can be tied to the cultural and political left, indicating a loss of faith in dominant political vision, it is simultaneously mainstream, marking the importance of personal experience as a governing framework for understanding the social world. The last few decades have seen the burgeoning in various personal and professional contexts of memoirs and autobiographical essays.

Jay Winter contextualizes the “memory boom” in relation to cultural and technological transformations specific to late capitalism. For example, he theorizes the gap between the Holocaust and the circulation of narratives of the Holocaust in the 1960s and 1970s in relation to four historical developments: first, with the decline of DeGaulle, the decline of the romantic image of the Resistance fighter (a space to be filled by a new kind of hero – the survivor); second, the development of audiovisual recording technologies; third, an increased international audience; and finally, an increasing public

²⁰ The term “salvational” comes from Guggenberger, who argues that in the 1980s and 90s academy, the study of testimonio took on a quasi-religious aura: “Testimonio has been the salvational dream of a declining cultural left in hegemonic countries, comparable to what Walter Benjamin expected from photography and film when he reflected on his famous auratic theory”(7). He suggests that the critical interest in Latin American testimonio by liberal/left Western academics derives from testimonio’s location at the “crossroads of all the discourses of institutional battles” in the 1980s: “postcolonial and/versus postmodern; genre versus non-genre; interest in autobiography; the function of the canon; authenticity/realism; the debates on subalternity; othering discourse; orature/literature; dual authorship; editorial intervention; margin/center; race/class/gender; feminisms . . . ; minority discourse; Third World writing; the post-boom novel; Latin Americanism; questions of disciplinarity; and so on” (7). Testimonio became a battleground on which the culture wars were played out.

assumption that cultural memory was a moral issue. While Winter seems to be discussing the memory boom in Europe, much of what he points to (especially in terms of transformations in technology and increasing global communication) applies to the U.S. as well. I would suggest additionally that the mainstream emphasis on personal memory is a way for people to make sense of their lives in a country in which historical memory is stunted and erased. Witnessing narratives retain a mainstream faith in the possibility of vision as an arbiter of the social world; they distinguish, rather, between misleading vision and truthful vision. The popularity of these narratives suggests that if institutions such as the state, the media and the corporation can no longer be trusted to proffer up trustworthy images, authority can only be located in the individual and his or her experiences.

These explanatory models all suggest that the public and academic interest in circulating and discussing human rights narratives relies upon the discursive, technological and structural transformations of the contemporary world. The witness attests to the failures of democracy – and testifies to a potential future democracy. Yet political witnessing narratives are not specific to the second half of the twentieth century; they can be traced to the development in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of both democratic discourses and the modern state. If current times have seen an explosion of personal narratives, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries marked the rise of autobiography, journalism, the novel and the *Bildungsroman*.²¹ Human rights witnesses

²¹ Scholars have variously tracked the relation between such genres and political and legal discourses. In *Human Rights, Inc.*, Joseph Slaughter traces the intersections between human rights language and the *Bildungsroman*, arguing that both “posit the individual personality as an instance of a universal human

are the figures who most clearly attempt to negotiate the relation between democracy and the state, between political ideal and practice. The over six thousand slave narratives produced from the early eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century (Gates 1-2), for example, speak to the failures or contradictions of the practices of the so-called democratic state at the same time that they attest to a faith in the possibility of what Jacques Derrida calls “democracy to come.”²² Ex-slaves’ fervent defenses of equality, justice, and freedom depend upon the circulation of democratic discourses. Witnessing narratives, therefore, can be put into perspective only when viewed in the context of contested discourses of human equality attendant to modern democratic theories from the 18th to the 21st centuries. It may be argued that democracy requires the witness.

personality, as the social expression of an abstract humanity that theoretically achieves its manifest destiny when the egocentric drives of the individual harmonize with the demands of social organization” (20). Like Wai-Chee Dimock, with whom I started this dissertation, Slaughter “take[s] it for granted that the social work of literature and the cultural work of law are ‘interdependent and interrelated’” (11).

²² A translation of Derrida’s essay “The Last of the Rogue States: The ‘Democracy to Come,’ Opening in Two Turns” appeared in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* in 2004. In it, Derrida parses through the history and nuances of the term. Implied in the notion of “to come,” he states, are “five foci.” The first suggests that democracy does not and cannot exist in the present; rhetoric that implies as such must be subject to “a militant and interminable political critique” (331). The very structure of democracy, he claims, makes it an impossibility: “it will always remain aporetic in its structure: (force without force, incalculable singularity and calculable equality, commensurability and incommensurability [etc.])” (331). Because democracy calls for interminable critique and, indeed, perfection it is a philosophical impossibility. Other aspects of the term include the “who” and “what” that are “to come” (among others, refugees) (332); the extension of democracy past the bounds of the nation-state to the global (and the inevitable “invention” such extension entails) (332); the relation between democracy to come and justice; and a meditation on the grammatical undecidability of the term.

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In tying the interest in witnessing and testimony to a broad transhistorical era (the 18th century to the present), I do not wish to claim that notions of democracy, citizenship, or human rights have remained static over time. I would like to suggest, however, that the narratives of human rights witnesses are some of the places where such shifts are grappled with. They are discursive locales in which the relations between “man and citizen,” between first- and second-class citizen, and between citizen and state, are formulated, negotiated, and challenged.

The work done on human rights witnessing helps to establish some of the assumptions, issues, debates, and questions of my study and allows for a nuanced exploration of the ethics and politics of the deliberate civic witnessing of the literary journalist. In what follows, I will first engage with the common traits of the witness, and second explore the way human rights witnessing in particular has been linked with democracy. An overview of these texts suggests that the traits of the witness include: 1) the witness’s presence at a politically significant scene or event; 2) the potential of giving testimony; 3) testimony’s association with a “truth claim;” and 4) the communal, communicative and at times institutional aspects of testimony. The witness’s traits lend the figure a particularly political charge, while at the same time setting her or him off from other figures associated with vision or observation.

The witness, through observation and experience, gains unique knowledge (and indeed, “wit” refers to “knowledge”) of a particular scene of political significance. Such a scene might feature a temporally contained event or an ongoing scenario. Human rights witnesses mark in particular the large-scale failure or violation of the ideals of human rights, social justice, and democracy. Such scenes exhibit, in their difference from the

everyday, their larger political and historical significance. Scenes of immense and brutal institutionalized violence in particular disrupt normative assumptions about ethical and political relations, radically destabilizing ideals of community, equality and justice. The witness, by contextualizing, personalizing and narrating the act of seeing and/or experiencing the violent disruptions or violations of such a scene, simultaneously recognizes and produces its significance.

The second trait of the witness is the implicit transition from watching to representing, or from witnessing to testimony; indeed, the word “testimony” is derived directly from “testis” (witness) and “monium” (action, state or condition). Unlike the more general “observer,” in the figure of the witness vision and representation are inextricably linked. Witnessing implies the potential of testifying, whether that witness chooses to do so or not. The witness is the potential link between the significant event and the public narration or writing of that event.

The witness holds the position of offering, in her or his testimony, what Paul Ricoeur calls a “truth claim.” In law, the witness who signs a legal certificate verifies identity, and the witness at the crime scene affirms a link between perpetrator and act. The witness to institutionalized violence attests not only to the identity of the perpetrator and that the event took place in a certain way, but that the event took place at all (in opposition to, for example, Holocaust deniers). In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricoeur grapples with the status of the truth claim in testimony, arguing that “Whether it is treated as suspect or as a welcome guest following a long absence, it is as the ultimate referent that the event figures in historical discourse. The question it answers is: What is one talking about when one says that something happened?” (179). Rather than claiming (as

would some postmodern theorists) that the event does not exist, Ricoeur posits the referent as the necessity of historical discourse (but not necessarily other modes of discourse.) For Ricoeur, the acknowledgment of the referent in historical discourse is a situated ethical act: “For my part, I mean to honor the event by taking it as the actual referent of testimony taken as the first category of the archived memory. . . . Only a semiotics inappropriate to historical discourse undertakes to deny this referent to the profit of the exclusive pair constituted by the signifier (narrative, rhetorical, imaginative) and the signified (the statement of a fact)” (180). Ricoeur seems to posit an ethics of historical representation intimately dependent on discourse and context. If a semiotics that would “deny this referent” is “inappropriate to historical discourse,” it would seem that historiography demands the possibility of the referent. The witness, therefore, stands at the crux of both the historical and the ethical.

The very frequency with which the truth claim is questioned or debated points to the centrality of the concept to witnessing. Contestations over the truth claim represent, in part, the public struggle to designate what kinds of acts and experiences count as politically and historically significant. Studies of human rights witnessing have been particularly productive in troubling the nature of the “truth claim.” For Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glezjer, testimony attests to “the witness’s obedience to the compulsion to speak, though what the witness says is neither a reflection of the event (which is irretrievably lost to memory) nor unaffected by it” (xi-xii). For Bernard-Donals and Glezjer, if testimony is produced by witnessing, it does not necessarily represent that which was witnessed, but rather illuminates a particular relation to trauma. Cathy Caruth places this relation in another light: she claims that in narratives about trauma “What

returns to haunt the victim . . . is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known” (6). Similarly, as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub write in *Testimony*, witnessing provides “nonhabitual, estranged *conceptual prisms* through which we attempt to apprehend – and to make tangible to the imagination – the ways in which our cultural frames of reference and our preexisting categories which delimit and determine our perception of reality have failed, essentially, both to contain, and to account for, the scale of what has happened in contemporary history” (xv, original italics).

If various scholars have prodded at the nature of the truth or reality to which the human rights witness attests, others have suggested that in such scenarios, a true representation can never be located, but only approximated. Giorgio Agamben, for example, marks the limit case of the unrepresentability of witnessing in narratives from Auschwitz. In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, he claims that if the logic of the concentration camp was a logic of transforming the human into the nonhuman through murder or starvation, there was only one “complete witness,” only one figure best able to attest to the truth of such a logic. This complete witness was the figure he calls the *Muselmann*, that being who becomes the prototypical image of the death camp, the “indefinite being in whom not only humanity and non-humanity, but also vegetative existence and relation, physiology and ethics, medicine and politics, and life and death continuously pass through each other” (48). The *Muselmann*, starved to the point of bare life, loses the ability to witness: “The *Muselmann* has neither seen nor known anything, if not the impossibility of knowing and seeing” (54). Because the *Muselmann* can neither witness nor testify, other survivors must do so in his or her place. Yet the act of witnessing and

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testifying for the *Muselmann* is an impossible one: “to attempt to contemplate the impossibility of seeing, is not an easy task” (54). The testimony that ensues from this impossible witnessing speaks to the impossibility of easy historicization: “Testimony thus guarantees not the factual truth of the statement safeguarded in the archive, but rather its unarchivability, its exteriority with respect to the archive – that is, the necessity by which, as the existence of language, it escapes both memory and forgetting” (157-8). Agamben writes, therefore, that “testimony [of Auschwitz] contained at its core an essential lacuna; in other words, the survivors bore witness to something it is impossible to bear witness to” (13).²³

In each of these cases, whether what is represented is an event itself, the effects of the event, the persisting inability to incorporate or work through the traumatic experience, or the impossibility of seeing, the figure of the witness nevertheless bears weight as the potential bearer or marker of truth or presence – even if that presence is the presence of an absence, an impossibility, or a limit case. Testimony – and works about testimony – attempt to locate in particular kinds of experiences, narratives, and modes of expression political value.

Witnessing narratives mark political significance not just in their (contested) claims to truth, but also in the way they resonate in particular social contexts. Theories about the democratic nature of testimony expose the varying ways the abstract notion of

²³ In a powerful ending, Agamben’s book reproduces the testimonies of numerous Holocaust survivors who at the time would have been characterized as a “Muselmann.” In some ways, this ending performs the impossible: “The Muselmann” speaks. In another way, these testimonies speak to the possibility of returning from what is considered “the inhuman,” pointing to a latent humanity within the inhuman figure and to the importance of testimony, even when it cannot reach its limit.

democracy can be imagined. One approach holds that testimony helps to bind a larger social community (state-based or otherwise) around the stories of the past; another claims that it democratizes history, bringing multiple voices into public dialogue; and still one more perspective posits that testimony can initiate debate, disagreement, and contention – productively bringing into public discourse ideological differences that are often ignored or erased.

A common approach to testimony imagines it as an act that produces community. Testimony is described as a narrative or representational act that links the one who was not there to the scene. For Derrida, “Testimony, which implies faith or promise, governs the entire social space” (HJR 82). I read Derrida’s “faith or promise” as bound up with the “trust” Ricoeur claims is central to testimony: “When I testify to something I am asking the other to trust that what I am saying is true. To share a testimony is an exchange of trust” (MF 17). Such “faith or promise” may also be the trust that the story will reach, or move, the other. It may be faith or promise in the possibility of the social. If the witnesses of institutional social disruption and violence encounter the violation of the promise of interpersonal respect, social justice, or community, testimony attests to the potential to rebuild what has been lost. Testimony attests to, or promises, the possibility for community and communication even while it represents its lack.

Part of the community-building aspect of testimony, some argue, is its ability to raise consciousness. Cathy Caruth, for example, finds the political, communal aspects of testimony to be what makes the witnessing of trauma endurable: “the implications of such a transmission will only be fully grasped, I think, when we come to understand how, through the act of survival, the repeated failure to have seen in time – in itself a pure

repetition compulsion, a repeated nightmare – can be transformed into the imperative of a speaking that awakens others” (108).

Testimony as described above, while communal, is not necessarily or inherently democratic. Testimony has, however, been theorized in more explicitly political terms as binding the community of the nation-state. The act of testifying for truth commissions, for example, has been conceptualized as an act of good citizenship that buttresses the new state. As Priscilla Hayner writes, while such commissions are designed in part to provide psychological healing for victims, they might also have other goals, such as “promoting national reconciliation and reducing conflict over the past, or highlighting the new government’s concern for human rights and therefore gaining the favor of the international community” (13).

The act of testimony has been located as well at the intersection of historiography and democratic practice. Annette Wieviorka argues that testimony – and the critical interest in it – is intimately linked to historiographical struggles over the meaning and practice of democracy. She describes documentary projects as “a political act,” claiming that “at issue [i]s a democratization of historical actors, an attempt to give voice to the excluded, the unimportant, and the voiceless” (97). Schaffer and Smith similarly write that “Through acts of remembering, individuals and communities narrate alternative or counter-histories coming from the margins, voiced by other kinds of subjects—the tortured, the displaced and overlooked, the silenced and unacknowledged—among them” (3–4). Ricoeur transforms such an opportunity into an act with civic associations: the witness has, he writes, a “duty to remember” and a “duty to tell” (MF 9-10). This duty to remember and to tell especially a history of suffering, he argues, counters a history

dominated by its “victors” and offers a “parallel history” (MF 10-11).²⁴ The above approaches to history posit that multiplication of historiographical voices is a democratic goal.

This way of looking at democracy considers its primary aim not to be the production of harmonious or trusting community but rather to be the construction of a public structure that allows for what Leigh A. Payne calls “contentious coexistence” (3). In her work on perpetrator narratives from South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, what Payne finds is not that such narratives produce “reconciliation, defined as resolution of past quarrels or friendly agreement between competing sides,” but rather that they expose “ideological polarization, antidemocratic attitudes and policies, and dialogic warfare” (2-3). Such conflict, she argues, can yet promote democracy by “provoking political participation, contestation and competition” (3).²⁵

Much of the work done on witnessing has imagined the democratic potential of testimony as historiographical, focused on the civic effects of circulating narratives about the past.²⁶ Some, however, have theorized the social implications of testimony as

²⁴ As is perhaps apparent in this quote (and as Wierviorka, Schaffer and Smith argue), the emphasis on individual narration locates the individual as the driving force of both society and history.

²⁵ In her posing of contentious coexistence as a more suitable democratic aim, Payne’s work intersects with Chantal Mouffe’s theorization of agonistic pluralism in *On the Political*.

²⁶ Inherent to the question of witnessing is the question of temporality. Work in philosophy and legal studies in particular have theorized the role of memory in the translation between witnessing, testimony, and ultimately history. John Henry Wigmore’s theorization of the legal witness, for example, defines evidentiary procedure as moving in a trajectory from “observation,” to “recollection,” and, finally, “communication or narration.” In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur describes testimony as the

drawing attention to, and therefore helping to truncate, ongoing acts or structures of political injustice. The circulation of testimony can therefore encourage the transformation of such acts or structures, producing in their place more democratic ideals, structures and relations. For E. Ann Kaplan, to witness is to perform an inherently political act: “there is also a need to mobilize the consciousness of large communities, such as the nation-state, in which people elect their leaders and vote for or against policies that affect people’s daily lives. ‘Witnessing’ is the term I use for prompting an ethical response that will perhaps transform the way someone views the world, or thinks about justice” (123). This approach to testimony’s democratic potential can be seen most obviously in work on Latin American testimonio, which – while first published in the 1960s and 70s – was widely circulated and studied in the American academy in the 1980s and 90s. Such interest was grounded in the assumption that, for the privileged reader, testimonio “suggests as an appropriate ethical and political response more the possibility of solidarity than of charity” (Beverly in Gugelberger 31). As indicated by Beverly’s comment, the circulation of testimonios is often portrayed as an act of global citizenship.

binding between memory and history. Testimony, too, engages intimately with memory and its partner, forgetting. As Hayner writes about her interview with a Rwandan government official who lost seventeen members of his family during the genocide, memory and forgetting can exist together: “‘We must remember what happened in order to keep it happening again,’ he said slowly. ‘But we must forget the feelings, the emotions, that go with it.’ . . . One must remember, but one must always sometimes very much want to forget” (1). Others have theorized testimony’s role in drawing a line between the past and the present. Allen Feldman, for example, writes that “[t]o enclave the human rights story at a primordial scene of violence is already to preselect the restorative powers of legal, medical, media, and textual rationalities as post-violent. There is normative and moralizing periodization built into the post-violence depiction of violence” (164).

Work on testimonio illuminates as well the way in which the ideal of global citizenship butts up against or even contradicts the ideal of national citizenship. Margaret Randall, for example, describes her work collecting women's testimonios as violating the demands of national citizenship: "When I returned to the United States in January of 1984, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) denied my petition for residency. They invoked the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act and initiated deportation proceedings against me explicitly based on the critical nature of my writings" (66). Testimonio in Randall's opinion helps to circulate an image of human identity that operates in direct opposition to national identity: "Through a systematic campaign of dehumanizing the people in 'alien' nations, our government can keep us feeling those people are other. It's one of the ways they perpetuate racism and keep us apart. If we hear those people's real voices, there is always the risk that we will discover we are not so different. We may not have to hate them after all" (66).²⁷

What all this suggests, perhaps, is that the term "citizen-witness" is redundant. Testimony has often been implicitly conceptualized as an act of citizenship, one which produces a democratic community at times linked directly to the state. In this way of thinking about citizenship, personal suffering is transformed after the fact into a civic act. Good citizenship is salvaged from the wreckage of democracy.

In this dissertation, I want to distinguish between human rights witnessing by survivors and voluntary or deliberate witnessing, in which the acts of observation and

²⁷ In its intimate associations with present-day politics and its implicit call to activism, testimonio of all the modes of witnessing is perhaps most closely aligned with civic journalism (and indeed Randall describes it as a subgenre of journalism (61)).

documentation are conceptualized from the beginning as an act of good citizenship. The texts I will consider are narrated by people who deliberately enter scenes that disrupt norms of human rights, justice, and democracy. In the interests of social justice and with an eye to democratic ideals, these persons – most notably journalists, documentarians and activists – choose to observe and document the social landscape. Their witnessing may include the observation of violence or suffering, or it may involve the collection of narratives by involuntary witnesses and survivors. Voluntary witnesses embrace the associations of witnessing and testimony with democracy, community, and citizenship and position themselves in the role of citizen-witness. To make the distinction between deliberate and accidental witnessing, between a prefiguration of witnessing and witnessing after-the-fact, I think, allows for a thoughtful discussion of positionality, privilege, and effect in what are often conceptualized uncritically as democratic acts.

The citizen-witnesses I examine are socially, physically or behaviorally set off from what or whom they are witnessing – both on the scene and in their narratives. They may witness scenes in which they are othered by nationality; they may witness wars or battles in which they wear no uniform; they may enter poverty-stricken areas armed with expensive photographic equipment. Such “otherness” takes advantage of a common assumption that distance creates clarity, the assumption that the outside observer is more neutral than the insider, who is caught up in the drama of the event. Even in the midst of the scene, the deliberate citizen-witness can maintain her or his sense of distance – and therefore, authority – because of a sense of otherness from what she or he watches and represents.

Alternatively, the citizen-witness might modify his or her behavior and physical appearance to enter spaces supposedly off-limits. While in a certain way these disguises elide difference within the stories' settings, by emphasizing the donning of the disguise and habitually reminding readers of social difference, the narrators of such texts reinscribe the distance between observer and observed.

The relation with the reader is paramount to such projects. Citizen-witnesses attempt to produce a sympathetic community between reader and writer by encouraging readerly identification with their own subject position, one characterized by a sense of altruism, distance and mobility. And indeed, the citizen who chooses to witness is like the reader. Like the reader who voluntarily engages with a text and can choose to continue or cease reading and/or watching, such a figure chooses to approach a scene and can choose to exit that scene. Such mobility issues from the trappings of social privilege based in class, race, gender, or nation, privilege which is often cemented by the witness's membership in a political structure like a nation-state, professional institution, international organization, and so on. By standing in for the absent reader, the citizen-witness models the encounter with the public space. The witness performs the struggle to perceive and narrate political truth.

These traits (distance and mobility) stage the ethical complexities of altruistic politics and raise questions about the relation between vision, representation, citizenship and state power. How do regimes of vision (objective or subjective) help to shape political relations? What modes of representation allow for the most ethical representation of others' suffering? Difference hyperbolizes the ethical conundrum of representation: how does the individual who is committed to democratic ideals relate to

and represent the other? Similarly, deliberate witnesses have a heightened responsibility to account for their political privilege. They must take into account their relation to the institutional and political structures by which they are protected, especially if those structures (such as the nation-state or international organizations like the U.N.) are perpetuating or deliberately ignoring violence or injustice. In what ways are the democratic projects of the citizen constrained or even disallowed by the state? Finally, these narratives consider their own social role: is deliberate witnessing directed toward the future as a means to produce a history, or is it directed toward the present as a means to transform it?

These questions could be examined through recourse to genres like poetry, the novel, and the graphic novel.²⁸ Because of the intimate relation between the genre and the practice of citizen witnessing, however, I will explore the way they are manifested in literary journalism.

²⁸ Citizen-witnessing is a thematic from fiction to poetry. For example, the explosion of violence in Richard Wright's *Native Son* is directed against the Communist daughter of Bigger Thomas's wealthy employer, who – in a show of altruism – enlists Bigger to give her a tour of his neighborhood. I will in Chapter One briefly address Stephen Crane's short story "An Experiment in Misery," which features the psychic deterioration of a well-intentioned citizen-witness who goes from posing as a beggar to "wearing the criminal expression that comes with certain convictions." More recent fictional texts include *Shooting War* and *DMZ*, two popular comic book series that each feature the exploits of a young man who falls into journalism and ends up with unprecedented street-level access to a warzone. In poetics, we might look to the work of Carolyn Forché, best known for her poem about her experience in El Salvador, "The Colonel."

Literary Journalism

Journalism's major function – to allow the people to observe, reflect on and contribute to the activities of the polis (local, national, and global) – is intimately linked to the democratic ideal of self-representation. At its best, as Stephen J. A. Ward writes:

Journalists provide the news and analysis by which a society communicates with itself, allowing it some measure of self-government. The public absorbs a daily barrage of news images that over time help to define its sense of place in society and within a global community. Fleeting news stories parade injustices, vanities, power struggles, disasters, accomplishments, and peculiar interests. Citizens, following the major issues in the press, become aware of their shared and competing values. (9)

The alliance between journalism and democracy can also be read in relation to the technological advancements that facilitated mass communication. In his expansive and influential history of American journalism, for example, Frank Luther Mott describes the establishment of a printing press in the American colonies of 1638 and argues that “The printing press, wherever it appeared in the world at the time, was regarded by government as a dangerous engine. It was very useful to men in power so long as they could control it absolutely; but the fact that a press sells its product to large numbers of people makes it essentially a popular institution, and as such it was a constant threat to government control” (6).

Mott tracks the historical association between journalism and politics in the U.S. After the establishment of the printing press, he writes, journalism quickly spread

throughout the colonies. With the lead-up to the Revolutionary War, journalism increasingly engaged with politics: “The publication of news from abroad continued to be regarded generally as the chief business of a newspaper; but as the struggle against England developed, American political affairs took on more and more importance” (71). Many of the key political figures of the Revolutionary War (e.g., Thomas Paine, Samuel and John Adams, and John Dickinson) transmitted their views via newspaper articles, and papers were increasingly aligned with either the Patriots or the Tories (71, 79, 89).

As the eighteenth century transformed into the nineteenth, the political associations of newspapers intensified. Mott argues that 1783-1801 sees “ardent partisan political propaganda” in the conflict between Federalists and Republicans. He writes that political persuasion soon became the primary function of newspapers: “Whereas nearly all newspapers heretofore had been set up as auxiliaries to printing establishments and had been looked upon merely as means which enterprising printers used to make a living, now they were more and more often founded as spokesmen of political parties” (113-114). At the same time, daily papers were established in the U.S. While these papers were initially meant to serve the mercantile class, many of them soon adopted a political aim (118). The first half of the nineteenth century brought a rapid expansion of journalism – both on the production end and the consumption end. From 1800 to 1833, “the total of papers published simultaneously in the United States increased from about 200 at its beginning to about 1,200 at its close” (Mott 167). By 1860, there were 3,000 papers (216).

The 1830s and 40s brought one of the most important developments in journalism: the advent of the “penny papers.” In the 1830s “the subscriber to a

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mercantile paper paid \$8 or 10 a year for it,” (216), a price hardly affordable to the average worker. In 1833, the *New York Sun* appeared, at a price of one cent (222). The *Sun* and other penny papers tended to focus on local news, sensational news, and human interest news stories (243). Like the printing press, the penny papers democratized communication. At a fraction of the cost of a standard daily paper, the penny papers “enlarged America’s newspaper-reading public tremendously” (241). At the same time, so as to appeal to more readers, penny papers were careful not to seem too partisan.

Soon after the institution of the penny papers came the addition of visuals to help readers imagine the events of the polis. Illustrations accompanied articles in U.S. magazines from the 1850s on (Becker in Wells, 292). By the 1890s, photographs took the place of illustrations, primarily in the increasingly popular “yellow journalism.” Yellow journalism as exemplified in Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst’s competing New York papers *The World* and *The Journal* incorporated “good news-coverage peppered with sensationalism, stunts and crusades, editorials of high character, [large] size, [elaborate] illustration and promotion” (Mott 439). Stunt journalism featured what I will later call “undercover citizen-witnessing.” The standard stunt narrative (according to Mott) was as follows: “a clever and adventurous writer assumes a disguise or forges documents to gain admission to a hospital, jail, or asylum, and then makes the narrative of his experiences an exposé of the administration of the institution” (442). While stunt journalism also encompassed travel and adventure narratives, it primarily manifested itself in the form of the social crusade, defined as “any campaign against an

abuse or in promotion of a public benefit which is prosecuted by a newspaper with zeal and enterprise” (573).²⁹

This period corresponds as well with the solidification of journalism as a profession.³⁰ As Michael Schudson writes in *Origins of the Ideal of Objectivity in the Professions*, by the 1890s reporters “constituted a self-conscious occupational group with its own myths, traditions, and clubs or other meeting places” (24). This is also a moment in which the reporter becomes a public figure and his or her persona takes on heightened cultural significance. Schudson claims that the 1890s becomes the “Age of the

²⁹ The “crusade” of the late nineteenth century participates in a well-established tradition of social investigation in mid-nineteenth century Britain and the U.S. This tradition included books like Charles Dickens’s *American Notes* (1842) and Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861). In their concern with observing and documenting urban conditions, crusaders expressed too an alliance with texts by and about flaneurs and with a mid-century genre Stuart Blumin calls “nonfictional urban sensationalism,” which included scandalous condemnations of the immorality of the city. Such fictions of the city include George C. Foster’s *New York by Gaslight* (1840), George Lippard’s *The Quaker City* (1845), Stephen Crane’s *Maggie: Girl of the Streets* (1893) and Edward Townsend’s *A Daughter of the Tenements* (1895). Finally, popular works of fiction such as Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888) and William Dean Howells’s *Traveler From Altruria* (1894) employ similar narrative structures, featuring a figure who travels across time or space to observe, and therefore gain knowledge of, another society. Bellamy’s main character travels into the future to observe a harmonious socialist society, which he compares to the poverty-stricken streets of Boston when he returns (briefly) to his own time. Howells’s traveler, by noting the inequalities he sees in Victorian America, produces an uneasy kind of knowledge in the middle class narrator and opens up the possibility for social action in the rural farmers who live in the area.

³⁰ Along with journalism, by the end of the nineteenth century, related practices like anthropology, photography, filmmaking and tourism, had become institutionalized and/or professionalized.

Reporter,” and that during the decade “reporters were for the first time actors in the drama of the newspaper world” (162). The decade sees, for example, the worldwide popularity of narratives like Nellie Bly’s “Around the World in 80 Days,” Henry Stanley’s tracking-down of David Livingstone, and Richard Harding Davis’s heroic war correspondence.³¹ In the face of increasing cultural notoriety, I’d like to argue, the personal narratives of such figures came to contribute in important ways to the public perception of civic duty.

I start the body of the dissertation in the 1890s, at a moment in which not only is journalism professionalized, but the sensational narratives about the lives and adventures of the journalist take on cultural significance as well. In Chapter One, I describe the entrenchment of the citizen-witnessing genre in the 1890s and 1900s in relation to the figure Michael Schudson calls the “informed citizen.” I examine in particular popular turn-of-the-century crusade narratives by Jack London, Jacob Riis, and Nellie Bly. Schudson claims that the 1890s’ ideal of good citizenship was that of the “informed,” rational citizen: these popular journalists retain the emphasis on rational information, but make the act of performing citizenship thrilling, dangerous, and heroic. Narratives like

³¹ Richard Harding Davis in particular was a pop-cultural hero. As Nathaniel Lande writes:

Delighted with this ‘American Kipling,’ the reading public during the 1890s and early years of the twentieth century consumed his novels, stories, and reports of wars and coronations. Perhaps they saw through Davis’s eyes a colorful young world full of romance, adventure, success and wealth. . . . It was said that no war was a success without the presence of this war correspondent who was handsome, debonair, and splendidly equipped to chronicle it. His dispatches from Cuba immortalized a colonel of the Rough Riders and helped to make a president of the United States. (138)

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People of the Abyss, *How the Other Half Lives* and *Ten Days in a Mad-House* establish a series of rhetorically effective and enduring tropes to authorize and make appealing their representations of the failure of the institutions of the so-called democratic state. Such narratives imagine an ideal relation between characteristics associated with the individual (subjectivity, the body, identity, and experience) and ethical representation, rhetorical force, and political transformation. The rest of the dissertation examines how later texts mobilize and transform the basic conventions established in these nineteenth-century narratives and either reaffirm or critique their idealistic assumptions.

If London, Bly, and Riis were very much considered exemplary (if controversial) figures in the journalism of their time, the works of John Howard Griffin, Grace Halsell, James Agee, Michael Herr, William Vollmann, Joe Sacco, and Joan Didion take part in what is increasingly considered a counter-tradition: literary journalism.³² Literary journalism as a genre is distinguishable from mainstream journalism by its emphasis on subjectivity as a mode of accessing or producing social truth. Subjectivity can be manifested in both narration and narrative: in other words, both in how the story is told and in what happens in the story. The narration of literary journalism often emphasizes journalistic commentary: the writer feels free to express his or her opinion about the story. Subjectivity can also be seen in the use of literary devices such as imagery, metaphor, and characterization.³³

³² Literary journalism has also been named, at various points, “narrative journalism,” “new journalism,” or “parajournalism” (Sims 4 and Boynton). The genre could also be referred to as “subjective journalism.”

³³ Tom Wolfe, for example, describes the emergence in the 1960s of “journalism that would . . . read like a novel.” He lists the four qualities or “devices” characterizing such work as “scene-by-scene construction,”

Subjectivity can also be manifested through an emphasis on the perceptions and reactions of the embodied journalist. Unlike most other forms of journalism, literary journalism often emphasizes the figure of the witness. The writer's experiences come to take on a fundamental significance: for example, to expose a social scene heretofore "invisible" to the reader, to reflect on the complexities of such a situation, to attest to the situation's truth or meaning, or to produce narrative suspense or drama. The texts I categorize as examples of citizen-witnessing, for example, emphasize in their very premise the importance of the writer.³⁴ They have been defined by William Dow as "insistence immersion" journalism and by William Stott as a subgenre of documentation he calls "vicarious persuasion." Both Dow and Scott emphasize the rhetorical function of such works, exploring the position of the journalist within them and the imagined effects of narratives on their ideal readers. In insistence immersion, according to Dow, "the writer/protagonist/narrator immerses himself or herself in or is unwillingly immersed by a prescribed environment that he or she wishes to change" (152). In vicarious persuasion, "the writer partook of the events he reported and bared his feelings and attitudes to influence the reader's own" (Stott 179). Such projects hold ethical and political import:

the recording of dialogue in full, third-person point of view, and the recording of "symbolic details" (31-32).

³⁴ Even in texts where the author's presence is seemingly erased, that very erasure can be seen as ethically significant, reflecting what Norm Sims refers to as the literary journalist's "sense of responsibility toward their subjects and a search for the underlying meaning in the act of writing" (8). For example, John Hersey's *Hiroshima* is famous in part because he removes himself from the story. His narrative recounts the story of Japanese survivors, becoming a potent if literally unspoken counterpoint to the violent erasure enacted by the U.S. government's dropping of the atom bomb.

as Dow points out, “the immersed subject usually charges the middle class with an ethical mission to alleviate social suffering” (152).

Like other modes of witnessing, literary journalism uses subjectivity to buttress the truth claim. The genre marshals literary techniques, for example, not to produce a sense of fictionality but to increase a sense of what Tom Wolfe’s influential *The New Journalism* (1973) calls its “realism.” Wolfe argues that realism is central to literary journalism, and – in a somewhat strange mechanical metaphor – claims that the genre cannot do without it: “The introduction of detailed realism into English literature in the eighteenth century was like the introduction of electricity into machine technology. It raised the state of the art to an entirely new magnitude. And for anyone, in fiction or nonfiction, to try to improve literary technique by abandoning social realism would be like an engineer trying to improve upon machine technology by abandoning electricity” (Preface). As Stott writes about vicarious persuasion, “this reporting technique responded to the appetite of the people of the time for lived, first-hand experience, and to their particular trust in the truth- the nonfalsifiability – of such experience” (179).

Positioned as a figure with unique access to social and political truth, the literary journalist often becomes imagined as a heroic figure. Wolfe’s own work – and much criticism after him – supports the implicit continuation of the 1890s’ “Age of the Reporter” in literary journalism. His description of his decision to become a reporter draws explicitly on such a heroic mythos that had by mid-century become familiar narrative: “Chicago, 1928, that was the general idea . . . Drunken reporters out on the ledge of the *News* peeing into the Chicago River at dawn [. . .] Nights down at the detective bureau – it was always nighttime in my daydreams of the newspaper life.

Reporters didn't work during the day. I wanted the whole movie, nothing left out" (3).

If Wolfe doesn't find the drama and excitement he's looking for in conventional journalism, he resolves to produce it, claiming that "new journalism" "would wreak such evil havoc in the literary world . . . causing a panic, dethroning the novel as the number one literary genre, starting the first new direction in American literature in half a century" (3). Marc Weingarten's 2006 book *The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight* replicates such a mythos, claiming that the New Journalists were part of the "greatest literary movement since the American fiction renaissance of the 1920s" (7). Weingarten writes: "The stakes were high; deep fissures were rending the social fabric, the world was out of order. So they became our master explainers, our town criers, even our moral conscience" (6-7). The importance of the author produced by Wolfe and Weingarten mirrors what Alan Spiegel has described as personality cults developed around popular writers like Hunter S. Thompson and James Agee.

Perhaps because of the perceived disjunction between the literary and the real, the genre of literary journalism has been historically undervalued in both journalism and literary studies. In the early twentieth century, as journalism became increasingly professionalized, journalism schools were instituted, and "objectivity" was paraded as the norm, the emphasis on the personal, subjective narratives of journalists was less frequently considered to be a normative mode of representation within the profession.³⁵

³⁵ Stephen Ward, David Mindich and Michael Schudson have explored in various ways the rise and cementation of the ideal of objectivity within mainstream journalism (a development that ensured the marginalization of literary journalism.) Noting that definitions shift throughout time, Ward offers six characteristics of journalistic objectivity: factuality, fairness, non-bias, independence, non-interpretation, and neutrality/detachment. He tracks a philosophical interest in objectivity from ancient Greece through to

the nineteenth century when, he writes, “‘Objectivity’ in this era emerges with a modern scientific meaning. . . . To be objective was to accept the coercion of facts” (77). Ward argues that the roots of journalism’s twentieth-century embrace of objectivity can be located at least in part in the nineteenth-century penny papers: “The doctrine of objectivity emerged from two notions of newspaper function: educator of public opinion and informer of the masses. These ideas in turn emerged from two forms of liberal paper in the nineteenth century – the elitist, middle-class, liberal newspaper of England and the egalitarian, popular press first developed in the U.S. in the 1830s” (174). Ward claims that the penny papers developed ideals of “factuality, non-partisanship, and independence – and launched a movement towards professionalism with associations, codes of ethics, and training programs” (175). Mindich’s work on the penny papers supports such an argument; he tracks the medical and journalistic responses to New York City’s cholera epidemics of 1832, 1849, and 1866 to link the penny papers’ emphasis on facts (naïve empiricism) to the increasing scientificity of the mid-nineteenth century.

If an emphasis on factuality and non-bias can be seen in nineteenth-century papers, journalism as a profession did not fully embrace the concept until the 1920s. As Ward writes, “The formal recognition of objectivity as a fundamental principle goes back to the formulation of two major statements about ethics – the 1923 code of the American Society of News Editors (ASNE) and the 1926 code of Sigma Delta Chi, forerunner of the Society of Professional Journalists” (214). Ward argues that objectivity in the twentieth century differed from nineteenth-century objectivity because it was “stricter, more methodical, and more professional”; he notes, for example, that “The editors who enforced objectivity after 1900 banned all comment or interpretation, raising questions about almost any adjective or adverb in a report” (216, 217). Ward links objectivity to the market economy, which valued “money, success, expertise, technology and useful knowledge,” and indeed, the same period that saw the rise of objectivity saw the rise of “the low-cost, centrally managed chain, run on the principles of market segmentation and vertical integration” (221).

Schudson makes a different distinction between the naïve empiricism of nineteenth century journalism and the objectivity of the twentieth. Defining objectivity as “an ideology of the distrust of the self” and noting that the term “objectivity” didn’t appear in journalism until approximately 1931 (*OIOP* 167), Schudson argues that a belief in and subsequent anxiety over the effect of subjective personal perspective on representation accompanies the twentieth, not the nineteenth, century. In the Progressive

In *Origins of the Ideal of Objectivity in the Professions* Schudson locates the impetus for the turn away from subjectivity in both cultural and political transformation. Whereas in the late nineteenth century “Reporters . . . saw themselves, in part, as scientists uncovering the economic and political facts of industrial life more boldly, more clearly, and more ‘realistically’ than anyone had done before” (167), by the 1920s and 30s “[p]eople came to see even the finding of facts as interested, even memory and dreams as selective, even rationality itself a front for interest or will or prejudice” (230). The increasing emphasis on individual psychologies by Freud and others paired with work in the sciences that increasingly emphasized randomness and instability instead of order and simplicity. Such developments had promoted the public view that the individual might not have complete control over witnessing or representation. Awareness of the use of the media to shape public opinion further cemented a distrust of conventional journalism’s modes of representation. Finally, Schudson argues, with the rise of European dictatorships and the seeming inability of the U.S. government to deal with the effects of the Depression, people believed less and less in the possibility of

Era news (as becomes clear in my readings of London, Bly and Riis), the personal and the factual could co-exist: “The nineteenth-century worry was exclusively about *intentional* shadings of the truth for *partisan* ends. The concern was about the danger of partisan views” (Schudson 4). This changed in the twentieth century, with the cementation of new models of human perception, memory and language: “The twentieth century added the danger of *partial* views, the inevitable selectivity of facts, the inevitable exercise of judgment in interpreting the real world” (4). As Schudson argues, “The nineteenth century worried about journalists’ intentions and what they wanted to do. In the twentieth century, there is an additional concern about journalists’ *attentions* and what they are able to see and do” (4).

citizen intervention in the production of democracy. Ultimately, he writes, the source of objectivity “lies deeper, in a need to cover over not authority or privilege but the disappointment in the modern gaze” (295). In the face of an increasing public distrust of journalistic texts, the process by which they were produced, and the aim and contexts of such texts the mainstream fronts of the profession spurred a concerted effort to institutionalize objectivity. Thus, while subjective experience initially confirmed the authority of the heroic journalist, as the twentieth century progressed the public was asked to see the subjective as devaluing journalism’s truth claim.

The cult interest in literary journalism starting at mid-century, academic interest from the 1970s on,³⁶ and recent public embrace of magazine and internet journalism indicate various challenges to such a perception. If much of the twentieth century has seen the devaluing of the genre, I would argue that the recently increased critical and public interest in subjective literary journalism can be placed within the context of the rising interest in witnessing and testimony I described earlier in this introduction.

Much of the work in literary journalism studies from the 1970s to the 1990s focused on defining the genre, championing it and defending it from its detractors, and exploring the intersection of (fictional) style and (real) content. Such works embolden me to take for granted that literary journalism “counts” as literature. In this dissertation, I focus my energy on examining the yield – and particularly the political yield – of the

³⁶ Recently scholars from journalism and literature backgrounds started an international association and a journal specifically geared toward the study of the genre (the International Association of Literary Journalism Studies, founded in 2006 and *Literary Journalism Studies*, founded in 2009). If courses on the practice of literary journalism may be found on occasion in journalism departments, however, English departments rarely offer reading courses.

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genre's particular conjunction of the literary and the real.³⁷ If Schudson sees objectivity as a way mainstream journalism imagined it might counter such disappointment and thereby secure an elusive social or political truth, I would argue that the embrace of subjectivity in alternative modes of journalism can be read as an attempt to reinsert the citizen in the production of that truth. In an era when state power, corporate dominance, and technological transformations are increasingly rendering the individual obsolete, literary journalism's emphasis on subjectivity reasserts the power of the individual (both citizen and not) to see and represent.

As Elfriede Fursich points out, journalism exemplifies the way ideas of reality are produced. While journalism is a "textual system" that "is characterized by its intention to 'count as true'" it is also a "cultural practice, led by a community of professionals who use their cultural and interpretive authority to shape cultural memory (Zelizer, 1992) and the production of knowledge in general" (59). Literary journalism's pairing of

³⁷ Work done on historiography, autobiography, anthropology, and photography in the past 25 years has similarly examined questions of the relation between representation and "the real" – and indeed, the work of writers like Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur forms an implicit backdrop to this project. This dissertation aligns itself as well with recent work by scholars of literary journalism such as William Dow, Jan Whitt, Isabel Meuret, and Joshua Roiland, all of whom explore the relation between social identities such as gender, class, and nation and literary journalism's modes of representation. Roiland's work, which examines the ways literary journalists encounter the political landscape, is very much aligned with my own. Dow, Whitt, and Meuret examine literary journalism in the context of class, gender, and nation, respectively. Race has been woefully undertheorized in contemporary literary journalism studies, but scholars less associated with the study of the genre such as Mary Louise Pratt and David Spurr have, in their consideration of colonial-era travel narratives and journalism, commented on the politics of race and nation in specific works of literary journalism.

“documentation” and “literature,” I would like to argue, illuminates even more explicitly the way political concepts are brought into being through imaginative narration.

“Democracy” takes on meaning only in narrative, and literary journalism is central to producing that meaning.

Chapters and Reflections

I read literary journalism’s emphasis on the individual citizen’s subjective reactions to the socio-political scene as an attempt to counter the decreased power of the citizen that is perceived to accompany the growth of the state. The flourishing, naming, and institutionalization of “New Journalism” in the 1960s, at a time when the U.S. was committing itself to an increasingly violent struggle in Vietnam and reinstituting the draft, speaks to this goal. Yet the roots of this civic anxiety are established well before the 1960s. If in the beginning of the dissertation I explore the establishment of a genre that takes for granted the power of the good citizen, in later chapters I will explore more deeply the specific ways literary journalists from the 1930s on reflect on the ethical and political implications of the decreasing power of the citizen.

Chapter Two shows how the understanding of witnessing established in certain late nineteenth century texts – namely regarding the relation between the damaged, painful body and the democratic ideal – is adapted to and transformed within a new historical context: the Civil Rights era. I read John Howard Griffin’s *Black Like Me* and Grace Halsell’s *Soul Sister* as mid-century manifestations of the “undercover witnessing” of London and Bly. In their adoption and adaptation of the earlier tradition’s modes of representation, and especially the sensationalistic centrality of the narrator’s body, the

books enlist the tried-and-true rhetorical force of their precursors. I employ such a reading to examine and critique the way narratives about suffering ask us to imagine the relation between the liberal state and democratic practice. In particular, I suggest that such a representation colludes with a Hobbesian vision that imagines the state's role as to erase bodily pain and suffering attendant to a state of nature. In this modality emerge two racialized sets of citizens – those who suffer and those who speak. Thus, *Black Like Me* and *Soul Sister* imagine the good citizenship of the heroic white savior as contributing to and reforming a perfectible state.

Yet in their attempts to embody the suffering of the other – to take on the identity of the other – Griffin and Halsell point to their own civic anxiety. In an age in which cross-racial nonviolent direct action is at odds with Black Nationalism, these narratives can be read as attempts to contain the public narrative about what it means to be African American and to reestablish the civic centrality of the good white liberal. If Griffin and Halsell are quite literally empathetic to the struggles of African Americans, the excessive nature of their empathy suggests an unwillingness to relinquish the social power attendant to sentimental race relations.

The third chapter explores how Walker Evans and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* critiques such modes of observation and representation. *Famous Men* forwards a politics of shame to critique conventional modes of citizen-witnessing as manifested in New Deal era, state-sponsored works like Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell's *You Have Seen Their Faces*. Agee's dramatized representation of the shame of the citizen-witness points out the way that mainstream journalism reinforces class hierarchy by positioning white and African American workers as the objects of a

voyeuristic gaze. Agee uses shame further as a way to try to theorize a democratic politics based on the mutual spectatorship of vulnerability. In this alternative democracy, the privileged witness positions himself/herself as the object of the gaze.

Yet as the chapter progresses, I show that, like similar professions of politicized shame in contemporary white liberalism, Agee's politics of shame simultaneously relies on and erases class, gender, and racial distinctions. If shame creates community, I argue, it does so on the basis of perceived similarity, a similarity that grounds itself on another racialized, gendered, or classed other. Furthermore, as the novel's paratexts and criticism reveal, the performance of shame, by focusing the reader's attention on the dramatic affects of the citizen-witness's body, repositions the witness as the (anti)heroic center of the democratic polis. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, therefore, inadvertently betrays its idealistic democratic solution.

The last two chapters explore how postwar narratives try to grapple with or circumvent the representational dangers demonstrated in the previous two chapters. Here, citizenship and privilege are contextualized in relation to newly popular discourses of human rights and democratization; anticolonial liberation movements; and the rise of U.S. (and Soviet) dominance. While revolutionary nations drew on the language of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) to challenge their colonial oppressors, the U.S. and the Soviet Union grew into superpowers, eventually maintaining a hold on military, economic and political power around the world. This era, therefore, has seen the growth of the superstate paired with the development of an at-times incompatible notion of "global citizenship."

The UDHR – drafted in 1948 – imagined a “human family” in which all members had “inherent dignity” and “equal and inalienable rights.” Such rights were imagined as “the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”; violations of these rights “have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind” (UDHR, Preamble). Many writers ground a notion of global citizenship, which operates outside or without regards to the bounds of the nation-state, in the “imagined community” of this human family. If, as Gerard Delanty points out, the classical figure of the citizen is founded on an implied noncitizen, and if the rights of citizenship are disproportionately applied, global citizenship in its expansiveness is often considered an ideal democratic solution to inequality.³⁸ In *Educating for Human Rights and Global Citizenship*, for example, editors Ali A. Abdi and Lynette Shultz write:

Global citizenship aims to expand inclusion and power and provides the ethical and normative framework to make this a legitimate and far-reaching project whereby citizenship is a product of diversity rather than an institutional tool serving particular groups. This global ethic should affirm, for all of us, that citizenship is not just a mechanism to claim rights that are based on membership in a particular polity, but that human rights are based on membership beyond any state or national boundaries, inherent to all individuals and groups in all places and times. (3-4)

³⁸ Delanty notes that in ancient Greece “a citizen was an essentially political being, by which was meant both a moral and a legal entity. Citizenship was an inherited privilege and clearly marked the boundary between non-citizens and citizens, for the polis was based on a restricted principle of equality as well as on a clearly defined territory. Thus from the very beginning the term entails exclusion since not everyone is in possession of it” (11).

The disjunction between massive state and corporate power and discourses of universal human rights and global citizenship emerges as a potent backdrop in war journalism in particular. Wars during the second half of the twentieth century draw out the disjunction between abstract and embodied war. Michael Herr's *Dispatches* and William Vollmann's *An Afghanistan Picture Show*, which engage with the Vietnam War and the war in Afghanistan against the USSR, draw out the increasing alienation between the superstate (that wages the war) and the citizen (who bears the bodily marks of war). Joan Didion and Joe Sacco, in their work on El Salvador (*Salvador*) and Bosnia (*Safe Area Goražde*), track conflicts in which governments, either aided or ignored by the U.S., attack their own citizens, essentially stripping them of the rights to which they purportedly may lay claim.

Herr concerns himself with U.S. marines, exploring the ethical conundrum produced by the unequal status of the journalist and the soldier. Vollmann, Sacco, and Didion, however, draw on discourses of global citizenship in order to represent the other outside the nation whose suffering is often implicitly supported by the U.S. state. Vollmann lives with the Afghani mujahideen who are engaged in organized rebellion against the invading Soviets; Sacco becomes friends with Bosnian Muslims who are the targets of Serbian violence; and Didion attempts a representation of Salvadoran civilians under the attack of their own government. These last three texts draw out a practical incompatibility between global citizenship and national citizenship. Identification with or representation of the suffering other, for example, often violates the aims and actions of the U.S. state, which is exposed as violent and repressive. At other times, the global citizen is saddled with responsibility for the failures of the nation.

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In the fourth chapter, I examine the ways Herr, Sacco, and Vollmann attempt to decenter the citizen-witness by engaging with and indicating the limits of altruistic hospitality. With decolonization and the rise of the superstate as an implicit backdrop to the narratives, the ideal of human rights takes precedence over a violent national citizenship, supported by the conventional television media. Such modes of representation, they point out, dehumanize those who bear the brunt of state violence. As a means of forwarding a more ethical alternative to such modes of civic representation, these writers seek to create space within their works for the stories of the other. By “address[ing] oneself to the other in the words of the other” (Derrida *FL* 245), these journalists engage in acts of discursive hospitality. I align such projects with Emmanuel Levinas’s work on ethical substitution, in which the ethical self recognizes the inherent violence existence enacts on the other, and substitutes the self for the other in an act of radical hospitality.

Herr, Vollmann, and Sacco attempt to perform discursive hospitality, but at the core of each project is the deliberate attempt to undermine altruism. The authors variously critique altruism’s foundation in a heroic and masculinist notion of self; upend the scene of hospitality; and indicate the limits of witnessing in a series of striking scenes that point out their own refusals to embrace ethical substitution. Sacco posits his refusal to be held responsible for the crimes of the American state (here, the erasure of genocide). Vollmann’s limit case is imagined as the choice between solidarity and death. Herr performs the conundrum Vollmann imagines: in a scene where he is almost killed, for example, he indicates that in war the ultimate ethical substitution is suicide. Such scenes emphasize the bodily and moral weakness of the citizen-witness. In this, their

works are aligned with Agee's. Yet, by refusing to reincorporate their failures into a heroic project of idyllic communality or democracy, these texts (ironically) succeed where Agee's does not. As I ultimately argue, these scenes craft a new mode of ethics which points to the way political hierarchy within the U.S. and between states undermines altruism.

Chapter Five examines the extension of this kind of ethical project by considering Joan Didion's *Salvador*, which describes her two-week visit to El Salvador during the military dictatorship's imprisonment and slaughter of dissidents and other civilians. In an act of what I call "negative testimony," Didion performs the way that massive and pervasive state power – on the part of both the Salvadoran military government and the U.S. government under Reagan – "empties out" the testimony of the voluntary citizen-witness.³⁹ *Salvador* posits a general inability to draw legally productive meaning from the witnessing of the dead body, suggesting that such an inability is produced by linguistic and visual structures that limit indexicality and parade the empty symbol. The book speaks to the emptying out of not only citizen-witnessing, but also of the democratic ideal.

In response to this dystopia of signification, *Salvador* mobilizes the indexicality of the signifier, using seemingly simple description to point to the collusion between the so-called democratic state (the U.S.) and the military dictatorship (El Salvador). While her project wavers at times, Didion carves out a new positionality. By speaking from an impossible position, she produces (and models) a new one: that of the potential citizen who pushes toward a democratic future not yet in place.

³⁹ The term "emptying out" is drawn from Giorgio Agamben's *Means Without End*.

Together, these narratives theorize the civic possibilities of observation and representation. The authors imagine that their embodied experiences can offer access to the hidden truths of the modern state, and meditate on the role of the citizen within such a context. If the authors variously accept or deny modern faiths in the state, vision, and representation, they all place their trust in the text itself and imagine its circulation – sometimes idealistically – as spurring the continuation of political critique and production.

I end the dissertation by returning to the citizen-witnessing of the blogosphere with which I began this introduction. If such a project revitalizes a way of thinking about civic practice strikingly akin to late-nineteenth-century modes of thinking, it has not yet accommodated the cautionary critique of state power found in later writers. Ultimately, I will call for a ceaseless and self-reflexive critique that contextualizes not only witnessing and representation, but circulation as well. I will suggest that we need to recognize and address the ways “democratic” writing projects of all sorts may yet be informed and/or constrained by the political, economic and military structures of the contemporary world.

Chapter One

Civic Adventures: Witnessing and Good Citizenship at the Turn of the Century

In *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*, Michael Schudson claims that “good citizenship” is imagined and manifested in varying ways depending on social, political, and historical context. He delineates four modes of good citizenship in the United States, ranging from the “rule by gentlemen” of the late eighteenth century, in which the ability to inhabit the role of the good citizen was limited by social position, to the current “age of rights” in which ideas of citizenship are shaped by notions of “entitlement” or “victimization” (8). Good citizenship as practiced at the end of the 19th century is manifested in the figure Schudson calls the “informed citizen,” a figure he aligns with the Progressive Era’s attack on political parties and associates with notions of privacy and rationality (9). “Progressive Era politics,” Schudson writes, “instructed people in a citizenship of intelligence rather than passionate intensity” (182).⁴⁰

I would like to trace the contours of a related figure, emerging at the same time: the citizen-witness. If in common parlance the “citizen” of such a term is meant to indicate a difference from a professional or official witness, here I use the term in a different way. I allude in my use of the term to an active, not a passive, citizenship: in other words, to “good” citizenship. The citizen-witness is good because, like Schudson’s

⁴⁰ The ability to access information had been encouraged already by the steady increase in libraries, discussion groups and newspaper circulation from the 1790s on. Such developments, Schudson writes, meant that “[k]nowledge was being modernized – more secular than sacred, more timely than timeless, and more related to regional, national, and international communities of print than to locale” (119). The modernization project, as indicated by the proliferation of the penny papers in the 1830s, stretched across class boundaries.

“informed citizen,” he or she is committed to transforming (or reforming) the public space to more closely fit a democratic ideal through the acquisition of “information.” In order to produce such transformation, the writer (often a journalist or activist) observes and documents the social sphere, especially urban scenes of poverty, corruption, and violence. The writings of the citizen-witness are meant to influence directly the reform of the flawed but perfectible state; their underpinning logic is that public awareness might lead either directly or indirectly to institutional or communal social reform. By informing other interested citizens of such challenges to democratic ideals, such a figure embodies, and encourages the reader to become, a good citizen.⁴¹

The most well-known early citizen-witnessing texts written by American authors are Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), Nellie Bly’s *Ten Days in a Mad-House* (1887), and Jack London’s *The People of the Abyss* (1903). Riis exposes the conditions of New York City’s tenements so as to urge their reform. Bly and London “go undercover” to expose the living conditions of, respectively, New York’s Blackwell Island Insane Asylum and London’s East End. Working from these canonical narratives, I will outline some of the major tropes of the genre, which are variously taken up, negotiated, or undermined in later citizen-witnessing texts, namely: competing visions, exploration/the tour, the democratic ideal, and the sensational body.

Schudson argues that the differing reformist platforms of the Mugwumps and the Progressives “helped to create a new model citizenship that made it both more difficult

⁴¹ Mark Freeman and Gillian Nelson call such figures “social explorers.” I choose to use the term “citizen-witness” instead because it taps into a variety of alternative discourses, discussions, and debates that I find helpful and provocative (see Introduction).

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and less interesting to be a ‘good citizen’” in the voting booth (147). This may well be true. The rhetorical appeal of citizen-witnessing narratives, however, counters such a view. The practice of good citizenship in these texts is imagined as a thrilling, heroic and worthwhile adventure in civic voyeurism. Such narratives imagine a harmonious and politically idyllic relation between the individual, the ethical, the rhetorical, and the political.

Competing Visions

Citizen-witnessing texts are both skeptical of and reliant upon the ability of vision to uncover social truths. They posit a distinction between conventional vision, which hides the truth, and the vision of the citizen-witness, which uncovers it. For example, near the end of *How the Other Half Lives*, Jacob Riis notes: “To get at the pregnant facts of tenement-house life one must look beneath the surface. Many an apple has a fair skin and a rotten core” (197). What “looks” fair, he warns, is instead “rotten.” Indeed, he writes, “the worst tenements in New York do not, as a rule, look bad” (197). Jack London suggests similarly that mainstream vision either erases or avoids the material conditions of the slums. *People of the Abyss* suggests that the spectatorial practices of “well-fed, optimistic sightseers” are superficial and erase real social problems: “The City of Dreadful Monotony the East End is often called, especially by well-fed, optimistic sightseers, who look over the surface of things and are merely shocked by the intolerable sameness and meanness of it all. If the East End is worthy of no worse title than The City of Dreadful Monotony, and if working people are unworthy of variety and beauty and surprise, it would not be such a bad place in which to live”

(211). The surface/depth distinction in such texts suggests that reality is not so easily accessible to the “well-fed” middle-upper class “sightseer.” Social relations, it seems, position the privileged spectator in the role of the tourist, incapable of anything other than superficial, “optimistic” seeing.

Bly similarly suggests that privileged mainstream vision hides injustice, staging the difference between vision from the outside and vision from the inside: “I was to . . . find out and describe its inside workings, which are always, so effectually hidden by white-capped nurses, as well as by bolts and bars, from the knowledge of the public” (n.pag.). She posits that a new mode of vision-from-the-inside is important not only because conventional vision disengages the spectator, but because it actively mis-sees. In a passage that takes place soon after she masquerades as a “poor, unfortunate crazy girl” in the attempt to enter the mad-house, Bly plays out this hypothesis. As she begins an evening in a “Temporary Home for Females,” the assistant matron approaches her:

“What is wrong with you? Have you some sorrow or trouble?”

“No,” I said, almost stunned at the suggestion. “Why?”

“Oh, because,” she said, womanlike, “I can see it in your face. It tells the story of a great trouble.”

“Yes, everything is so sad,” I said, in a haphazard way, which I had intended to reflect my craziness.

If here, Bly mobilizes the misperception of the matron in order to get into the mad-house, as the narrative continues she intimates not only that the structures of the social space (not just the insane asylum, but the “Temporary Home for Women” and the justice system) rely on fundamentally flawed practices of recognition, but that such practices

deliberately conspire to promote the continuation of the system.⁴² After she is incarcerated, Bly claims, “I made no attempt to keep up the assumed *role* of insanity. I talked and acted just as I do in ordinary life. Yet strange to say, the more sanely I talked and acted the crazier I was thought to be.”

London, Riis and Bly describe as mainstream a mode of vision known as Cartesian perspectivalism. “Cartesian perspectivalism,” Karen Jacobs writes, “joins Renaissance notions of perspective with Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality,” to produce “the dominant scopic regime of the modern era” (10). A Cartesian model of vision offers the illusion of objectivity, in which, as Jacobs argues, attention to the body of the observer is decreased even as the body of the observed remains the object of the gaze: the observer must see “reviled corporeality in the Other, whose embodiment at once qualifies it as an object of knowledge and disqualifies it from epistemological possibility and subjective complexity itself” (1-2). The key technological manifestation of such a logic is the *camera obscura*, which Jonathan Crary claims “decorporealizes” vision and “confirms or promotes the illusion of the observer as “a free sovereign individual and a privatized subject confined in a quasi-domestic space, cut off from a public exterior world” (39). The separation between the observer and the observed, where the observed becomes an objectified body and the observer becomes disembodied, critics argue, becomes a dominant conception about the way vision works in the modern era. Mary Louise Pratt and David Spurr, for example, have drawn on Michel Foucault’s work on

⁴² Visual misperception is matched by a flaw in institutional hearing. When Bly responds to a police officer with a “a little accent,” the officer claims: ““That girl is from the west . . . She has a western accent.”” Bly claims that “Some one else who had been listening to the brief dialogue here asserted that he had lived south and that my accent was southern, while another officer was positive it was eastern.”

surveillance to define vision as a means by which colonial spectators reassured themselves of their “mastery” over the people and places they observed. Colonial vision, according to Spurr, produced an Orientalist fantasy grounded in vision that did not acknowledge the returning gazes of those seen. Turn-of-the-century citizen-witnesses similarly suggest that the dominance of such a mode of vision – if it allows access to the sight of the “public exterior world” – produces a misrecognition of the world that has dangerous socio-political consequences. These writers seem to align themselves with critiques of Cartesian perspectivalism in literature,⁴³ modes of representation, spectatorial practices,⁴⁴ and modern visual technologies.⁴⁵

⁴³ Jamaica Kincaid and Toni Morrison have featured in their fiction and non-fiction a psychological splitting encouraged by the violent objectifying gaze of racist structures and persons (otherwise theorized by W.E.B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon). Karen Jacobs locates a challenge in modernist writing: such writings “denaturalize” Cartesian spectatorship and emphasize subjectivity, indicating “diminished faith” in “the capacity of vision to deliver reliable knowledge, as they critique the forms of violence that vision inevitably seems to entail” (3).

⁴⁴ In anthropology, participant observation, “in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture” (DeWalt and DeWalt 1) participates as well in an attack on objective, distanced vision. More recent writers have reclaimed visual power for social groups that have traditionally been relegated to the object position. bell hooks in *Black Looks*, for example, argues that the gaze be harnessed by the colonized: “The ‘gaze’ has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally. Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that ‘looks’ to document, one that is oppositional. In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating ‘awareness’ politicizes ‘looking’ relations – one learns to look a certain way in order to resist” (116). This approach intersects as well with recent theories and practices of

Despite their critiques of conventional social vision, none of the above books suggests abandoning vision itself; rather, they forward a different and more reliable kind of observation, one that might be described as civic witnessing. London describes his seeing in spatial terms which suggest going underneath the surface of things: “I went down into the under-world of London with an attitude of mind which I may best liken to that of the explorer. I was open to be convinced by the evidence of my eyes, rather than by the teachings of those who had not seen, or by the words of those who had seen and gone before” (vii). Similarly, while Riis cautions in certain parts of the book against assuming that appearance represents reality, in others, he suggests a direct link between the two. Indeed, in his reflections on his explorations of the “lower half,” Riis writes: “I have aimed to tell the truth as I saw it” (218). Bly as well marks her exploration of the asylum’s “inside workings” in which she “experienced much, and saw and heard more of the treatment accorded to this helpless class of our population.” Bly, Riis, and London suggest that this different kind of seeing – the kind that “looks below the surface,” examines the “lower half,” or goes inside – provides an authoritative knowledge lacking in mainstream visions of the social sphere.

Bly, London and Riis attach special significance to their sensing, perceiving bodies. Bly not only sees, but “hear[s]” and “experience[s]” the madhouse. London, similarly, is “convinced by the evidence of [his] eyes.” Riis emphasizes that the truth is as he “saw it.” Such statements locate the body of the citizen-witness as the center of

“sousveillance,” or “looking from below,” in performance studies and social activism (see Mann, Nolan and Wellman).

⁴⁵ Crary, for example, has located a challenge to Cartesian vision in the stereoscope, which he argues refigures observation in a way that confounds subject and object, internal and external.

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spectatorial and experiential authenticity, and necessitate the citizen-witnessing narrative as the key means for imagining the democratic sphere. Such a practice engages the empathetic bodily response of the reader, asking him or her to allow the citizen-witness to stand in the reader's place: seeing, hearing, and experiencing for the reader.

Lest the observational practices of the citizen-witness fall prey to the same kind of blindness with which such texts charge conventional vision, these narratives buttress their claims with visual images, namely the illustration, the engraving and the photograph.⁴⁶ The evidentiary usage of visual technologies like the photograph was, as John Tagg points out, "bound up with the emergence of new institutions and new practices of observation and record-keeping" in fields such as criminology, anthropology, sociology, psychiatry and public health (*BR* 5). Interestingly, then, Bly's *Ten Days in a Mad-House* critiques the insane asylum while abiding by its logic. Both the *New York World's* original publication (1887) and the Ian L. Munro book publication (n.d.) of *Ten Days* expose the utility of visual images in buttressing the testimony of the citizen-witness. Accompanying illustrations depict, in the first part of the text, Bly herself writing at her desk, "practic[ing] insanity at home," sharing a meal at the Temporary Home for Women and encountering the legal and psychiatric establishments. These illustrations help the reader imagine Bly's transition and place her in specific locations and in contact with specific people. Once she arrives at the asylum, the nature of the illustrations changes, picturing the exteriors and interiors of the asylum. Such illustrations are alternatively

⁴⁶ Such texts' reliance on photography ends up reinscribing Cartesian perspectivalism, suggesting that their critique is relegated only to the particular vantage of the perspective, not the notion of distance or objectivity.

specific and general; they visualize the details of particular physical spaces, like Bly's bedroom and the reception-room, and give a representative sense of common situations, like "quiet inmates out for a walk." The women in the photograph titled "quiet inmates out for a walk" lack any distinguishing facial features or differences in dress. In such a way, they are static representations that, by linking her narrative to ongoing, physical structures and practices, give the sense that the situation Bly describes is reliable and unchanging. This type of illustration strengthens the narrative's appeal to truth and longevity.

If *How the Other Half Lives* (like Bly's *Ten Days*) buttresses Riis's narration with drawings, it also draws upon the most conventionally iconic and indexical visual art: photography. Riis's photographic gaze explores both the interiors of the tenements and "bird's eye views" of the different neighborhoods in order to comment on the nature of the people who live within them. On the first page of the first chapter, Riis begins to describe the "rotten" inside at the core of the tenements, the rooms. He quotes at length from a legislative report: "*large rooms were partitioned into several smaller ones, without regard to light or ventilation, the rate of rent being lower in proportion to space or height from the street; and they soon became filled from cellar to garret with a class of tenantry living from hand to mouth*" (9, original italics). He claims that "It was thus the dark bedroom, prolific of untold depravities, came into the world" (10). Here sexual deviancy (or rottenness) is produced by a crowded indoor space.

An included photograph, "Lodgers in a Crowded Bayard Street Tenement – 'Five Cents a Spot,'" only increases this sense of crowding and deviance. At least six men are piled into the bedroom in various poses and states of undress. The photograph itself

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suggests a sense of crowding. It is as if the frame parallels the space; it literally cannot contain the men. One man's body is sliced in half by one edge of the photograph, while blankets, a stove, shelves of pots and pans, sacks, and clothing clutter the other edges. Most of the pictures included in the book depict similarly cramped or busy scenes, often truncating human bodies. The photograph suggests that these conditions produce an unhealthy voyeuristic intimacy. Many of the men are sleeping, while the camera captures the spread legs of a man on the top bunk. In Riis's moralistic terms, tenements "touch the family life with deadly moral contagion" (6); this photograph both suggests and participates in an extra-familial intimacy. Photography thus confirms Riis's narration.

London's *People of the Abyss* represents the most explicit doubling of signification, by featuring photographs with captions taken directly from his written text. In Chapter Six, for example, London writes: "The shadow of Christ's Church falls across Spitalfields Garden, and in the shadow of Christ's Church, at three o'clock in the afternoon, I saw a sight I never wish to see again" (61). He describes how a number of homeless women and men, in "a welter of rags and filth, of all manner of loathsome skin diseases, open sores, bruises, grossness, indecency, leering monstrosities, and bestial faces," were attempting to sleep on the benches, because they were prevented by law from sleeping in such places at night (62). The passage is matched by a two page photographic spread, seemingly documenting the exact scene London describes and captioned with a direct quote from the written text: "In the shadow of Christ's Church, I saw a sight I never wish to see again" (60-61). The grotesque horror of "a sight I never wish to see again" is transmitted from narrator to reader, who purportedly witnesses directly the sight London otherwise narrates. The density of meaning produced by such

an explicit match between photograph and narrative extends logically to the entire text. London's vision has been reaffirmed by the reader's vision; the body of one confirms the authentic narration of the other. The narrative of the citizen-witness is not just imbued with an authority derived from the seeing body but is doubled, or made dense, by the authenticity of a separately produced image. The indexical superiority of civic vision is supported by visual technologies that seemingly exhibit a direct relation to social reality.

These narratives imagine the witnessing of democracy in conventional aesthetic terms, drawing on the affective charge of well-established aesthetic categories to heighten the reader's investment in social transformation. As Alan Trachtenberg writes, during the 1890s "Social conflict was most visible in cities – the contrast between slums and the ostentatious palaces of the very rich; new forms of recreation, night life, and pleasure challenging older moral values; women more visible in workplace and the public realm. . . To outsiders like Riis, the slums seemed a chaos of alien tongues, strange costumes and customs, foods, habits of child-rearing – a frightening caldron of poverty and despair" (170). While works of civic witness tied the beautiful and the sublime to delusional mainstream spectatorship, they emphasized the grotesque nature of the city.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Most theories of the "grotesque" are grounded on the same basic definition, based on the word's etymology. As both Wolfgang Kayser and Mikhail Bakhtin discuss, "grottesca" were ornamental forms found in Roman caves (cave = "grotta"), and were characterized by the visual intermixing of plant, animal and human forms. They and others typically interpret the grotesque body as involving the liberal combination of disparate elements (animals and humans, machines and animals, plants and humans, etc.), exaggeration and excess. The two theorists, however, differ on whether they see in the grotesque primarily "an extreme lightness and freedom of artistic fantasy, a gay, almost laughing, libertinage" (Bakhtin 32), or "something ominous and sinister in the face of a world totally different from the familiar one" (Kayser 21).

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Before he enters the East End, for example, London describes himself as being overwhelmed by linking the streets to Kant's most famous example of the sublime: the public space is imagined as a "sea, lapping about me and threatening to well up and over me" (10).⁴⁸ He must overcome his fear in order to enter the space and document the physical grotesquerie ("loathsome skin diseases, open sores, bruises, grossness, indecency, leering monstrosities, and bestial faces") of Christ Church's shadow. Riis's comment about the social sphere that "Many an apple has a fair skin and a rotten core" (197) draws on the distinction between the beautiful and the grotesque. In these texts, the beautiful and the sublime are imagined as an equivalent to visual false consciousness, shielding access to the grotesque, which is aligned with social truth. The grotesque visions of the citizen witness are designed to appeal to the reader's embodied emotions by rousing visceral affects of disgust or horror. In turn, physical revulsion is imagined to lead to the commitment on the part of the reader to transform such conditions.

In *People of the Abyss*, the grotesquerie of the social space is intimately intertwined with a Social Darwinist landscape, as London reads in the move from the

Bernard McElroy supports Kayser's approach, positing that the modern grotesque "is found in the fears, guilts, fantasies, and aberrations of individual psychic life. The modern grotesque is internal, not infernal, and its originator is recognized as neither god nor devil but man himself" (21). In the late-nineteenth-century works of Riis and London, the grotesque becomes a cautionary aesthetic of a dystopic social space, one meant to excite horror and fear in readers.

⁴⁸ In *A Critique of Judgment*, Kant describes the sublime as being "found in a formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of it *boundlessness* is represented, and yet its totality is also present to thought" (82, original emphasis). As one of his examples of the sublime, he offers up the poetic vision of the ocean (111-2).

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country to the city the literal and inevitable degeneration of the human body and mind.⁴⁹

London consistently appeals to the concepts of survival of the fittest and degeneration. In *People of the Abyss*, the material conditions of the East End damage the “naturally” strong health of the human being:

the city life of London is so utterly unnatural that the average workman or workwoman cannot stand it. Mind and body are sapped by the undermining influences ceaselessly at work. Moral and physical stamina are broken, and the good workman, fresh from the soil, becomes in the first city generation a poor workman; and by the second city generation, devoid of push and go and initiative, and actually unable physically to perform the labor his father did, he is well on the way to the shambles at the bottom of the Abyss. (45-46)

⁴⁹ In this emphasis, he was in step not only with the general zeitgeist in the U.S., but also with American socialist thinking at the time. As Mark Pittenger has documented, unlike Marx and Engels, who appreciated Darwin’s work but did not see it as directly applicable to the social sphere, American socialist intellectuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries repeatedly took up both Darwin’s and Spencer’s work to authorize and naturalize their politics. Pittenger shows how between 1870 and 1890, American socialists “tended to embrace a Christian, teleological, broadly Spencerian view: if societies were essentially organisms that became ever more interdependent, then the trend toward organization and consolidation in American capitalism could be seen as a harbinger of socialism” (AS 10). In the early twentieth century, he writes, evolutionary thought was adapted, not abandoned: these later Marxists, “promoted the scientific education of workers and strove to reframe current evolutionary thinking to fit a revolutionary and usually a materialist world-view” (AS 10). London, like many other socialists of the time, proudly subscribed to evolutionary thinking.

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Here, the economic and political system produces and reproduces inequality; London writes: “It is incontrovertible that the children grow up into rotten adults, without virility or stamina, a weak-kneed, narrow-chested, listless breed, that crumples up and goes down in the brute struggle for life with the invading hordes from the country” (47). In this depiction of the nefarious effects of city life, London does not necessarily counter the assumptions about the poor that uphold social segregation. By virtue of being poor, the poor have been stripped of their strength. If they are produced by the system, the end point lies not just in the prevention of the reproduction of the system but the prevention of the reproduction of the population: “And day by day I became convinced that not only is it unwise, but it is criminal for the people of the Abyss to marry. They are the stones by the builder rejected. There is no place for them in the social fabric, while all the forces of society drive them downward till they perish. At the bottom of the Abyss they are feeble, besotted, and imbecile. If they reproduce, the life is so cheap that perforce it perishes of itself” (40). The poor in this formulation are hopelessly degenerate; they are not “the fittest,” and cannot survive.

Such descriptions of the degenerate, physically inferior poor are paired with images of animality and subhumanity, as evidenced in as passage in which London describes himself as a “mark” in the urban jungle:

At times, between keepers, these males looked at me sharply, hungrily, *gutter*-wolves that they were, and I was afraid of their hands, of their naked hands, as one may be afraid of the paws of a gorilla. They reminded me of gorillas. Their bodies were small, ill-shaped, and squat. There were no swelling muscles, no abundant thews and wide-spreading shoulders.

They exhibited, rather, an elemental economy of nature, such as the cave-men must have exhibited. But there was strength in those meagre bodies, the ferocious, primordial strength to clutch and gripe and tear and rend. When they spring upon their human prey they are known even to bend the victim backward and double its body till the back is broken. They possess neither conscience nor sentiment, and they will kill for a half-sovereign, without fear or favor, if they are given but half a chance. They are a new species, a breed of city savages. The streets and houses, alleys and courts, are their hunting grounds. As valley and mountain are to the natural savage, street and building are valley and mountain to them. The slum is their jungle, and they live and prey in the jungle. (284-285)

London focuses on the mothers of these urban beasts who “held carouse in every boozing ken, slatternly, unkempt, bleary-eyed and tousled, leering and gibbering, overspilling with foulness and corruption” (286). Like his contemporaries Riis and Crane for whom, as Mark Seltzer writes, “the slums are embodied in the body of a monstrously productive mother” (100), in *People of the Abyss* these mothers personify the gross sexuality and animality of the streets.

This discourse, by positioning the poor as half beast, half “savage,” is quite clearly aligned with colonial era travel narratives which also position the to-be-colonized other as less than human and thus in need of colonial rule. Here London’s rhetoric attempts to convince the reader of the justness of his argument on the basis of fear of contamination. In this fantasy, the poor transform the surrounding space of civilization (the “street and building”) into dangerous natural landscapes (“hunting grounds” and

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“valley and mountain”), endangering the normative middle-class human. Not only do the poor degenerate, but they in turn degenerate the social space. The Golden Rule loses its force; rather, readers are meant to imagine themselves as “marks” in the urban jungle. The poor become figures which, in their dangerous animality, form a counterpoint to the good middle-class citizen.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ If in London’s narrative the good citizen-witness is seen as immune to such environmental contaminations, Stephen Crane’s fictionalized account of a young down-and-out, “An Experiment in Misery,” does not provide such immunity. Crane’s short story tracks the ominous changes that occur in the young man’s psyche over the course of one short night spent as a homeless man. The original version of the story begins by establishing the citizen-witnessing premise:

Two men stood regarding a tramp. ‘I wonder how he feels,’ said one, reflectively. ‘I suppose he is homeless, friendless, and has, at the most, only a few cents in his pocket. And if this is so, I wonder how he feels.’ The other being the elder, spoke with an air of authoritative wisdom. ‘You can tell nothing of it unless you are in that condition yourself. It is idle to speculate about it from this distance.’ ‘I suppose so,’ said the younger man, and then he added as from an inspiration: ‘I think I’ll try it. Rags and tatters, you know, a couple of dimes, and hungry, too, if possible. Perhaps I could discover his point of view or something near it.’

‘Well, you might,’ said the other, and from those words begins this veracious narrative of an experiment in misery. The youth went to the studio of an artist friend, who, from his store, rigged him out in an aged suit and a brown derby hat that had been made long years before. And then the youth went forth to try to eat as the tramp may eat, and sleep as the wanderers sleep.

By the end of the narrative, the young man begins to identify with the poor, and “confessed himself an outcast, and his eyes from under the lowered rim of his hat began to glance guiltily, wearing the criminal expression that comes with certain convictions.” Pittenger argues that in the nineteenth century “For all

Exploration

Citizen-witnesses at the turn of the century depict grotesque, dangerous and out-of-control spaces, under the assumption that uncovering the injustices associated with such spaces will encourage democratically minded readers to work towards changing those conditions. They posit a distinction between an inadequate mainstream or elite vision and their more reliable photographic vision, which sees beneath the surface of things. Citizen-witness sought to draw in the reader by drawing on embodied affects like disgust and horror. To make such an effect even more powerful, they utilized the trope of the tour or the exploration to ask the reader to imagine her or himself in the place of or alongside the witness.

In these texts, the citizen-witness often takes on the role of a tour guide or a sympathetic undercover agent guiding the reader through an unfamiliar social landscape. For example, as Luc Sante points out, Riis structures his narrative like a tour, employing direct address: "Leaving the Elevated Railroad where it dives under the Brooklyn Bridge at Franklin Square, scarce a dozen steps will take us where we wish to go. With its rush and roar echoing yet in our ears, we have turned the corner from prosperity to poverty. We stand upon the domain of the tenement" (26). Similarly, London and Bly structure their narratives as adventures; in theirs, however, they must modify their bodies and

investigators, there was the possibility of coming to understand working-class life and psychology, but also the more disturbing potential of being drawn fully into it – of 'going native' among a population often thought of as primitive or as devolving toward savagery" (43). Indeed, in this short story, the citizen-witness's "criminal" expression suggests that his transformation is not to be celebrated, but rather to be feared.

actions in order to access off-limits spaces. *Ten Days in a Mad-House* and *People of the Abyss* belong to a popular subgenre of citizen-witnessing: undercover witnessing.⁵¹ As I will later discuss, they walk their readers step-by-step through the process of disguising their bodies before describing their entry to specific social spaces.

Such spaces, these narratives suggest, require guidance: they are not easily accessible to the middle-class white reader. For example, as Jean Marie Lutes explains about “stunt reporters” like Bly: “Stunt reporters visited opium dens, joined workers who rolled tobacco for cigarettes, went begging on the streets in rags, sought illegal abortions,

⁵¹ Bly’s popularity spawned a journalism of disguise by “girl stunt reporters” such as Nell Nelson, Winifred Black, and Elizabeth Jordan (see Jean Marie Lutes and Karen Roggenkamp). London, by adopting the dress and manner of an out-of-work seaman in order to explore working-class or underclass life, fits into a genre called, variously, “down-and-outing,” “slumming,” “immersion journalism,” and “class transvestism” (see the work of Mark Pittenger, Carolyn Betensky, Cecilia Tichi, and Eric Schocket.) Schocket has suggested that such investigations flourished at the turn of the century in part because they wouldn’t have been possible before: “Before the large-scale poverty, urban migration, and immigration of the 1890s, journalists and writers would not have been able to ‘pass’ with such apparent ease, since many of the unemployed and workers lived in ‘knowable communities’ where impersonation would have been difficult” (116). In “A World of Difference,” Pittenger claims that cross-class passing narratives flourished during the 1890s due in large part to “the longer-term processes of nineteenth-century industrialization: an expanding discourse on class relations and poverty, and mounting anxieties about the stability of class identity” (31). Pittenger points out, however, that some precursors can be found in the mid-1800s, such as Richard Dana, who often disguised himself as a sailor in order “to explore such rough urban terrain as New York City’s notorious Five Points” (55, note 15). In the use of the socially motivated disguise, too, undercover citizen-witnessing texts were not without precedent. The mid-nineteenth century also saw the publication and circulation of both slave passing narratives and stories of women passing as men to fight in the Civil War.

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and fainted on the street to gain admittance to public hospitals” (218). “Down-and-outers” like London “lived and worked in disguise among clerks and waitresses, factory laborers, itinerant workers, beggars, and tramps, in order to observe and to write about them” (Pittenger “WD” 27). The observed spaces (asylums, opium dens, the illegal abortionists’ offices, public hospitals, factories, and the streets) were locales that were either physically or behaviorally off limits to the genteel reader. Some locations were inherently associated with danger or illegality; for others (like the streets or the factories), the citizen-witness in his or her narrative emphasized or produced a sense of danger. The restricted nature of the spaces was meant to pique an at-times prurient interest in middle-class readers about what kinds of things might happen within them.

The off-limits quality of the spaces was produced by and contributed to a social invisibility and public disinterest which the journalists purportedly meant to counter by making the spaces – and the experiences of those within them – hypervisible. Of the three writers, London most playfully engages with this invisibility. In *People of the Abyss*, the East End is defined by its lack of spatial distinctness; when London asks his friends for information on the area, they reply: “‘But we know nothing of the East End. It is over there, somewhere.’ And they waved their hands vaguely in the direction where the sun on rare occasions may be seen to rise” (2-3). His cab-driver similarly muddles about when London asks him to drive to the East End: “‘To the East End, anywhere. Go on.’ The hansom pursued an aimless way for several minutes, then came to a puzzled stop. The aperture above my head was uncovered, and the cabman peered down perplexedly at me. ‘I say,’ he said, ‘wot plyce yer wanten go?’” (5). The “vague” location of the East End is coupled with a nebulous sense of inaccessibility to the privileged middle and

upper classes. In another humorously staged and hyperbolically narrated scene, London goes to Cook's travel agency to book a tour, only to hit yet another brick wall:

But O Cook, O Thomas Cook & Son, pathfinders and trail-clearers, living sign-posts to all the world and bestowers of first aid to bewildered travellers--unhesitatingly and instantly, with ease and celerity, could you send me to Darkest Africa or Innermost Thibet, but to the East End of London, barely a stone's throw distant from Ludgate Circus, you know not the way! 'You can't do it, you know,' said the human emporium of routes and fares at Cook's Cheapside branch. 'It is so--ahem--so unusual.' (3)⁵²

It is clear that London's inability to secure directions to the East End is meant to reflect a wider social discomfort with the very presence of the slums. For London's middle-upper class friends and their travel agents to acknowledge the spatial location of the slums

⁵² In their positing of off-limits spaces, these narratives draw on the conventions of another genre popular in the nineteenth century: colonial adventure narratives. The image of unexplored territory (expressed most famously in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*) is manifested in a wide network of colonial narratives featuring the glorification and eroticization of the exploration of supposedly empty spaces. Indeed, London's trip to Cook's, and his comparison between the East End and "Darkest Africa or Innermost Thibet" align the slums with the most traditional destinations of colonial adventurers; London quite literally models himself after the colonial explorer. Along with the off-limits space, another central trope of the colonial adventure narrative is the disguise; one of the most famous of these texts was Richard Burton's *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al Madinah and Meccah* (1855-56), in which he masqueraded as a "wandering Darwaysh" in order to participate in a pilgrimage to Mecca, a space restricted to Muslims.

would be to acknowledge their existence. Not only can the slums not be accessed; in an inversion of Marx's famous decree, they must not be represented.⁵³

Bly's, Riis's, and London's depictions of the conditions of such spaces ultimately critique the failure of democratic practice. All describe spaces of injustice and inequality developed within seeming democracies, places where people are ejected from the practice of democracy. Such spaces feature an explicit lack or failure of representation in front of social institutions such as the law and the medical establishment.

The off-limits spaces described by citizen-witnesses are often marked either explicitly or implicitly by both class and race. For example, Riis's descriptions of New York's tenements are categorized by race and nation, both of which are posited as producing the physical characteristics of the spaces. In his description of Chinatown, for example, Riis notes that "Chinatown as a spectacle is disappointing. Next-door neighbor to the Bend, it has little of its outdoor stir and life, none of its gaily-colored rags or picturesque filth and poverty" (73). This dullness is paralleled by an earlier description of the characteristics of this racialized "type": "The Chinaman does not rise at all; here, as at home, he simply remains stationary" (25). He adds to this description elaborate representations of the parts of town where the Italians, the Bohemians, and the Jews live, among others. These typological descriptions, of course, parallel common ethnographic techniques of the time that derived behaviors and qualities from seemingly static racial categories; they also suggest that the inside and the outside (personality and behavior,

⁵³ London's suggestion that Cook's has no knowledge of the slums is clearly a rhetorical device; in fact, as is currently the case in contemporary tourism, "slum tours" were a popular middle-class diversion in the late nineteenth century.

persons and their environments, the tenements and the rest of the city) correspond to one another.

Bly's asylum and London's East End are more subtly racialized. Pointing out the vulnerability of immigrant women to being committed, Bly notes the way racial and national differences are pathologized. As she is escorted through the streets with policemen, she speculates that "my companions looked upon me with expressions of pity, evidently believing I was a foreigner, an emigrant or something of the sort." She discusses how in the courtroom as well she is explicitly marked as "foreign": "After we were seated there Judge Duffy came in and asked me if my home was in Cuba. 'Yes,' I replied, with a smile. 'How did you know?'" She encourages this misconception by "speaking with a little accent" and referring to herself as "Nellie Moreno." The assumption is, therefore, that the asylum is populated by women who, due to racial, national and class marginalization, are more vulnerable to institutional commitment. London focuses his attention on class distinctions rather than race. Nevertheless, the East End was at that time home to an influx of immigrants and his mobilization of the rhetoric of colonial adventure narratives reflects the racial underpinnings of his commentary.

All of the above citizen-witnesses consistently mark their narrative personae (if not their characters) as outsiders to the spaces they represent in terms of class, race and, at times, nation. They thus align themselves even more squarely with their ideal readers, as comfortable inhabitants of middle-class society. While London was a member of the working class for much of his life, for example, through comments like "the fair years and fat, which had made my skin soft and brought the nerves close to the surface," he constructs a narrative persona marked as similar to his ideal middle-class reader (13).

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Riis also aligns himself not with his fellow immigrants, but rather with the policemen who escort him around the tenements. While Bly's character assumes the positionality of an immigrant in order to point out the increased risk of incarceration immigrant women faced, as a narrator she speaks from the position of middle-class respectability.⁵⁴ Such narratives, therefore, are not only about the space of the classed and raced other, but also about the encounter between that other and the privileged citizen.

The Democratic Ideal

Citizen-witnessing texts as established in the late nineteenth century founded themselves on a deep-rooted faith in the ability of witnessing and testimony to produce social change. They reach toward a democratic future by pointing out disjunctions between democracy as imagined and practiced. Such narratives tend to take for granted – and pose as common sense – the democratic ideal. For example, London draws on a

⁵⁴ Near the beginning of her narrative, she informs the reader that “my acquaintance with the struggling poor, except my own self, was only very superficial”; indeed, one of the illustrations accompanying her exposé depicts Bly “practic[ing] insanity at home” by gazing into the mirror above a decorative vanity table topped by a large bottle of perfume. Ostensibly, her narrative is written from the durable location of “home.” Jean Marie Lutes argues that “it was the figure of Bly herself—her “modest, comely, well-dressed” appearance— that attracted interest in her case” (Lutes 222). Lutes claims that Bly never allowed her reader to forget that it was her white middle-class body at risk: “she protected her more privileged readers from the dangers of overidentification with the less fortunate segments of the urban population by carefully preserving the respectability of her physical self, by reiterating her ‘modesty’ and ‘comeliness,’ characteristics that marked her as part of a class whose members were *not* crazy, *not* poor, and *not* ethnically different” (Lutes 222).

discourse of religiously grounded human equality to appeal to his readers' sense of social equality:

The application of the Golden Rule determines that East London is an unfit place in which to live. Where you would not have your own babe live, and develop, and gather to itself knowledge of life and the things of life, is not a fit place for the babes of other men to live, and develop, and gather to themselves knowledge of life and the things of life. It is a simple thing, this Golden Rule, and all that is required. (213)

He aligns the Golden Rule here with simplicity and common sense, implying that "do unto others" is a universal rule that all can and should subscribe to. Along with this "simple" rule, he casually refers to the inhabitants of East London as "men," equivalent to the reader in all except environment. Similarly, in his description of the "upper half" responding to the demands of the "lower" ("the upper half fell to inquiring what was the matter" (5)), Riis implies that a concern for democratic conditions ought to come somewhat naturally to the population.

This imagined interest in the conditions of the other person can be read as appealing alternately to the common sense of altruism or self-interest. For example, Bly claims that after she entered the insane asylum she acted as she would otherwise, and that most of the women in the asylum were "just as sane as I was and am now myself." By showing how easily a sane woman could be committed and arguing for the equivalence between herself and her compatriots, Bly attacks the idea that the asylum operates democratically. In the face of the dangerous instability of ideals of justice, the middle-

class readers of either text are asked to support a change in inequitable conditions and institutions, because they could just as easily find themselves at the mercy of the system.

Taking for granted a public commitment to democratic ideals, many citizen-witnesses use their narratives to stage a platform for a larger social program, primarily on the left. As such, their books often include passages which call for (or recount the implementation of) specific legal or practical changes. *How the Other Half Lives*, for example, ends with a chapter entitled “How the Case Stands,” offering a proposal for transforming the state of the tenements. Riis’s description of the causes of inequitable conditions, and his solution to such, expose the capitalist underpinnings of his ideology of good citizenship: in Riis’s imagined future, private enterprise – if infused with the altruistic care of the good citizen and buttressed by the law – can transform the social system. Riis’s ultimate attack is directed at the wealthy class: “The danger to society comes not from the poverty of the tenements, but from the ill-spent wealth that reared them; that it might earn a usurious interest from a class from which ‘nothing else was expected’” (197). Riis sees social transformation as necessitating action by the informed, rational, and altruistic private citizen.

The first arena in which the citizen can act is in support of legal reform: “the law needs a much stronger and readier backing of a thoroughly enlightened public sentiment to make it as effective as it might be made” (200). The second is in the transformation by citizens of their own private actions. Riis calls on those associated with tenant houses to help counter unjust conditions. “Miss Ellen Collins in her Water Street houses” is Riis’s ultimate example of such a good citizen; he writes that “Her first effort was to let in the light in the hallways, and with the darkness disappeared, as if by

magic, the heaps of refuse that used to be piled up beside the sinks" (211). Like *How the Other Half Lives*, such a promise grounds itself on the power of vision: with increased visibility, garbage "as if by magic" (but implicitly by the tenants) disappears. Miss Collins's magic touch is accompanied implicitly by cooperation between two types of citizens – the tenant and the landlord (211): "To this end the rents were put as low as consistent with the idea of a business investment that must return a reasonable interest to be successful" (211-212). Riis's dream is that of an altruistic capitalism, grounded on mutual recognition that the sights of the tenements damage humans but at the same time concerned with a profitable "return."

Bly does not venture to meditate on the causes for the asylum's injustices, but she is openly committed to social change. She, like Riis, emphasizes the power of the law and altruistic spending to enforce social change. In fact, in her story citizen-witnessing becomes legal witnessing when she is called to testify in front of a grand jury. She claims to have great faith in the legal establishment to secure justice: "I answered the summons with pleasure, because I longed to help those of God's most unfortunate children whom I had left prisoners behind me. If I could not bring them that boon of all boons, liberty, I hoped at least to influence others to make life more bearable for them." If in the narrative her suggestions for social change are implied rather than stated, it is apparent that she forwarded such suggestions to the jury and that the law proved reliable: "I hardly expected the grand jury to sustain me, after they saw everything different from what it had been while I was there. Yet they did, and their report to the court advises all the changes made that I had proposed." In both her conclusion and in her introduction to the Ian L. Munro version of *Ten Days in a Mad-House* (printed some time after the version

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in the *World*), Bly stated proudly that her undercover venture into the asylum had led to New York City appropriating an additional million dollars per year toward improving the asylums.

Unlike Bly and Riis, who retained faith in a combination of the law, capital, and rational altruism to transform social conditions, London as a socialist advocated a more radical overhaul of the economic system. In his introduction, he claims that the system, not the generic individual is at fault for human suffering: “I measure manhood less by political aggregations than by individuals. Society grows, while political machines rack to pieces and become ‘scrap.’ For the English, so far as manhood and womanhood and health and happiness go, I see a broad and smiling future. But for a great deal of the political machinery, which at present mismanages for them, I see nothing else than the scrap heap” (viii). Yet in his more in-depth conclusion, London does suggest that the system has deleterious effects on the everyday individual: “It has built up a West End and an East End as large as the Kingdom is large, in which one end is riotous and rotten, the other end sickly and underfed” (316). Using the Inuit culture as a simultaneously idyllic and dystopic counterpoint (the Inuit are “primitive,” but are more well-fed than the “civilized” Englishmen (311)), he argues that “Civilization” produces more but benefits few. In its production of a national debt, Civilization is, he claims, “mismanaged” (314).

The logic of capitalism is perhaps parodically apparent in London’s narration, as he employs the language of business to describe both the causes and solutions for the injustice he recounts. In pragmatic and sardonic fashion, London appeals to his reader’s sense of fair play and profit-sharing: “If the 400,000 English gentlemen, ‘of no occupation,’ according to their own statement in the Census of 1881, are unprofitable, do

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away with them. Set them to work ploughing game preserves and planting potatoes. If they are profitable, continue them by all means, but let it be seen to that the average Englishman shares somewhat in the profits they produce by working at no occupation” (315). Primarily, however, he calls for an overhaul of “the management”: “It is inevitable that this management, which has grossly and criminally mismanaged, shall be swept away. Not only has it been wasteful and inefficient, but it has misappropriated the funds. Every worn-out, pasty-faced pauper, every blind man, every prison babe, every man, woman, and child whose belly is gnawing with hunger pangs, is hungry because the funds have been misappropriated by the management” (316).

In such texts, the citizen-witness takes on the role of the rational spectator who sees clearly what is going wrong in the social space, and offers up solutions to fix such difficulties. Such writers sometimes gently, sometimes forcefully suggest their own heroism. For example, in the very beginning of *Ten Days in a Mad-House* Bly asks: “Did I think I had the courage to go through such an ordeal as the mission would demand? Could I assume the characteristics of insanity to such a degree that I could pass the doctors, live for a week among the insane without the authorities there finding out that I was only a ‘chiel amang ‘em takin’ notes?’ I said I believed I could. . . . I said I could and I would. And I did.” Her reporting, therefore, is authorized in part by a reliance on a discourse of heroic feminist independence.

Similarly, London’s rational bravery stands in stark contrast to his friends’ vague admonishments: “‘You don’t want to live down there!’ everybody said, with disapprobation writ large upon their faces. ‘Why, it is said there are places where a man’s life isn’t worth tu’pence’” (2). To this, London replies: “The very places I wish to see”

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(2). When he tells the clerk at Cook's, for example: "Here's something you can do for me. I wish you to understand in advance what I intend doing, so that in case of trouble you may be able to identify me," the clerk responds with "Ah, I see; should you be murdered, we would be in position to identify the corpse" (3-4). London's is the sole voice of brave rationality amongst a sea of paranoia.

If London and Bly portray the act of civic witnessing as an act of heroism, Riis even more explicitly employs the iconography of the hero, portraying himself as simultaneously innocent, gentle and strong. This self-depiction can be seen in two separate anecdotes. In one, Riis describes how he, with "unpractised hands," sets a tenement on fire. At the same time, he is the one who heroically stifles the fire (30). In another, Riis describes how, as he pauses in front of a tenement, "a dirty baby in a single brief garment – yet a sweet, human little baby despite its dirt and tatters – tumbles off the lowest step, rolls over once, clutches my leg with unconscious grip, and goes to sleep on the flagstones, its curly head pillowed on my boot" (102). In this representation, the citizen-witness is entrusted with responsibility to right accidental, "unpractised" wrongs. The good citizen is powerful and firm, but this firmness, like Riis's boot, is portrayed as able to shelter and protect the helpless members of the tenements, here associated with an infant.

This rational approach to social change seen in Bly, Riis, and London aligns itself directly with Schudson's informed good citizen – and in fact makes good citizenship a heroic act. The citizen-witness's apparent belief in the ability of the good citizen to intervene in democratic practice – indicates a conception of the state, and the state-citizen relation, as the foundation of the democratic promise. The representation of the citizen-

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witness as good, informed, and rational helped to cement the notion that the state and other social institutions also held the potential to be good. If they critiqued economic structures and practices, these narratives did not undermine – and in fact reinforced – the reliability of political ideals like democracy and citizenship.

The Sensational Body

If citizen-witnessing narratives attach their explorations to the altruistic desire for social change, their enlistment of a rhetoric of civic heroism takes part in a larger appeal to the reader's bodily sensations – excitement, fear, disgust, desire. In such narratives the social space is not only rational and perfectible; it is also inherently affective and sensational. In this context, citizen-witnessing narratives – and especially “undercover witnessing” narratives like Bly's and London's – position the body of the witness as the locus of experiential truth, appealing to the thrill of the melodrama and – like sentimentalism – using the vicarious sensations of the reader's body to encourage political engagement.

While practitioners of undercover citizen-witnessing differed widely in their ultimate platforms for societal improvement (ranging from socialist to liberal), their tactics were the same. Unlike other works of social critique which focus primarily on the other space and person, in undercover witnessing narratives, the trials and tribulations of the disguised citizen-witness become much more central to the narrative workings of the text. Instead of relying on visual or aural evidence of the other, the undercover citizen-witness transforms the self into the other to gain evidence of the other's experience. In both *Ten Days* and *People of the Abyss*, bodily transformation is depicted as necessary

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for accessing the off-limits space and gaining of it a particularly trustworthy kind of first-hand evidence.

Both Bly and London posit a space that is inaccessible to them either because of social convention or institutional restrictions. They pose that to best cross these barriers they must masquerade as the inhabitants of such a space – either (for Bly) a “crazy woman” or (for London) one of the “common people” (13). Neither imagines any difficulty in the transformation: social identity is imagined to be written on the body. As William Dow has suggested about *People of the Abyss*, the practices of undercover citizen-witnesses prefigure Pierre Bourdieu’s theorization of *habitus*, in which he tracks the ways class status is inscribed in orientations toward performing everyday practices, habits, codes, and tastes (which in turn inform class distinctions).⁵⁵ In *Distinction*, for example, Bourdieu analyzes the way aesthetic taste, as a manifestation of *habitus*, “classifies” social subjects (6). But while Bourdieu would suggest that the *habitus* is neither overdetermined nor static, and that individuals occupy intersecting social fields which allow for a complex manifestation of behaviors, inclinations, etc.,⁵⁶ both *Ten Days* and *People of the Abyss* suggest that the *habitus* of the other person can be easily

⁵⁵ See Dow’s discussion of the relation between London’s and Bourdieu’s theories of the body in *Narrating Class in American Fiction* (93).

⁵⁶ Bourdieu writes that *habitus* “expresses first the *result of an organizing action*, with a meaning close to that of words such as *structure*; it also designates a *way of being*, a *habitual state* (especially of the body) and, in particular, a *disposition, tendency, propensity, or inclination*” (Invitation 18, footnote). The words “disposition,” “tendency,” “propensity,” and “inclination” are meant to suggest that subjects can respond to their social fields in alternative ways, but that these are the most likely responses, and are most likely to be promoted, enforced, and inscribed into bodily practice.

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comprehended, appropriated, and performed. Indeed, these texts revel in the details of the transformation into the other.

In *People of the Abyss*, London states that while he wants “to be convinced by the evidence of my eyes” (vii), he cannot initially trust that evidence. Indeed, “the solid walls of brick, the slimy pavements, and the screaming streets” (8) first overwhelm him. In order to enter the East End, London must become part of it. He convinces his cabdriver to drop him at an “old clothes shop.” The donning of the disguise is painstakingly detailed; London tells the reader that “I selected a pair of stout though well-worn trousers, a frayed jacket with one remaining button, a pair of brogans which had plainly seen service where coal was shovelled, a thin leather belt, and a very dirty cloth cap” (10). If he is unwilling to carry the façade to its logical extreme, choosing “new and warm” underwear, he assures the reader that “any American waif, down in his luck” could acquire such garb (10-11).

London’s picture of “the slums” is inaugurated and facilitated by his change in costume. If he is swamped by “ragged onlookers” before he enters the old clothes shop, the behavior of the crowd changes when he reemerges, dressed as the literally generic “American waif”: “All servility vanished from demeanor of the common people with whom I came in contact. Presto! in the twinkling of an eye, so to say, I had become one of them” (13). The old clothes shop effects a magical change that transforms London from different to same. The dangerous “sea, lapping about me and threatening to well up and over me” dissipates when he becomes part of it (10). He becomes “one of” the slum-dwellers, who now act as they would if nobody was looking. They no longer notice him, and he is in turn free to observe them in a mode of spectatorship Gayle Wald calls

“critical voyeurism” (155).⁵⁷ London’s performance displaces the performance of the “ragged onlookers”; his falsity produces the truth of the slums.

London’s space (the East End) is more readily accessible than Bly’s asylum. For him, the bodily transformation is about being able to see without being seen. His middle class status is manifested as vulnerability and susceptibility to the sublime effect of the streets, an unpleasant state which can only be overcome by donning a disguise. When he externally dons the trappings of another class, London becomes that which he witnesses. In so doing, he sees details from the inside, avoids being overwhelmed by witnessing the crowd and assumes discursive control over what he sees.

Bly’s disguise is less about costuming and more about physical performance. While her only change in dress is to don “old clothes,” like London she details the changes she puts herself through to assume the appearance of the other: here, the “madwoman.” She describes her facial expressions (“‘Far-away’ expressions have a crazy air”), her mode of speech (“a haphazard way, which I had intended to reflect my craziness”), and her behavior (“She tried to persuade me to undress and go to bed, but I stubbornly refused to do so. During this time a number of the inmates of the house had gathered around us. They expressed themselves in various ways. ‘Poor loon!’ they said. ‘Why, she’s crazy enough!’”). For Bly, changing her bodily behaviors and habits makes

⁵⁷ Critical voyeurism, Wald writes, occurs when the social critic is free to observe his or her surroundings without in turn being observed.

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her read as mad, thereby allowing her to gain entry to the asylum and giving her the authority to write about it.⁵⁸

The bodily experiences of undercover citizen-witnesses drew on the thrilling conventions of sentimentalist melodrama, emphasizing the danger of such situations to intensify readerly engagement in such narratives. In order to gain the trust of their readers, Bly and London position themselves as both normal and not; if they model calm and rational responses to social fear and paranoia, they also depict themselves as succumbing to these very emotions. In this way, undercover citizen-witnesses could stand in for readers while simultaneously speaking with authority. London in some places condemns the irrationality and cowardice of the vague hysteria which surrounds him, but he also entertains and hyperbolizes the looming threat of danger. When the travel agent suggests that he might be murdered, London indulges in a melodramatic rendering of his potential future (or lack thereof): “He said it so cheerfully and cold-bloodedly that on the instant I saw my stark and mutilated cadaver stretched upon a slab where cool waters trickle ceaselessly, and him I saw bending over and sadly and patiently identifying it as the body of the insane American who would see the East End” (4). Late in the book, London describes a walk in the East End as though he has entered a cageless zoo: “It was a menagerie of garmented bipeds that looked something like humans and more like beasts, and to complete the picture, brass-buttoned keepers kept order among

⁵⁸ As Lutes writes, the performance of madness allowed Bly a certain narrative authority: “By adopting the hysteric’s hyperfemale, hyperexpressive body, she created her own story and claimed the right to tell it in her own way” (218). I would add that Bly’s ability to adopt the outer trappings of hysteria also indicated her ability to manipulate and contradict the terms of a medicalized discourse in which women and women’s bodies were portrayed as irrational and out of control.

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them when they snarled too fiercely. I was glad the keepers were there, for I did not have on my 'seafaring' clothes, and I was what is called a 'mark' for the creatures of prey that prowled up and down" (284-5).

Similarly, at the beginning of *Ten Days* Bly writes: "I shuddered to think how completely the insane were in the power of their keepers, and how one could weep and plead for release, and all of no avail, if the keepers were so minded." Her implicit reference, here, does two things. On one hand, it positions her as a sympathetic woman who will be more committed to finding the reality of the asylum. On the other hand, it points forward to her soon-to-be vulnerability to violence and sexual violation, an image even more closely approximated in Bly's description of her clothes being taken from her: "I was ordered to undress. Did I protest? Well, I never grew so earnest in my life as when I tried to beg off. They said if I did not they would use force and that it would not be very gentle. . . . They began to undress me, and one by one they pulled off my clothes. At last everything was gone excepting one garment. 'I will not remove it,' I said vehemently, but they took it off." By drawing on the melodramatic and sentimentalist trope of the imperiled woman, Bly heightens the stakes of her narrative.

The alternation between fear and bravery emphasizes the potential dangers of the slums and the asylum and solidifies the dramatic centrality of the citizen-witness as endangered potential victim. Such a rhetorical strategy increases the sensationalistic appeal of each narrative. The act of civic imagination is made exciting and enjoyable, as Bly and London encourage their reader to envision sympathetically the exciting merging of danger and exploration.

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The reliance of undercover witnessing on melodramatic tropes, like the use of grotesque imagery, can be read not just as a way to draw readers into the story, but also as a rhetorical strategy to spur readers' latent good citizenship. These manifestations of what Cecilia Tichi calls "civic melodrama" were meant to stir the reader into sympathetic action. Tichi discusses, for example, how turn-of-the-century muckrakers' uses of civic melodrama could work to "stimulate recognition of citizenly identity and its obligations" (76). By positing a dystopic world in which "societal ideals . . . had been frighteningly threatened or assaulted," muckrakers "called for the forces of civic virtue to combat the villainous assailants, to defeat them and restore the good order of an earlier era – or to project an ideal, yet attainable, society into the future" (77). Such dangers were embodied in the experiences of the citizen-witness. The tightrope walk between rationality and paranoia can be seen as a rhetorical strategy which is meant not just to appeal to the reader's logic (the mind) and sympathy (the heart), but also to ground political action in the body. Vicarious repulsion, fear, and excitement are meant to awaken the reader's body to a politics of reform.

In the linking of bodily trauma with political action, citizen-witnessing narratives intersect intimately with sentimentalism. Scholars such as Shirley Samuels, Lauren Berlant, and Bruce Burgett have tracked the way sentimentalism engaged in a "project about imagining the nation's bodies and the national body" (Samuels 3). Burgett points out that sentimentalism "relied on readers' affective, passionate, and embodied responses to fictive characters and situations in order to produce political effects" (4). Citizen-witnessing narratives may make the empathetic and substitutive relationship between character and reader even stronger than in sentimentalism by anchoring the

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narrative in the “real,” nonfictional body of the writer. Instead of asking comfortable middle-class readers to see themselves as different from the other, they are asked, via the experience of the citizen-witness, to imagine the ease by which they themselves might become the other. What happens to the body of the undercover citizen-witness, as in other citizen-witnessing narratives, models the possibilities and problematic of the material democratic space, linking the individual to the collective and materializing an often abstract ideal.

Citizen-witnessing narratives suggest that the failure of democracy produces very real bodily suffering. Such narratives stage this suffering in the body of the citizen-witness. Schocket has written about the writers of “class transvestism” narratives that “These authors thus conceived of their own bodies both as objects of social forces and, consequently, as sites of social knowledge – the value of the experience depended, in this sense, on the very ‘authenticity’ of the misery the experiment produced” (110). In *Ten Days* Bly emphasizes her hunger, chills, and pain, bringing such sensations to life so as to intensify her retelling of other women’s experiences. In the bathing passage, Bly writes:

The crazy woman began to scrub me. I can find no other word that will express it but scrubbing. From a small tin pan she took some soft soap and rubbed it all over me, even all over my face and my pretty hair. . . . Rub, rub, rub, went the old woman, chattering to herself. My teeth chattered and my limbs were goose-fleshed and blue with cold. Suddenly I got, one after the other, three buckets of water over my head—ice-cold water, too—into my eyes, my ears, my nose and my mouth. I think I experienced some of the sensations of a drowning person as they dragged me, gasping,

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Elaine Scarry locates bodily pain as the most extreme example of bodily sensation, which imbues “reality” on that with which it is associated. This realizing effect, for Scarry, is most obvious in torture and war, she claims, where the body in pain confers its sense of reality on the power structures and ideologies which produce injury. In Bly’s text, the injustices of the asylum are embodied – and thus made more real for the reader – in her physical pain.

Bly’s emphasis on pain not only realizes injustice, it also enlists the reader’s sympathy. If Bly depicts herself as escaping such degradation relatively unscathed (“Unable to control myself at the absurd picture I presented, I burst into roars of laughter”), she uses the opportunity to ask the reader to imagine the effects of such treatment on less hardy women, such as her sickly friend Miss Mayard: “Imagine plunging that sick girl into a cold bath when it made me, who have never been ill, shake as if with ague. I heard her explain to Miss Grupe that her head was still sore from her illness. Her hair was short and had mostly come out, and she asked that the crazy woman be made to rub more gently, but Miss Grupe said: ‘There isn’t much fear of hurting you. Shut up, or you’ll get it worse.’” Berlant has described the “aesthetic witnessing of injury” in Fanny Fern’s journalism, which was meant “to produce and authorize a universal feminine perspective that can critique a patriarchal public sphere” (280), and Bly’s narrative seems to participate in such a project.

The use of bodily pain participates in the rhetoric of sympathy, lending further credence to the testimony of the citizen-witness. Karen Roggenkamp has written about how women reporters in the late nineteenth century used sympathy as a rhetorical

strategy to produce a greater sense of realism in their reporting, thereby strengthening their hold in a largely male-dominated field. She examines Elizabeth Jordan's treatment of the Lizzie Borden trial, arguing that Jordan posits two Bordens: "one created by the male-dominated press, the other rightfully identified by the sympathizing female reporter who is able to gain access to her fellow woman, and thus gain access to the reality behind the story" (SS 43). By using her own experience as a luridly colored if inadequate example of the far worse discomfort other women faced, Bly invites the reader to experience vicariously such discomfort and to "imagine" far worse experiences.

If such tactics are common in turn-of-the-century women's reporting, London employs similar techniques, both emphasizing his own discomfort and arguing that others' misery is much worse. In a chapter titled "Carrying the Banner," he describes his experience walking the streets over night in the rain, as would one who had no home. Like Bly, he implicitly draws on the reader's imagination by telling himself to "consider that you are a poor young man, penniless, in London Town, and that tomorrow you must look for work" (115). Once the reader has thus "considered," London performs the plight of such a figure: he describes, for example, how he attempts to get some sleep on the steps of a building, only to be chased from his temporary domicile by a policeman: "every time I dozed," he writes, "a policeman was there to rout me along again" (117). London, like Bly, has a more extreme example of suffering to contrast to his own: an old woman. The woman, he writes:

seemed to have neither the sense nor the strength to get out of the rain or keep walking, but stood stupidly, whenever she got the chance, meditating on past days, I imagine, when life was young and blood was warm. But

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she did not get the chance often. She was moved on by every policeman, and it required an average of six moves to send her doddering off one man's beat and on to another's. By three o'clock she had progressed as far as St. James Street, and as the clocks were striking four I saw her sleeping soundly against the iron railings of Green Park. A brisk shower was falling at the time, and she must have been drenched to the skin. (116).

London can hardly endure such conditions (the next day he goes home to shower, bathe, and sleep for "fifteen straight hours").

If London and Bly perform the encounter with danger, pain, hunger, and cold, they are temporary travelers. Their role is to witness, to experience, and to tell the story of extreme suffering, but they return to a life of comfort. Similarly, if danger is constantly present in the narratives themselves, that danger remains relegated to the narrative. If readers' bodies are more than likely safely ensconced in the home, shielded from the dangers of the public space, the citizen-witness takes their place, allowing them to inhabit imaginatively the dangers of this space without risking actual trauma.

If this appeal to the sensationalism of the endangered body enhances the rhetorical appeal of each narrative and may spur political action, I'd like to argue (as do many critics of sentimentalism) that the assumptions underlying this sensationalism weaken each text's appeal to democratic values. Samuels points out that sentimental literature, in its spectacular staging of the crossing of racial, class, and gender boundaries, can have results that run counter to its aims. Sentimentalism – even if its goals are radical – can reinscribe cultural norms which it seemingly abhors (6). Citizen-witnessing texts often fall into the same trap: first, by relying on the suffering white middle-class body to

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dramatize democratic dangers and second, by centralizing the narrator as the locus of narrative authenticity.

In *Ten Days* it is the endangerment of the genteel white woman's body which spurs political action, while in *People of the Abyss*, London's appeal to degeneration and danger of the crowd reinforces class boundaries. By physicalizing and sensationalizing the damaging effects of injustice on the white middle class body, and by imagining the danger the white body faces in the crowd, these narratives – in their attempt to transform the practice of democracy – end up reaffirming norms of human inequality. Disguise in undercover citizen-witnessing texts becomes a way to establish cultural knowledge, authority, and distance.⁵⁹ In these narratives, the citizen-witness offers up the sole authoritative voice, positioning himself or herself as both the protagonist and the narrator of the democratic drama.

If turn-of-the-century citizen-witnessing texts forwarded democratic values, therefore, and employed a variety of highly effective rhetorical strategies to enlist readerly sympathy and action, they often subtly undermined their own ideals. Such

⁵⁹ The emphasis on disguise aligns these texts with the racial assumptions and practices of colonial adventure narratives. Rana Kabbani writes that "The disguised travelers did not merge with the culture they were parodying: the more like that culture's inhabitants they appeared to be in dress and manner, the more distinct they felt themselves to be, the more convinced they became of their own superiority" (91). As Edward Said argues about Burton's *Pilgrimage*, "what is never far from the surface of Burton's prose is another sense it radiates, a sense of assertion and domination over all the complexities of Oriental life" (196). The disguise produced the sense that Burton and other travelers were uniquely capable of manipulating the habits and practices of the other space/person.

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dangers have not precluded, however, a lively continuation of the genre in the succeeding century.

Continuations

Citizen-witnessing narratives continue into the twentieth century and morph to fit new social projects. The continuing popularity of the figure of the good citizen-witness was evident, for example, in turn-of-the-century texts published by men and women Teddy Roosevelt classified as “muckrakers.” Lincoln Steffens’s *Shame of the Cities* (1904), Ida Tarbell’s *History of the Standard Oil Company* (1904), and Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906) can be counted among these.⁶⁰ While the figure of the citizen-witness was not as important in the narration of these slightly later texts, the cultural notoriety of their authors at the time when they were writing these works suggests that the archetype persisted.⁶¹ The 1930s ushered in a third wave of citizen-witnessing with the emergence of “photographic essays” such as Dorothea Lange and Paul Schuster Taylor’s *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (1939), Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White’s *You Have Seen Their Faces*, and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, by James Agee and Walker Evans.⁶²

⁶⁰ I do not mean to suggest that the muckrakers had the same exact goals or approaches to social change as Progressive-era reformists, but rather that they become representations of the same kind of public figure – the citizen-witness.

⁶¹ This notoriety may be seen reflected in and produced by Roosevelt’s frustrated and very public bequeathing of the group’s name.

⁶² W.J.T. Mitchell describes the “photographic essay” as “a literal conjunction of photographs and text – usually united by a documentary purpose, often political, journalistic, sometimes scientific (sociology)”

Citizen-witnessing from the 1910s to the 90s included as well the exploration of a space posited alternatively as utopian or dystopian: namely, communist Russia. As Neil Denslow writes, “writers visited Russia in order to investigate Communism. In the 1920s and 30s, writers primarily went to see how Communism worked: during the Cold War they went to show how it didn’t” (1114). Describing the U.S.S.R. as a “popular destination for a certain breed of leftist intellectual,” Denslow briefly comments on the reports of Lincoln Steffens, Sir Bernard Pares, Corliss and Margaret Lamont, and Lion Feuchtwanger – as well as postwar travelers like Angela Davis and Dick Walda. Strikingly absent in Denslow’s brief article is perhaps the most famous report from Communist Russia: John Reed’s *Ten Days Which Shook the World* (1919), which documents Reed’s experiences during the Bolshevik Party’s rise to power in 1917. Russian politics were often read as counterpoints to the democratic failures of the United States; Langston Hughes’s *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956), for example, describes his journey to Russia in the 1930s, comparing the Russians’ embrace of him with the racist violence and discrimination of the U.S.

The subgenre of undercover witnessing (including stunt reporting and cross-class passing narratives) continued as well as the century progressed. Eric Schocket traces a decline in cross-class passing texts in the 1920s, along with their resurgence in the 1930s and 40s (sometimes in fictional form).⁶³ George Orwell’s book, *Down and Out in Paris*

(285-286). He notes that “[p]hoto-essays have been, by and large, the product of progressive, liberal consciences, associated with political reform and leftist causes” (287).

⁶³ See the film *Sullivan’s Travels* (1941), in which a wealthy white man passes as a hobo, only to be captured and forced to work on a chain gang. Eventually he learns that comedy is the best tool for helping society, as it makes the poor laugh and temporarily forget their situation (!). For critical commentary on a

and London (1933) is perhaps the most classic undercover witnessing narrative. I would argue as well that undercover witnessing has taken place not just in regards to class, but in regards to race as well. In Chapter Two I will examine Civil Rights era disguise narratives by John Howard Griffin and Grace Halsell as reformulations of undercover citizen-witnessing in the context of racial difference. Undercover witnessing narratives (with varying political ideologies) continue to be produced today.

Such narratives actively engage with the conventions of their predecessors, especially in regards to their assumptions about an unproblematic relation between the bodily, the ethical, the rhetorical, and the political. The work of Michael Moore – perhaps the most well known citizen-witness of the last twenty years –demonstrates such a continuation. Moore’s classic film *Roger and Me* (1989) displays his engagement with the rhetorically effective techniques of the citizen-witnessing genre.

Moore’s centrality to his narratives – as seemingly innocent, mistreated gadfly – cannot be denied. Indeed, the symbolic centrality and narrative importance of Moore-as-citizen is depicted in the opening lines of the film: “I was kind of a strange child. My parents knew early on that there was something wrong with me. I crawled backwards until I was two, but had Kennedy’s inaugural address memorized by the time I was six.” We soon learn that Moore is not just a preternaturally good citizen, but also a representative of the citizen more generally: he is a resident of Flint, whose “entire family had worked for GM.” If Moore is the prototypical citizen, he also fits the “outsider”

related genre of fiction, see *Whiteness, Otherness, and the Individualism Paradox from Huck to Punk* (2007), in which Daniel Traber traces the recurrence from the late nineteenth to late twentieth centuries of narratives about straight white men who seek to reaffirm their individuality by voluntarily aligning themselves with the racialized and classed margins of society.

status of the citizen-witness, leaving Flint for San Francisco before he returns to his home town armed with a camera crew and, ostensibly, a fresh perspective.

The film performs the political via Moore's charged personal narrative, depicting the gap between the everyday worker and the corporate "fat cat" in large part through the film's parodic inability to stage a confrontation between "Roger and Me." GM chairman Roger Smith's refusal to meet with Moore, let alone go to Flint with him to "meet some of the people who were losing their jobs" is at the core of the narrative. Along the way, Moore contrasts the blithe optimism of society's elites – including partygoers at upscale fundraisers; elderly golfers; and celebrities like Miss Michigan, Anita Bryant and Bob Eubanks – to iconic filmic images of decrepit and rotting houses and broken down buildings, spaces made symbolically invisible by such elites' willful blindness.

Moore takes the spectator with him as he explores these spaces and the narratives of the people within them. He also stages the attempted entry of other spaces that are repetitively dubbed "private" or "off-limits": including the General Motors building (above the first floor), the Detroit Athletic Club, the Grosse Pointe Yacht Club, and a General Motors factory. Moore even enlists the "undercover" tactics of earlier citizen-witnesses, claiming early on that he and his team pose as a film crew from Toledo to mark the closing of one plant and, at another time, that he has gone undercover as a General Motors stockholder.

Like its predecessors, *Roger and Me* assumes a one-to-one relation between ethics and politics. The film is successful in part because of its playful and sardonic performance of citizen-witnessing. Moore pokes fun at everyone, including himself, ushering the sympathetic spectator into the joke and partially defusing potential criticisms

of his ideological failures. His works adopt light-heartedly the assumptions and understandings of nineteenth-century civic witnessing, and have in large part authorized and buttressed other modes of citizen witnessing in arenas such as the blogosphere.

The conventions of citizen-witnessing have reemerged at various points during the century, especially at moments when the role and scope of state power in relation to its citizenry is being debated. In this chapter I have discussed the foundation of citizen witnessing and ways in which its assumptions and modes of representation have been enlisted relatively straightforwardly, and I have suggested that such reinscriptions can be aligned with modern faiths in the state, vision and representation. In them, politics and ethics merge heroically to support a future state. In the following chapters, however, I will consider texts which both carry on and undermine the genre and the political and epistemological faiths to which it is aligned. Such texts, I will argue, will obligate a rethinking and recontextualizing of citizen-witnessing and its assumptions.

In the next chapter, the questioning of citizen witnessing takes place despite itself, in the problematic amplification of the genre's conventions. *Black Like Me* and *Soul Sister*, two texts of racial undercover witnessing, will be read as indicating an anxiety about the decreasing power of the good (white) citizen. By performing the suffering that grounds the formation of the democratic state, the white narrators imagine a state of nature within the political state. At a time when African Americans are mobilizing around new identities, these texts can be read as attempts to both establish the grounds for state intervention and to stabilize a familiar racialized model of good citizenship.

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Chapter Two

The Suffering Body and Civic Anxiety in *Black Like Me* and *Soul Sister*

“The assumption that others feel pain as we do makes democracy possible.”

– Johann Neem

In a 2008 article in the *Seattle Times*, history professor Johann Neem makes the claim that democracy depends on the imagination of pain. American democracy, he writes, is made possible by sympathetic recognition:

Once, in a world before human rights, in a world before the American Revolution, nobles thought of commoners as lesser people. They often attributed to the common folk qualities closer to animals than to human beings. The king, of course, was divine and untouchable. All men were decidedly not created equal.

During the 18th century, however, Enlightenment philosophers — our Founding Fathers among them — learned to sympathize with the pain and suffering of ordinary people. Because they came to believe in a universal human nature, they also came to the conclusion that other people experienced pain and joy, glory and humiliation, much as they did. This recognition of the universal qualities of human nature made possible Jefferson's assertion that all men are created equal.

In this democratic fairy tale (and Neem's narrative is indeed structured like a fairy tale) the magical emergence of sympathy leads directly to a political happy ending. A belief in

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a universal humanity is paired with recognition of the other's suffering, which establishes the grounding for the democratic platform.

For Neem this happy ending is under attack: the U.S. government's defense of torture, he claims, violates the sympathetic promise of democracy. Using the generational transmission of slavery as a parallel to torture, he warns against the transformation of the democratic fairy tale into another kind of pedagogical lesson: "If young Americans witnessed their fathers inflicting corporal punishment upon slaves, they would learn that it was OK to torture other human beings — that others do not suffer as we do and that their bodies are not entitled to basic respect and dignity. The result would be the end of democracy; America's youth would be trained to be despots rather than democrats."

From one angle, Neem's claim that democracy is founded on the recognition of pain and suffering is prefigured by modern theories of the state. Thomas Hobbes's description of a state of nature in which "there is . . . continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short" (70) produces a model in which the state is implemented to prevent violence and its effects (death and suffering). If Hobbes imagines the state of nature to precede the civil state, modern democratic theory imagines the problem of nondemocratic governments as the problem of suffering. Thomas Paine, for example, argues that brutal violence can take hold again within the state if democracy is not properly played out. The violence of the French revolution Paine ascribes to the improper practice of democracy after an age of despotism. In *Rights of Man*, he writes:

Lay then the axe to the root, and teach Governments humanity. It is their sanguinary governments which corrupt mankind. In England the punishment in certain cases is by hanging, drawing and quartering; the heart of the sufferer is cut out and held up to the view of the populace. In France, under the former Government, the punishments were not less barbarous. Who does not remember the execution of Damien, torn to pieces by horses? The effect of those cruel spectacles exhibited to the populace is to destroy tenderness or excite revenge; and by the base and false idea of governing men by terror, instead of reason, they become precedents. (49-50)

Paine implies as well that monarchical and hereditary governments are inferior to democracies because, rather than preventing misery, suffering, and pain they perpetuate it and are indeed founded upon it: "When we survey the wretched condition of Man, under the monarchical and hereditary systems of Government, dragged from his home by one power, or driven by another, and impoverished by taxes more than by enemies, it becomes evident that those systems are bad, and that a general Revolution in the principle and construction of Governments is necessary" (162). Rousseau similarly begins his *Discourse on Political Economy* by claiming that political societies that are not committed to the rule of law and the public interest will propagate human misery: "Far from the chief's having a natural interest in the happiness of private individuals, it is not uncommon for him to seek his own happiness in their misery . . . abuses are inevitable and their consequences fatal" (4-5).

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Yet these conceptualizations do not rely upon feeling, but rather upon reason; they do not necessitate a sympathetic understanding of the other's pain as Neem would claim is necessary to support a democratic politics. In this chapter, I explore how the writings of citizen-witnesses at various historical moments have helped contribute to, rehabilitate, and shape a sentimental narrative in which, as Neem claims, "The assumption that others feel pain as we do makes democracy possible." The witnesses I consider rely upon both sympathy and empathy. If their readers are expected to understand others' suffering through sympathetic imagination, these civic adventurers construct themselves as empaths who experience (still imaginatively) that suffering. Undercover witnessing, with its overt emphasis on the suffering body, draws out the importance of (and limitations inherent to) suffering and empathy in citizen-witnessing in general. In what follows I will consider in particular how two Civil Rights era dramatizations of racial witnessing, *Black Like Me* and *Soul Sister*, mobilize and refashion the conventions of Nellie Bly's and Jack London's turn-of-the-century books. I will ultimately argue that these continuations and transformations of the genre indicate first, the limitations of a politics of empathy and second, evidence of a civic anxiety on the part of privileged whites over yielding power to those they wish to help.

Racism and Pain

In Chapter One I discussed the conventions established in the flourishing of civic witnessing at the end of the nineteenth century. If citizen-witnessing narratives attach their explorations to the altruistic desire for social change, I argued, their enlistment of a rhetoric of civic heroism contributes to a larger appeal to the reader's bodily sensations –

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excitement, fear, disgust, desire. I discussed more specifically how “undercover witnessing,” by positioning the feeling body of the disguised witness as the locus of experiential truth, appeals to a melodramatic and sensationalistic thrill. Citizen-witnessing draws on sentimental tropes to appeal to the vicarious feelings of the reader’s body, thereby encouraging political engagement. *Black Like Me* and *Soul Sister* mobilize the same conventions in their conceptualizations of race relations during the 1960s.

Black Like Me (1961) has been both lauded and criticized for its portrayal of race relations during the struggle for civil rights in the U.S. Often placed on the curriculum for students from middle school through college, the book tracks a white man’s experiment in “becoming a Negro” by darkening his skin and traveling through the 1950s South. Jennifer Delton categorizes *Black Like Me* as one of a crop of “tolerance novels” or “social problem” books that emerged in the U.S. immediately following WWII. Delton describes this genre as “popular fiction or journalism that depicted the tragedies and irrationality of white racism.” She adds that “they were often, but not always, written by white people who . . . brought their experiences as whites to their explorations of racism. These books were generally well received, although they were not seen as great literature. The lessons within them reflected the new thinking about race and racism that had emerged during the war” (312). While Griffin’s book would seem to come at the tail end of this trend, Grace Halsell wrote a self-proclaimed follow up, *Soul Sister* (1969), in which she too underwent skin darkening treatment and lived and worked in Harlem and Mississippi.

Black Like Me and *Soul Sister* imagine the experiential body to be the foundation of an activist politics. Positing the sympathetic understanding of the effects of racism to

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be lacking in good-hearted whites, and arguing that such an understanding is necessary for political change, Halsell and Griffin forward their experiences as offering access to what Griffin calls “the real story.” In his preface, Griffin links his personal experience to a universal truth, claiming that his book represents “the journal of my own experience living as a Negro. . . . It traces the changes that occur to heart and body and intelligence when a so-called first-class citizen is cast on the junkheap of second-class citizenship.” Indeed, he argues that “The real story is the universal one of men who destroy the souls and bodies of other men (and in the process destroy themselves) for reasons neither really understands. It is the story of the persecuted, the defrauded, the feared and detested. I could have been a Jew in Germany, a Mexican in a number of states, or a member of any ‘inferior’ group. Only the details would have differed. The story would be the same” (preface). Halsell, too, states, “I wanted to write a story revealing how much alike we all are. And I wanted to do it directly, from the most personal experience, so that I could actually feel the commonality and communicate it to others” (17). The sensual details of their embodied experiences are imagined as pointing to the universal – either the universally damaging effects of social injustice, or a human commonality.

As a means of demonstrating this damage the narratives focus primarily on suffering, pain and the risk of death. Both *Black Like Me* and *Soul Sister* feature memorable scenes in which the narrators narrowly avoid pain, rape or death. In one scene, for example, Griffin describes being followed down a dark alley by an ominous young white man who threatens him with violence. Griffin imagines: “What if he should knock me in the head – or worse; he sounded diabolic” (37). In another, he describes how a man who has picked him up while hitchhiking casually comments that “You can

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kill a nigger and toss him into that swamp and no one'll ever know what happened to him" (110). Near the end of *Soul Sister*, Halsell elaborately recounts a more direct threat, when her white employer tries to rape her. While both narrators escape relatively unscathed through acts of aggressive self-defense, the threat of violence is positioned as the immediate effect of being black in racist culture.

If both narrators raise the specter of direct racial violence, actual bodily pain in each narrative is linked to the daily fact of living in a racist landscape. As Gayle Wald has pointed out, Griffin often emphasizes his aching feet. Describing his search for a job as "two days of incessant walking," he describes being forced out of a park by a middle-aged white man: "I left, sick with exhaustion, wondering where a Negro could sit to rest. It was walk constantly until you could catch a bus, but keep on the move unless you have business somewhere" (40, 45-46). If Griffin draws attention to his aching feet, the image of damaged, pained feet becomes heightened in Halsell's narrative, in which she focuses for many pages not just on endless walking but also on the way her bottoms of her feet erupt into monstrous blisters, crippling her mobility. When a doctor examines her feet, he "props my feet up, opens one large bluster – and white liquid pours as from an open faucet. He says what I am beginning to realize: that infection is the great danger and that if I am not careful I might lose entire toes – and even my feet" (80). Halsell, here, utilizes the grotesque in much the same manner as London and Riis did seventy years earlier. The grotesque body signifies the ignored reality of the social world, the day-to-day experience of being African American. Both narratives suggest that racism is pervasive, repetitive and damaging to the very bodily foundations of the sufferer.

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This postulation of the effects of racism was grounded in the realities of life in the 1950s U.S., reinforced within legal discourse, and supported by the nonviolent philosophy of the Civil Rights Movement. As Robert P. Green, Jr. and Harold E. Cheatham have pointed out, disenfranchisement of Blacks was enforced by brutal violence. According to Green and Cheatham, “The ultimate tool of Black subjugation was the lynch mob. Statistics compiled by the Tuskegee Institute researchers suggest that between 1882 and 1968, over 3,200 African Americans were lynched in the South and border states” (6). Officers of the law often sanctioned, ignored, or actively participated in racial violence. The devastating effects of racism were perceived to be not just bodily but psychological as well. In *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), Thurgood Marshall successfully utilized social-scientific reports about the negative psychological effects of segregation on Black children to argue his case for desegregation (in Green and Cheatham 49).

In response to systematic and structural violence, various groups mobilized around calls for nonviolent protest. CORE (The Congress of Racial Equality), created by activists from the Christian-based Fellowship of Reconciliation, was founded in 1942 as “an organization which would seek to use Gandhi-like techniques of nonviolent resistance – including civil disobedience, non-cooperation, and the whole bit – in the battle against segregation” (Farmer in Green and Cheatham 38). The language of suffering, drawn from Christianity, permeated the philosophy of such groups. As one of the founding members of CORE, Bayard Rustin, emphasized suffering in response to calls “to demand now, with violence if necessary, the rights [Blacks] have long been denied”: “Certainly the Negro possesses qualities essential for nonviolent direct action.

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He has long since learned to endure suffering. He can admit his own share of guilt and has to be pushed hard to become bitter” (in Green and Cheatham 37). Direct-action practitioners like John Lewis “talked a lot about the idea of ‘redemptive suffering’” as the foundation of their resistance (in Green and Cheatham 87). Such a model of suffering bridged both the secular and nonsecular worlds. Lewis, for example, stated that in the late 1950s “I always understood the idea of the ultimate redeemer, Christ on the cross. But now I was beginning to see that this is something that is carried out in every one of us, that the purity of unearned suffering is a holy and affective thing. . . . Suffering puts us and those around us in touch with our consciences. . . . If you want to create an open society, your means of doing so must be consistent with the society you want to create” (87-88). Here, suffering models what Lewis calls “love,” and is seen to ground a future society. If for Neem, sympathetic understanding of others’ pain is the foundation of democracy, suffering is its necessary partner.

This formulation pairs bodily performance with vision: suffering must be visually inscribed on the body, and it must be witnessed by others to be a model for a society. Nonviolent resistance was grounded on the visual spectacle of the performance of suffering. It was meant to publicize the effects of violence, and in so doing, to shape public and legal opinion. If in part such a structure was racialized (blacks perform suffering, whites observe), the Civil Rights movement involved both whites and blacks participating in projects (sit-ins, etc.) that involved (at least potentially) the performance of suffering.

The narrators of *Black Like Me* and *Soul Sister* clearly mobilize the performance of suffering in much the same way as whites who participated in nonviolent direct action.

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Their narratives track attempts to perform empathy by literally occupying the position of the other. Indeed, in his book Griffin refers directly to nonviolent modes of resistance. While the emphasis on suffering can be most clearly associated with the Christian and Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence emphasized in the Civil Rights Movement at the time, I would like to suggest that it is also a continuation of the conventions of turn-of-the-century undercover witnessing. Such a construction works both as a rhetorical strategy and a political one. It imagines the state of nature as inhering within the social sphere, and suffering as a byproduct of the failure of the state to act. It establishes as well the hierarchical relation between self and other that characterizes sentimentalism. While the similarities between earlier undercover civic witnessing suggest the limitations of a politics of empathy, the differences indicate the emergence of a mode of civic anxiety absent in cross-class undercover witnessing.

Civil Rights Era Citizen-Witnessing

The exploratory nature of the narratives most strikingly aligns *Black Like Me* and *Soul Sister* with undercover witnessing. Griffin and Halsell, like London and Bly, disguise themselves to enter otherwise off-limits spaces. Like earlier citizen-witnesses, each writer performs the role of the heroic and adventurous narrator, just different enough from readers to deserve their respect. They address a white, middle-class and liberal audience, seeking to rouse readers' rational, democratic sympathy for the oppressed other. By explicitly positioning their narrative selves as white, middle-class subjects, Griffin and Halsell encourage white middle-class readers to identify with them.

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The similarities go deeper. In their mobilization of a binaristic above/below, disembodied/embodied model of the difference between civic witnessing and the conventional Cartesian modes of vision described in Chapter One, *Black Like Me* and *Soul Sister* align themselves even more explicitly with their turn-of-the-century precursors. Griffin describes the difference between two modes of observing African-American spaces as follows:

I had seen them before from the high altitude of one who could look down and pity. Now I belonged here and the view was different. A first glance told it all. Here it was pennies and clutter and spittle on the curb. Here people walked fast to juggle the dimes, to make a deal, to find cheap liver or a tomato that was overripe. Here was the indefinable stink of despair. Here modesty was the luxury. People struggled for it. I saw it as I passed, looking for food. A young, slick-haired man screamed loud obscenities to an older woman on the sidewalk. She laughed and threw them back in his face. They raged. Others passed them, hearing, looking down, pursing lips, struggling not to notice. (19)

Superficial white spectatorship, Griffin posits, can see only the basics. The citizen-witness, on the other hand, is associated with a detailed, specific and multisensory mode of vision. Halsell similarly contrasts false vision with an authoritative one that accesses more than a “superficial” outside, writing “Most white people still think of Negroes as somehow different and apart. They see their skin and nothing else. The depths of sensitivity, attitudes, abilities, emotions escape this superficial, subliminal view” (17). In

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these passages, the observing, feeling body of the citizen-witness becomes the conduit for an authoritative social truth.

As in turn-of-the-century civic witnessing, suffering is meant to realize the effects of social damage. Here the effects of racism materialize the failures of the democratic promise in the bodies of citizen-witnesses. I'd like to suggest that the state with which readers are asked to empathetically identify is the anti-democracy, a state of pain and suffering akin to the Hobbesian state of nature. Such a state is the fantasy on which the sentimental narrative about democracy rests and relies, and from which it distinguishes itself: a fantasy which must be repetitively produced. The state of nature is imagined in these passages as emerging within the political state, authorizing state and citizen action. *Black Like Me* and *Soul Sister* enlist the experiential body of the citizen-witness as the performer of this fantasy and in so doing indicate not only the importance of continually reinscribing damage within liberal conceptions of democracy but some of the potential dangers of doing so as well.

Black Like Me has often been criticized for its claims to authoritative representation. The book, many critics argue, implicitly supports racial hierarchy despite its claims to do otherwise. Kate Baldwin, for example, writes that "*Black Like Me* recruits its modes of communication in order to produce the pathos of precisely the racial and sexual differentiation that it is the text['s] slated purpose to deny" (114). Wald claims that Griffin's book exposes the limits of cross-racial political representation, effectively silencing black self-representations of experience. By writing from "the position of a privileged observer of racial 'difference,'" Wald writes, Griffin "displac[es] the possibility of what bell hooks calls 'black looks'" and "turn[s] to strategies of silencing –

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both of 'minority' subjects and of the very experience that such attempts purport to represent" (154-5).

Other critics, such as Phillip Brian Harper and Eric Lott, argue that *Black Like Me* exposes white male fantasies and stereotypes about black masculinity. Lott positions *Black Like Me* (and other mid-century texts glorifying the "White Negro"⁶⁴) in the context of American minstrelsy. He elaborates on the homosocial nature of blackface, arguing that the imagining of black masculinity in both minstrelsy and *Black Like Me* helps construct and uphold the "white racial unconscious." These modes of racial performance, Lott argues, "actually found the color line even as they witness the latter's continual transgression" (475). Harper argues that racial passing narratives model normative gender behavior to the detriment of black masculinity; he claims that *Black Like Me*, like other race passing narratives, defines black masculinity as "problematic" and "inassimilable to socially normative codes" (112, 126). Such critiques, therefore argue that the book inadvertently reinscribes the very racial hierarchy it seeks to upend; and that the book, if it claims to be about the African-American "other," ends up being about the white "self." In the context of such critiques, *Black Like Me's* positing of an authoritative experience not only justifies its pursuit of an imaginary racial landscape, but in so doing obscures the fact that it is a fantasy.

I would like to point out another aspect of the books' democratic fantasy. By aligning suffering with naturalistic concepts of degeneration and degradation, *Black Like Me* and *Soul Sister* rehabilitate the naturalist project common to citizen-witnessing texts

⁶⁴ Norman Mailer coined the term "The White Negro" to describe the 1950s hipster in his identically titled essay (1957).

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written at the turn of the century. This construction imaginatively reinscribes a social space bifurcated into two parts: the civil state and the state of nature. The two halves of this imaginary landscape are explicitly racialized: whites populate the civic half and blacks the natural. The implications of such an assumption reflect both the continuation of a hierarchical racial schema within white activism and a problematic vision of the role of the state.

Black Like Me and *Soul Sister* link blackness to a degenerative state of nature.

Griffin and Halsell associate their adventures with a bodily return to a dangerous natural state. The visual transformation into blackness is described in the language of degeneration; when Griffin first looks in the mirror he states his reflection leads “back to Africa, back to the shanty and the ghetto, back to the fruitless struggles against the mark of blackness” (11). When her doctor seems blasé about the side effects of the medication he is prescribing, Halsell similarly fantasizes about the danger she is in via Griffin, writing: “Griffin had said his bones were disappearing, and so I thought that no doctor would want to give the same kind of prescription” (34). Her adventure *could* be life-threatening, even if it was not acknowledged as such. Halsell utilizes a language of physical degeneration when she returns again and again to the image of Griffin’s bones dissolving, worrying that her encounters with skin-darkening drugs will similarly dissolve her bones.⁶⁵ Indeed, she tells the reader that the gruesome deterioration of her

⁶⁵ Lott notes that “Griffin did not, as is still widely rumored, die as a belated result of his skin treatments . . . a rumor whose persistence (roughly half of those I spoke to about this essay repeated it) attests either to a continuing desire to punish Griffin for his transgressions and guard the color line or to a continuing fascination with white-liberal martyrdom. Either way, the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living” (495, note 35).

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feet is due to the combination of skin-darkening drugs and the sunlight in the Caribbean, where she tries to tan herself. The language here, of changed appearances leading “back” or “dissolving,” implicitly relies upon a degenerationist discourse which manifests in the body.

Degeneration is imagined to issue as well from the experience of being African American in racist culture. Griffin claims, for example, that racism degrades the psyche of the African American: “the whites as a group can still contrive to arrange life so that it destroys the Negro’s sense of personal value, degrades his human dignity, deadens the fibers of his being” (48). Lest the “maiming” and “deadening” effects of her experience be read as overdetermined manifestations of her own desires, Halsell uses an outside eye’s gaze at her body to confirm the damage she has been through. After her adventure, the director of her health club affirms: “I must tell you you look at least ten years older. And if you tell me you’ve been in prison, and brutally beaten . . . whatever horrible tale you tell me, I can believe you” (11). Similarly, after “[being] a Negro more than three weeks,” Griffin notices that his face “had lost animation. In repose, it had taken on the strained, disconsolate expression that is written on the countenance of so many Southern Negroes. My mind had become the same way, dozing empty for long periods” (123). In such constructions, being oppressed implicitly damages the body. In these scenes, aging is accelerated, and faces “lose” their expression; health is quickly stripped from the body.

If the experience of enduring racism is marked on the body, racism also degrades the “spirit.” Soon after he sees his reflection in the mirror, for example, Griffin notes that the sounds of his surroundings “degrade” him: “A dog barked nearby and his bark grew louder as another tune from the juke box blasted up through my linoleum floor. I could

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not shake the almost desperate sadness all this evoked, and I marveled that sounds could so degrade the spirit” (15). Degradation in this passage is imagined to be produced by a social-Darwinist landscape in which “[e]xistence becomes a grinding effort, guided by belly-hunger and the almost desperate need to divert awareness from the squalors to the pleasures, to lose oneself in sex or drink or dope or gut-religion or gluttony or the incoherence of falsity” (48). Griffin’s African Americans turn to the pleasures of bodily excess (“sex or drink or dope or gut-religion or gluttony”) to avoid the “grinding effort” of existence. He suggests that racism draws out the animality of its targets: “life loses its significance and becomes a matter of little more than animal survival” (121). Halsell similarly aligns the ghetto with the jungle: “The ghetto walls exist as walls, terrible as those ‘green curtains’ that closed in on me in the jungle, sealing me off, so that I felt I could not move beyond the enclave where I and others like me were camped out” (106). If the ghetto is like the jungle, it is also a prison where she becomes trapped; indeed, she describes it as an “open-air jail” (63). In such constructions, being oppressed implicitly damages the self and the body.

Degeneration and related tropes authorize a particular mode of inquiry, one driven by the good white citizen. The link between physical and mental degradation and degeneration and the erasure of the political ability to narrate is manifested in one of the more famous moments in *Black Like Me*. The most explicit and well-known scene of degeneration in either book is Griffin’s bizarre tale of his encounter with a roll of blank negatives. As in the earlier scene in which his sensual surroundings degrade him, here he overhears people singing in the tavern below with voices “full of sadness and awe” (69). He looks at himself in a cracked mirror, again reperforming the earlier scene. Thinking

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with “grief” that “my own people could give the hate stare, could shrivel men’s souls, could deprive humans of rights they unhesitatingly accord their livestock,” Griffin performs what this shriveling of souls might entail. Turning from the mirror, Griffin notices “a half-dozen film negatives” which he picks up “with strange excitement, curious to see the image that some prior occupant of this room had photographed. Each negative was blank” (70). Soon after, he tries to write a letter to his wife, but internalizing social stigma against interracial sex, leaves the page following the salutation “blank” (71).

These narratives’ focus on the suffering, damaged body draws a line between those who are imagined to be painless, full of agential civic speech and those whose pain is imagined to silence them.⁶⁶ The narrators’ reliance on pain as the arbiter of democratic success or failure determines in advance who is allowed to participate in the polis. In their critique of racism, however, Griffin and Halsell reaffirm the structures of hierarchy that produce the imagined damage. In these narratives, African Americans (as represented by the transformations in the bodies and minds of the narrators) are presented as victims of degradation, in its associations with pained immobility and degeneration. In Griffin’s and Halsell’s imaginings of the effects of racism, African Americans’ bodies fall apart and their souls “shrivel,” while they stay in the ghetto out of fear and lethargy.

⁶⁶ Gayatri Spivak has linked the circulation of speech to the cessation of subalternity, and Scarry writes bluntly that “Political power . . . entails the power of self-description” (279). In these narratives, degenerative processes are imagined as leading inexorably to silence, in the face of which the representation the other is made not only possible but necessary. The shriveling of the soul, it appears, is equivalent to the loss of the ability to represent or narrate. In his attempt to fill in the imagined blank space of African American experience, Griffin’s own narrative ability has been erased.

They lose not only facial expression but the very ability to express themselves at all. By depicting the effects of racism in such a way, *Black Like Me* and *Soul Sister* systematically erase the possibility of African American representation, reinforcing the assumption at the core of each book that the African American experience is a “blank space.” If what is desired in these texts is human equality and universally defined citizenship, the playing out of the fantasy destroys the grounds on which such a platform stands.

Griffin suggests that racism damages whites as well as blacks. In his description of the “hate stare,” he writes “you feel lost, sick at heart before such unmasked hatred, not so much because it threatens you as because it shows humans in such an inhuman light. You see a kind of insanity, something so obscene the very obscenity of it (rather than its threat) terrifies you” (54). Here, not only does racism degenerate everyone (including whites), it is, in its obscenity, itself degenerate. Yet he also suggests that he as a white liberal can escape the damaging effects of racism, whereas an African American cannot. Indeed, when he finally decides to “go back” to being white, it is because “Suddenly I had had enough. Suddenly I could stomach no more of this degradation – not of myself but of all men who were black like me” (140). It is only after the fact, as a white man, that he can narrate his story.

Clearly, the tropes of degeneration and the state of nature are imaginatively produced by the authors, and must be read as such. Through them, Griffin and Halsell imbue their narratives with dramatic urgency and political force to suggest the need for immediate social change. In so doing, however, they reinscribe hierarchical notions of race. Furthermore, as in classic democratic theory and naturalistic writing, these

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narratives continue to oppose the civic state to a state of nature. Because the suffering of African- Americans is imagined as occurring outside of the realm of the state, *Black Like Me* and *Soul Sister* erase the state's culpability in allowing or promoting a hierarchical civic order.

The similarities between *Black Like Me* and *Soul Sister* and their predecessors indicate the limitations of a politics of empathy. The books reinscribe tropes from nineteenth-century discourses of sentimentalism and degeneration that implicitly enforce the superiority of the speaking white citizen over the suffering and silent black subject and refrain from radical political critique. In this way, they carry the genre and some of its more problematic assumptions unscathed into the middle of the twentieth century. Yet in other ways, the books indicate a civic anxiety about these assumptions. In the next part of the chapter, I'd like to show how the emphasis on authentic embodiment over more straightforward modes of vision points to the instability of the sentimental democratic narrative.

Empathy as Embodiment

The citizen-witnessing texts written in the late nineteenth century locate truth in the objective images of social spaces and social others, positing the exploration of the social space as the means to access such images. Images and stories in these texts are imagined to be straightforward representations of social truth; the goal of the citizen-witness is merely to expose them to public view. *Black Like Me* and *Soul Sister*, however, transform this structure, aligning the exploration of the social space with the exploration of interior or experiential space. In Griffin's book, the uncharted territory is

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only secondarily the space of the cities and highways the narrators traverse. What is central is not just the exploration of a terrain, a city, or a landscape, but of experience – imagined as a materialized space. Griffin writes: “I searched for an opening, a way to enter the world of the Negro, some contact perhaps. As yet, it was a blank to me . . . I looked for the chink in the wall through which I might pass unobserved” (7). Halsell similarly spatializes the black experience: “I need this experience. I have been on the outside looking in. I have smelled the colored people’s collard greens and their living-up-close-together smells. I am now going to knock on their doors and say, black people let me in there with you!” (19).⁶⁷ These passages conceptualize “the world of the Negro” as an off-limits, blank, and bounded space that must be exposed to the public eye. Experience becomes the democratic landscape, itself the space in which the failures and inadequacies of democracy (namely, the effects of racism) are played out. Such a space must be entered through an opening (a “chink in the wall” or “a door”) in order to be explored and narrated.

Griffin and Halsell imagine this opening to be provided via external changes to the body of the witness. In this assumption, *Black Like Me* and *Soul Sister* abide by the conventions of its predecessors within undercover witnessing, in which narrators change their bodies to gain access to a physical space (for Bly and London, the asylum and the East End). Like London and Bly, Griffin and Halsell emphasize the process of bodily transformation: in this instance, from white to black. Griffin takes six pages to describe the process of taking “accelerated treatments” of a medicine designed for sufferers of

⁶⁷ This uncomfortable passage suggests the degree to which the imagined space of experience is constructed by the narrator’s own fantasies about being intimate with the racialized other.

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vitaligo, including the results of his blood tests, his nauseated reaction to the drug, and his ultimate decision to supplement the process by staining his skin and shaving his head. These passages are supplemented with a psychological transition, in which he discusses his plans with his doctor and meanders around “the Negro sections in the South Rampart-Dryades Street sections” of New Orleans “to orient myself” (9). He ends this section by postulating – through a scene in which he looks into the mirror – the success of his transformation: “In the flood of light against white tile, the face and shoulders of a stranger – a fierce, bald, very dark Negro – glared at me from the glass. He in no way resembled me” (11). Halsell takes over thirty pages to revel in her transformation, like Griffin using journal form to describe to the day the details of taking medication, dying her hair, and acquiring “new *black* eyes!” (38, original emphasis). Like Griffin, she ends the process with the success of the transformation, attested to by an overwhelming profusion of comments on her skin color by more than six observers (three of whom claim identically: “you are *black*!” (52-3, original emphasis)).

In London’s and Bly’s narratives, it is clear that the narrators’ self-identified subject positions remain consistent throughout each book. Never does London say he becomes an immigrant East Ender, for example, and Bly never writes that she is going mad. In fact, Bly explicitly states that once she gets into the asylum, “From the moment I entered the insane ward on the Island, I made no attempt to keep up the assumed *role* of insanity. I talked and acted just as I do in ordinary life.” Similarly, if they each offer personal experiences of pain and suffering, they immediately mark the temporary nature of such experiences and offer them as inferior examples of the more intense and enduring suffering of those around them. In their stories, the disguise functions superficially and

temporarily; it is encapsulated in costumes and behaviors that are easily donned and just as easily discarded. There is no confusion between self-identity and behavior.

In *Black Like Me* and *Soul Sister*, on the other hand, bodily transformation leads to an intimate identification with the imaginary other. When Halsell describes the influence of reading *Black Like Me* on her future plans she describes her “inner voice” as saying “I could do that. . . I could be black” (15). Her repetition of the phrase “you *are* black!,” cited earlier in regards to her physical transformation, lends further rhetorical force to the suggestion that her racial identity changes with her skin color (52-3, my emphasis). Similarly, while Griffin claims that initially he “decided not to change my name or identity” (5), he also states that his goal was to “become a Negro” (2).

The transformation of the body splits each narrator into (at least) two parts: the observer (“me”) and the observed (“he”/ “she”). In a passage littered with confusing pronouns, Halsell describes returning to “whitey’s world” and becoming “a tourist” in her own apartment: “After the bath, I will inspect her closet- I will try on one of her nice dresses . . . My street . . . my world . . . But I’m not believing myself when I say these things. No, I am from the ghetto – when I say these things *to me* I might as well say to you that last Tuesday you drank a cup of tea with the Queen of England and then flew to the moon” (133-134, original emphasis). Griffin’s split is more coherent and self-reflective. He writes: “I became two men, the observing one and the one who panicked, who felt Negroid even into the depths of his entrails” (12).⁶⁸ In this passage, the observer

⁶⁸ Gayle Wald points out that in “reproduc[ing] himself as both the subject and the object of his anthropological fieldwork,” Griffin approximates DuBois’s description of the splitting of double consciousness (162). Of course, the difference here is that double consciousness is imagined as an effect of

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takes over the subject position of the observed, embodying them both at the same time. These two parts are imagined both as identical and as fundamentally different. So, for instance, if Griffin's observed self "in no way resembled me," he also claims: "I thought it vaguely illuminating that the Negro Griffin's sweat felt exactly the same to his body as the white Griffin's" (13). Griffin is both self and absolute other, both coming together in a universal and authentic humanity grounded in the body. The simultaneous identification and difference in these passages is necessary to authorize the narrators' claims to truthful, universal representation.

In *Black Like Me* and *Soul Sister*, "the African-American experience" is imagined as a well-delineated and bounded off-limits space in which the democratic drama unfolds and is performed. The white citizen-witness is presented as the explorer of such a space, narrating its happenings to an interested community of civically minded white readers. The "becoming black" of the white observer is posited as the necessary means to enter such a space. Once the door is opened, experience ceases to be posited as a space, and the white observer reports his or her bodily sensations, emotions, and thoughts in response to a traditionally conceived social environment. These experiences signify the direct and tangible effects of racism, the explicit proof of democracy's failures.

These narratives, therefore, if they retain the faith in the state common to the conventional citizen-witnessing narrative, also destabilize the ability of vision alone to access the authoritative truth of the other person. The books lack the iconic images of earlier citizen-witnessing texts because vision without other senses will no longer do.

the positioning of the self in the network of aggressive and judgmental gazes attendant to racist culture.

Griffin's double consciousness is self-produced and maintained, and attendant to the ethnographic project.

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Instead, the witness must literally become the other to experience holistically his or her suffering. If at the turn-of-the-century the off-limits space to be broached is external (a city, an asylum), in Griffin's and Halsell's texts the experiences of the other are imaginatively spatialized. At this point, I would like to reflect on why, in the early and late 1960s, the books might produce as a necessity the importance of the narrator's body.

Resistance and the Experience of Suffering

Experience has often been posited as a mode of resistance to oppression.⁶⁹ Robin Morgan's introduction to an influential feminist anthology from the 1970s, *Sisterhood is*

⁶⁹ A heated debate over experience took place within the academy during the 1980s and 90s. This conversation, Craig Ireland points out, came to a head in the 1990s with "a series of debates . . . in such journals as *New Left Review*, *Critical Inquiry*, *New Literary History*, and *Yale Journal of Criticism*" (86), establishing the word "experience" as "a general buzzword" (87). In it, as reflected in this passage, certain modes of poststructuralism butted heads with certain modes of feminism and Marxism. If some revolutionary projects demanded recourse to a social experience they perceived to be erased by political and academic discourse poststructuralism drew on the infinite deferral of the signifier to argue that experience could never be located. As Jonathan Culler wrote about feminist appeals to women readers' experience, "The appeal to the experience of the reader provides leverage for displacing or undoing the system of concepts or procedures of male criticism, but 'experience' always has this divided, duplicitous character: it has always already occurred and yet is still to be produced – an indispensable point of reference but never simply there" (63). Scott adds that the appeal to authentic experience could have devastating political consequences: "It is precisely this kind of appeal to experience as uncontested evidence and as an originary point of explanation – as a foundation upon which analysis is based – that weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference. By remaining within the epistemological frame of orthodox history, these studies lose the possibility of examining those assumptions and practices that excluded considerations of difference in the first place" (25). Ultimately, she writes, such an approach

Powerful, claims that “Women’s liberation is the first radical movement to base its politics – in fact, create its politics – out of concrete personal experiences. We’ve learned that those experiences are *not* our private hang-ups. They are shared by every woman, and are therefore political. The theory, then, comes out of human feeling, not out of textbook rhetoric” (xvii-xviii). Such approaches center the living body and personal

“reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems – those that assume that the facts of history speak for themselves and, in the case of histories of gender, those that rest on notions of a natural or established opposition between sexual practices and social conventions, and between homosexuality and heterosexuality” (25). Different discourses with different aims were butting up against each other.

A variety of critics who identified as feminist but practiced post-structuralist modes of reading attempted to negotiate ways in which experience can be acknowledged as discursively produced and non-“essential” but still maintain its political force. One approach, famously forwarded by Gayatri Spivak, argues that positivist essentialism can be strategically wielded to promote political change. In *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, Spivak claims that Subaltern Studies mobilized the idea of subaltern consciousness that stands in the place of “a difference rather than an identity.” Such a practice, she writes, explores the production of a “subject-effect,” in which “what seems to operate as a subject may be a part of an immense discontinuous network (‘text’ in the general sense) of strands that may be termed politics, ideology, economics, language, and so on” (204). In “Experience,” Joan Scott seeks not merely to point out the limitations of foundational accounts of experience, but to offer alternatives which can yet be politically viable. Claiming that “Experience is not a word that we can do without,” Scott calls for the politically invested critic to historicize experience in order to understand how it is constituted. Such a historicization would point out the way experience is variously interpreted, and the political yield of such interpretations. These two options can be placed in conversation with each other to form a set of political strategies: such a project would seem to call for a constant historicizing of the production of experience interspersed with the occasional strategic mobilization of such experience in a way that seeks to destabilize such hegemonic modes of discourse production.

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narratives about such bodies as the source of political liberation. Other writers claim both that the representation of experience of the oppressed other reinforces social hierarchy by erasing the possibility of self-representation and that many projects of self-representation (like feminism) assume a universal experience that continues to elide experiences. In the introduction to the black feminist anthology *But Some of Us Are Brave*, editors Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith write that feminism as it had been practiced up to that point implicitly centered on white women. Conversely, “Only through exploring the experience of supposedly ‘ordinary’ Black women whose ‘unexceptional’ actions enabled us and the race to survive, will we be able to begin to develop an overview and an analytical framework for understanding the lives of Afro-American women” (xxi-xxii).

Emphasizing personal narratives, writers argued, could counter hegemonic histories that erase particular raced, gendered, and classed experiences. As Joan Scott writes in her essay “Experience,” “The challenge to normative history has been described, in terms of conventional historical understandings of evidence, as an enlargement of the picture, a corrective to oversights resulting from inaccurate or incomplete vision, and it has rested its claim to legitimacy on the authority of experience, the direct experience of others, as well as of the historian who learns to see and illuminate the lives of those others in his or her texts” (24). In the ways of thinking promoted by such works, the sensual body of the subject remains a repository of authenticity, a grounding for a more accurate, complete and transformative history and politics. As Craig Ireland writes, “at stake is . . . the condition of possibility of an active subject and of a ground from which can be erected strategies of resistance (to use the jargon of the



1980s) and a politics of identity (to use the slogan of the 1990s) that might evade the hegemony, as current parlance phrases it, of dominant discursive formations” (94-95). The body becomes conceptualized as a counterpoint to theoretical approaches that imagine as universal the experiences of the socially dominant.

Those who argue for the authentic experience of the body often imagine as a foundation narratives about pain, suffering and violation. The call to produce narratives about black women’s experiences in *But Some of Us Are Brave*, for example, imagines as a first step towards a Black feminist curriculum the production of a course on “rape, battering, and incest as viewed by Black female and male authors,” informed by “essential firsthand information” from survivors. When discussing critiques of poststructuralist challenges to the authentic body, the editors of *Feminists Theorize the Political* note that “some feminists have argued that poststructuralism forbids recourse to a ‘real body’ or a ‘real sex’ and that such recourse is necessary to articulate moral and political opposition to violence, rape, and other forms of oppression” (xvi).⁷⁰ In this line of thinking, the suffering bodies of women – and narratives about such experiences – are the very foundation of the political. Pain becomes the ultimate representation of social truth. The importance of narrating pain, therefore, is that it taps into an unquestionable

⁷⁰ As an example of such, Sharon Marcus cites Mary Hawkesworth’s claims that “The undesirable consequences of the slide into relativism that results from too facile a conflation of the world and text is particularly evident when feminist concerns are taken as a starting point. Rape, domestic violence, and sexual harassment . . . are not fictions or figurations that admit of the free play of signification” (385). Marcus writes that “Hawkesworth makes three claims: that rape is real; that to be real means to be fixed, determinate, and transparent to understanding; and that feminist politics must understand rape as one of the real, clear facts of women’s lives” (385).

reality and authority. Such critics suggest that to describe bodily suffering as discursive is to violate a certain code of ethics: to, in essence, participate in the silencing of those who have already been silenced through violence.

If certain writers have suggested that considering pain as discursive is unethical and politically unviable, Elaine Scarry's work on torture and injury shows how a consideration of the discursive work of pain can intervene in and help people rethink political discourses. In Scarry's work, "real pain" is the limit case of experience. She posits the phenomenology of pain as something that resists and destroys language, writing that "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (4). The incompatibility of pain and language, she writes, would seem to prevent understanding: "Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language" (4). The experience of pain, she writes, is ultimately the erasure of discourse to the point of inexpressibility. Yet because pain denies language, she writes, the way it is approximated in discourse becomes even more significant: "A great deal, then, is at stake in the attempt to invent linguistic structures that will reach and accommodate this area of experience normally so inaccessible to language; the human attempt to reverse the de-objectifying work of pain by forcing pain itself into avenues of objectification is a project laden with practical and ethical consequence" (5-6). Structures of power utilize pain as discourse and in turn, narratives that seek to describe pain take on political importance.

If images and expressions of injury and pain are used by state power to stabilize itself, those who fight against the perpetuation of suffering similarly posit pain as the ultimate undeconstructable reality, and narratives about such suffering as the most important means to challenge such suffering. Such narratives draw on the empathy of the reader and in so doing encourage action. In her discussion of Amnesty International's project to end torture, for example, Scarry writes that "Amnesty International's ability to bring about the cessation of torture depends centrally on its ability to communicate the reality of physical pain to those who are not themselves in pain . . . The goal of the letter is not simply to make the reader a passive recipient of information about torture but to encourage his or her active assistance in eliminating torture" (8-9). Such a goal must assume a relation between the narrative about the experience and the actual experience: "Amnesty's ability to stop torture depends on its international authority, and its international authority depends on its reputation for consistent accuracy; the words 'someone is being tortured' cannot be, and are never, pronounced unless it is the case that someone is being tortured" (9-10).

Black Like Me and *Soul Sister* are political projects that rely on the painful and suffering body to "realize" the effects of racial injustice. While later works on experience emphasize the importance of narrating one's own suffering, however, these narratives authoritatively imagine the suffering of others as the suffering of the self. The books wield the experience of suffering, therefore, as a transparent reflection of empathy for the other, and encourage privileged white readers to identify sympathetically with their plight. These narratives point out the ease by which others' experience can be appropriated: the construction of a fantastical state of nature in which suffering and

degeneration are intimately tied together both reinscribes racial difference and erases the role of the state. By eliding the difference between self and other and claiming authority over the other's story, these narratives leave untouched the power differential that later works on experience illuminate. *Black Like Me* and *Soul Sister* thus lack critical self-reflection about power, positionality and epistemology. The texts' excessive emphasis on embodiment, however, points to a submerged civic anxiety.

Pain and Anxiety

Gayle Wald has argued that bodily pain is central to the narrative construction and representation of experience in *Black Like Me*, and is in fact at the core of the text's model of communicability: "in Griffin's narrative embodied pain is portrayed as a privileged mode of racial apprehension, one linked to the construction of circuits of shared knowledge that transcend the physical boundaries of individualized bodies. Embodied pain thus serves as a metaphor of the sympathetic bond that Griffin hopes to forge between himself and racialized 'others'" (161). The heightened pain of the body marks an alliance between the privileged citizen-witness and those he/she observes and the vivid representations of the battered body ask the reader to identify with the physical and emotional pain of each narrator. Carolyn Betensky, in her consideration of *Black Like Me* and other "crossing" narratives, reads the embodiment of suffering differently. Suffering, she writes, gives pleasure to people in positions of power by reminding them of their power: "The pleasures of powerlessness rely on a guarantee of safety, on the existence (and vigilant policing) of barriers so high and impermeable that the barriers may survive their own breaching and toppling. The enjoyment of powerlessness is, in



some sense, the enjoyment of power” (130).

Each of these formulations suggests that Griffin’s embodiment of the suffering of the other is narratively or psychologically productive. I would like to suggest that embodiment in both *Black Like Me* and *Soul Sister* displays and represses a civic anxiety over the role of the good white citizen in the 1960s. While personal narratives by blacks existed at the time, Griffin insists that “I, a specialist in race issues, really knew nothing of the Negro’s real problem” and that only total embodiment can offer him access to the “real story” (2). Similarly, Halsell imagines “the black experience” as closed off to her. Cross-racial sympathy in this formulation is grounded not in the vision of first-hand witnessing or the imagination of readership but in literally occupying the imagined position of the other.

An implicit aspect of this claim is that whites can only identify sympathetically with the writings of other whites. The friction between this implication and Griffin’s and Halsell’s purported goal to participate in narrating a “universal story” can be read, I think, as a manifestation of racially conservative civic anxiety. In an era in which nonviolent, cross-racial modes of resistance were increasingly challenged by calls to racial solidarity, the books imaginatively and anxiously produce the necessity for good white citizenship.⁷¹

⁷¹ In the denial of the possibility of African American self-representation, *Black Like Me* and *Soul Sister* practice what David Spurr calls a discursive “negation,” “by which Western writing conceives of the Other as absence, emptiness, nothingness, or death” (92). Spurr claims that negation “clear[s] a space for the expansion of the colonial imagination and for the pursuit of desire” (92-93). Here, the fantasy is one in which to be white can (“again”) be heroic, and authorizes the centrality of the white liberal to the narration of a future democracy. The fantasized existence of the blank space seemingly erases the force attendant to assuming the social position of the other. Yet as many have noted, like the off-limits space, the blank space



Nonviolent direct action – like sentimentalism – posited suffering at the core of political action, and offered up a space for cross-racial solidarity. This mode of political organization imagined state reform and just law enforcement as the solution to social hierarchy. *Black Like Me* and *Soul Sister* support such a project. Yet as Green and Cheatham point out, in the 1960s “the intractability of problems in the North and the continued, violent resistance of Whites in the South despite legislative and court victories led a number of disenchanted Black activists to consider alternatives to nonviolent, direct action, and integration, its central aim” (150).

Justification for alternative modes of resistance were authorized through calls to varying forms of civic or cultural identity. In 1962, Korean War veteran and former President of a North Carolina chapter of the NAACP Robert F. Williams, wrote: “I have asserted the right of Negroes to meet the violence of the Ku Klux Klan by armed self-defense – and have acted on it” (Green and Cheatham 99). He justified his actions through a call to citizenship: “It has always been an accepted right of Americans, as the history of our Western states proves, that where the law is unable, or unwilling, to enforce order, the citizens can, and must, act in self-defense against lawless violence. I believe this right holds for black Americans as well as whites” (99). While he argued that he did not support retributive violence or advocate the suspension of nonviolent tactics, Williams urged “flexibility in the freedom struggle” (100). As the 1960s continued, alternatives to nonviolence were increasingly framed in terms of Black

is characteristic of colonial discourse and was historically employed to justify dominance. While performing this making-blank of the human soul and the erasure of the ability to communicate, Griffin and Halsell cement the erasure of African American narration on which their texts rely.

Nationalism, which emphasized strength rather than suffering and centered around cultural identity and solidarity. Malcolm X queried in a speech at Abyssinian Baptist Church: “Will these awakened black masses demand integration into the white society that enslaved them or will they demand complete separation from that cruel white society that has enslaved them? Will the exploited and oppressed black masses seek integration with their white exploiters and white oppressors or will these awakened black masses truly revolt and separate themselves completely from this wicked race that has enslaved us?” (Green and Cheatham 164).

I would like to read Griffin’s and Halsell’s emphasis on the suffering white body as an anxious response to a growing call to Black nationalism. The construction suggests a civic anxiety about losing political power grounded in sentimentalist race relations. Each text forwards the suffering, white-turned-black body as a political necessity. The “good white citizen,” therefore, seeks at one and the same time to change and to protect the status quo. The literal embodiment of the position of the other suggests that at the core of political empathy is a desire to contain and control the public narrative about African American life, a narrative which was becoming increasingly fractured and contestatory.

The anxiety with which they ensure this necessity is apparent in foregrounded attempts to counter potential criticisms. Griffin writes in his Preface, “Some Whites will say this is not really it. They will say this is the white man’s experience as a Negro in the South, not the Negro’s. But this is picayunish, and we no longer have time for that. We no longer have time to atomize principles and beg the question. We fill too many gutters while we argue unimportant points and confuse issues” (preface). The anxiety here about the passage of time both masks and points to a fear of changing discourses which may

soon render the good white citizen obsolete. Halsell's book is more direct. In a reversal that relies on the very critique she fears, Halsell draws on Malcolm X himself to justify her project. When an African American acquaintance "let me know that he and others like him were sick and tired of white liberals coming to 'study' and help the Negroes" (68-9), she suggests that her work is in line with "brotherly love" which could "rise above" the "sins" of the past (70). She uses Malcolm X's writings to suggest that Jim's response to her project stems from "hatred of a man because of his color": "Now that it was too late I remembered the final conviction of Malcolm X and wished I had quoted that to Jim: *You can hate the System* – Malcolm had told the black people in his last days – *but there's no need to hate the person*" (71, original emphasis). The easy divide here between the "System" and the "person" allows herself to see her actions as solely interpersonal and ethical. She, this passage would suggest, is not contaminated by a "System."

The popularity of *Black Like Me* in the early 1960s suggests that Griffin's fears were at the time unfounded. The sentimentalism underlying the relation between good white liberals and blacks struggling against violence and discrimination was perhaps ingrained within the mainstream Civil Rights movement. Yet within the decade, the rise of Black nationalism would transform white-black relations and foreground the racial hypocrisy of white liberalism evident within *Black Like Me*. In a transformed political atmosphere, Griffin disowned his former effort. Such a transformation also ensured that *Soul Sister* – while somewhat popular upon first publication – could (thankfully) be discarded as an anachronism and never attain the enduring fame of *Black Like Me*.

Postscript

Undercover witnessing narratives continue in the present moment. As Carolyn Betensky and Eric Schocket point out, such stories (with varying political ideologies) continued to be produced in the 1980s and 90s, such as TV anchor Pat Harper's 1987 special "There but for the Grace of God," in which she lived as a homeless woman for six days, Lawrence Otis Graham's 1992 exposé "Invisible Man," in which he (an African American corporate lawyer) obtained a job as a busboy at an all-white country club, and Janet Lii's 1995 "Week in Sweatshop Reveals Grim Conspiracy of Poor," in which, according to Eric Schocket, Lii went undercover "to expose the 'complicity' of immigrant sweatshop workers with immigrant sweatshop owners" (note 17, 129). Cross-class passing continues into the 2000s: an acclaimed contemporary "down-and-out" narrative is Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America* (2001). We can also see evidence of a pop cultural obsession with crossing class boundaries in recent reality TV shows such as Morgan Spurlock's *30 Days*. Most recently, the practice has been uncomfortably applied in the context of the religious politics of the current era, with British journalist Liz Jones's "My Week Wearing a Burka," published in the *Mail Online* on August 10, 2009. These reinscriptions suggest that sentimentalist civic tropes – if they are no longer acceptable in black-white relations – are still widely popular, and eminently marketable,⁷² in the context of class and now, in

⁷² In an interview with Robert Birnbaum, Barbara Ehrenreich talks about the inception of the idea for *Nickel and Dimed*. While lunching with the editor of *Harper's Magazine*:

the conversation drifted to talking about welfare reform and the assumption that these single moms could just get out there in the workforce and get a job and then everything would be okay. They'd be lifted out of poverty. We were both agreeing that nobody

relation to religion.⁷³ It is clear that the mainstream still believes – and is expected to believe – that democracy depends on the imagination of pain.

Most of the works of citizen witnessing I have discussed up to this point pair the acts of witnessing and observation with a faith in the perfectibility of the so-called democratic state. The assumption in such works is that to see and represent – and to facilitate the reader’s seeing and understanding – is to move toward the rational reform of the state. These acts, in fact, become modes of civic heroism. I have just discussed a narrative that clings to such ideals while betraying a racially conservative anxiety over the lessening importance of the good white citizen. As the dissertation progresses, I will explore works that mourn a loss of citizen power based in a different kind of threat: the growth of the state. In Chapter Three, I will consider how James Agee and Walker Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* embraces a move away from citizenship. This book conceptualizes witnessing – in its connection with the state – as a shameful, not a

seems to see that the math doesn't work. That's when I made this, perhaps disastrous suggestion, that somebody should go out there and do the old-fashioned kind of journalism, just try it for themselves and write about it. I did not expect him to say, 'Yeah, great idea. It should be you.'

Her profession of surprise here erases recognition of the eminent marketability of sensationalism while retaining its heroic aspects. Ehrenreich has also been surprised when people have drawn a connection between *Nickel and Dimed* and *Black Like Me*. While her website now draws the connection explicitly (and, ironically, as a justification for her project against potential ethical criticisms!), Betensky cites an interview in which “Ehrenreich responds that she had neither read Griffin’s narrative nor considered the possibility that she might be ‘slumming’” (154 note 4).

⁷³ This may be truer for class than for religion. See online critiques of Jones’s article by commentators Krista, Moonblossom and Sadie.

heroic, act. Shame, I will argue, becomes the catalyst for a seductive, if deeply flawed and ultimately unsustainable, mode of human community.



Chapter Three

Witnessing and the Politics of Shame in James Agee and Walker Evans's

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

The writings of the deliberate citizen-witness, I have argued, emerge at moments when the modern state's role in citizen's lives is being transformed or negotiated. If in the late nineteenth century, the citizen-witness valorizes the idea of citizenship, as the twentieth century progresses, self-representations by citizen-witnesses become increasingly troubled. In the previous chapter I explored the way anxious reinscriptions of civic witnessing in the Civil Rights era subtly and perhaps accidentally disrupt their own projects. In this chapter, I will chart a more explicit and conscious challenge to generic conventions evidenced in James Agee and Walker Evans's 1941 work *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

If the New Deal years see unproblematically heroic portrayals of citizen-witnessing, Agee and Evans's book both participates in and counters such practices, offering for readers an alternative if unsustainable model of citizenship and civic community. *Famous Men* mobilizes the shame of the citizen-witness to critique and reform both journalism and politics. First, shame's association with an objectifying vision is enlisted to point out the way social reform journalism's spectatorial conventions may reinforce racial and class hierarchy, thereby undermining attendant concepts of altruistic citizenship and the perfectibility of the state. *Famous Men* next explores and ultimately destabilizes a mode of representation that attempts to avoid objectification by refocusing vision on the inanimate object instead of the human. Finally, the book

forwards an alternative model of sociality in which the ideal democratic space becomes one which erases shame (and therefore, hierarchy) because all risk it. This formulation re-envision the good citizen as one who exposes him or herself as an object to the gaze of the other. I will argue, however, that *Famous Men*'s "imagined community" erases its own reliance on hierarchical objectification and difference.⁷⁴

The 1930s ushered in a wave of citizen-witnessing funded by the Roosevelt administration. Various government-sponsored documentary projects – both written and visual – sought to record life during the Great Depression. Within the Federal Writers' Project, for example, documentarians with the Folklore Project compiled thousands of life histories from 24 states between 1936 and 1940. According to the Library of Congress the histories "[vary] in form from narrative to dialogue to report to case history. The histories describe the informant's family education, income, occupation, political views, religion and mores, medical needs, diet and miscellaneous observations" ("American Life Histories"). These histories tend to be short in length and usually record a brief encounter between documentarian and subject. At the same time, the Resettlement Authority (which became the Farm Security Administration) commissioned photographers to document living conditions in agricultural regions of the country. This project "focused relentlessly on the gap between victims of rural poverty and the

⁷⁴ The term "imagined community" refers to Benedict Anderson's similarly titled book. Anderson tracks the way that print capitalism enabled the imagining of the nation through the circulation of different kinds of cultural texts, including newspapers, censuses, and maps. I utilize the term to emphasize the important role both nonfictional and fictional narratives play in producing, critiquing and experimenting with various conceptualizations of political community.

comfortable condition of the presumed middle-class viewers of the images and found a wide distribution in the popular press, museums, and traveling exhibitions” (Allred 4).

The most enduring and well-known social documents from this period bring together description and image in photo-textual books or “photographic essays” which primarily critiqued Southern poverty and migration during the Dust Bowl.⁷⁵ The most well-known of these are *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White’s *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), Dorothea Lange and Paul Schuster Taylor’s *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (1939), and Richard Wright’s *12 Million Black Voices* (1941).⁷⁶ These works are direct descendants of the citizen-witnessing of the late-nineteenth century; as William Stott points out, “The point of all these books was the same: to make the reader feel he was firsthand witness to a social condition” (214).

If most of these books were not funded by government agencies (Agee was commissioned by *Fortune* magazine to research and write *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*), by drawing on the work of government photographers they participate in a common project to document and critique contemporary living conditions. *An American Exodus*, for example, displayed photographs Lange took for the Resettlement Authority,

⁷⁵ W.J.T. Mitchell describes the photographic essay as “a literal conjunction of photographs and text – usually united by a documentary purpose, often political, journalistic, sometimes scientific (sociology)” (285-286). He notes that “[p]hoto-essays have been, by and large, the product of progressive, liberal consciences, associated with political reform and leftist causes” (287).

⁷⁶ Alan Trachtenberg points out that after the publication of *You Have Seen Their Faces* “a rash of picture-and-word books appeared between 1938 and 1941 on themes of rural poverty, the small town, the Negro, the condition of agriculture” (252-3).

12 Million Black Voices takes its images from the FSA archive, and Walker Evans was an FSA photographer. Taken together, these images produced and reinforced a “typical” view of both social reality and norms of representation. As Alan Trachtenberg writes, “images of farmers struggling against drought, or citizens gathered in a small-town square [were] typical images of typical scenes. Such books reinforced the lesson of popular journalism, that pictures which looked like documents of the times be accompanied with captions, with explanations, with open appeals to the viewer’s sympathy or anger” (253). Oftentimes subjects were led into performing the properly political image. Abigail Solomon-Godeau writes:

When subjects smiled into the camera, they were stage-managed into more somber poses; sharecroppers who wore their best clothes to be photographed were told to change into their ragged everyday wear, persuaded not to wash begrimed hands and faces for the camera. . . .

Insofar as the mandate of the program was to bolster popular and governmental support for New Deal relief policies, it was images of the ‘worthy’ as opposed to the ‘unworthy’ poor that were promoted. (179)

The images produced by the Farm Security Administration, therefore, crafted a particular image of social reality, one which authorized and justified governmental intervention.

Yet not all images of the socio-political landscape were produced by government sponsored projects like the Farm Security Administration. Bourke-White, for example, was a magazine photographer. If up until the 1930s, photographs accompanied news primarily in yellow journalism and tabloids, the 1930s saw the rise of both documentary filmmaking and mass-circulation picture magazines like *Life*, where Bourke-White

worked (Becker 297). The increasing use and circulation of still and moving pictures during the decade was facilitated by the “the accelerating development and exploitation of new technologies – new cameras, film stock, means of mechanical reproduction, presses, papers, inks; new techniques – of graphics, layout, presentation and reportage; new styles of publication and exhibition; and new methods of finance, promotion and distribution” (Tagg, *BR* 13). Such processes broadened the modes by which citizen-witnessing narratives could be constructed, produced, and circulated.

It might be posited that the increasing access to citizen-witnessing would lead to the weakening of the heroic associations of witnessing. Indeed, Walter Benjamin’s argument that the mechanical reproduction leads to a loss of the aura of the work of art is by now well-known. Karin Becker argues, however, that 1930s U.S. popular culture undermines Benjamin’s claims. Rather, she argues, “we find an ‘aura’ reconstructed to privilege particular spheres of mass production and popular culture, including in this case, photojournalism” (297). The photo essay in particular, with its “determination of the single photograph as an idealized moment – fetishized as ‘the decisive moment’ either alone or at the centre of the essay,” helped to elevate the photojournalist to the status of artist (297). Such fetishization of both image and photographer is most obvious in the case of Bourke-White. As John Tagg argues in “Melancholy Realism”: “From the very beginning, the antics of the ‘crack photographer’ were central to the glamour and modernity of *Life*. The photographers were the stars . . . the salary, the pose, the clothes, the travel, and the life were integral to the package being sold, in which ‘Margaret Bourke-White makes a picture’ was always part of the performative meaning of the image, and in which an essential part of the story would always be an account of her

pains to meet the challenge of her assignment” (12, footnote deleted). The construction of Bourke-White and Caldwell as heroic good citizens who, in the name of social change, pursue the story in the face of adversity is expressed in the very last paragraphs of the book, in which Bourke-White describes both the excitement of shooting photographs in a “hysteria”-laden church service, and the adventure of photographing a chain gang as “the captain shouted that he would shoot off our tires” (190). *You Have Seen Their Faces* rehabilitated, therefore, the heroic nature of the citizen-witness as established in the late nineteenth century.

You Have Seen Their Faces further emphasizes the centrality of the citizen-witness by highlighting the authors’ roles in constructing the text (both captions and images). In perhaps the most obvious expression of the central role of the citizen-witness in representing the other person’s perspective, the note to the book indicates that “The legends under the pictures are intended to express the authors’ own conceptions of the sentiments of the individuals portrayed; they do not pretend to reproduce the actual sentiments of these persons” (6). At the end of the book, the reader accesses the experiences of Caldwell and Bourke-White as they pursue their project. While this section, entitled “Notes on photographs by Margaret Bourke-White,” focuses primarily on the types of photographic equipment she utilized, it also narrates quite captivantly the dramatic process of attaining a photograph. Bourke-White writes, for example, about her technique of capturing particular expressions: “It might be an hour before their faces or gestures gave us what we were trying to express, but the instant it occurred the scene was imprisoned on a sheet of film before they knew what had happened” (187).

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If You Have Seen Their Faces assumes the witness's right to authoritatively represent the experience of the other person, it mirrors as well two other aspects of the genre: the sensational exposure of the grotesque injustices of a socially ignored space and the one-to-one pairing of word and image. The book takes up social reform journalism's assumption that the textual representation of the other space and other person can produce social change. The book provides a visual and narrative representation of the South during the Depression, pairing photographs with written text to expose the conditions of poor tenant farmers. The photographs were invasive, sensational, and grotesque: as Stott writes, Bourke-White captured people "bare, defenseless before the camera and its stunning flash. No dignity seems left them: we see their meager fly-infested meals, their soiled linen; we see them spotlighted in the raptures of a revival meeting, a woman's arms frozen absurdly in the air; we see a preacher taken in peroration, his mouth and nostrils open like a hyena's" (220).

Like the word-image relation in turn-of-the-century citizen-witnessing (see Chapter One), words are meant to correspond neatly to the images displayed. The photographs are accompanied by captions indicating the location of the photograph and representing the thoughts the people in the photograph are supposedly having at that moment. In one example of this practice, an image in Part V of the book depicts two elderly people looking off to their left. The caption reads: "*Yazoo City, Mississippi*: 'I think it's only right that the government ought to be run with people like us in mind'" (147). While Caldwell and Bourke-White produced the captions (and were open about their role in doing so), they read like excerpts from the Federal Writers Project interviews.

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This approach to documentation, therefore, draws on the assumptions and practices of the civic witnessing tradition established in the 1890s and 1900s. *Famous Men* intervenes in, manipulates, and critiques the tradition of citizen-witnessing that solidifies at the end of the nineteenth century and resurges in the 1930s. The intervention that *Famous Men* makes into this tradition can be illuminated perhaps most effectively by juxtaposing it with the modes of representation common to both governmental documentary projects of the time and the photo-textual book as exemplified by *You Have Seen Their Faces*.⁷⁷ *Famous Men* both mimics and ultimately destabilizes norms established in the late nineteenth century and in its contemporary moment. In so doing, it simultaneously disrupts the genre's valorization of the good citizen.

At first glance, the form of the book and the conditions of its production seem to engage with the conventions of the genre. Agee and Evans were sent to Alabama on behalf of *Fortune* magazine to document the government's rural electrification program, a project of the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.) which was designed to provide economic relief during and after the Depression. The physical appearance of the book

⁷⁷ In *American Modernism and Depression Documentary*, Jeff Allred provocatively argues that readings that see *You Have Seen Their Faces* as the "propagandistic or kitschy" antagonist to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*'s "authentic modernism" are no longer productive. Such a comparison is, of course, drawn directly from *Famous Men* itself, which deliberately places itself in contradistinction with *Faces*. Allred's solution to this "tired debate" is to position both books in the context of modernism, and to invert their value differential. In his rewriting, *Faces* is rehabilitated as pop culturally savvy and politically progressive where *Famous Men* is linked with a backward-looking and politically stilted elitism. I similarly have issues with the oftentimes-unthinking valorization of *Famous Men*, but I don't wish to eliminate or underplay the very clear differences between the two texts, nor do I find it necessary to elevate *Faces* in order to critique *Famous Men*.

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seems to conform to the conventions of the photo-textual book: Evans's photographs of tenant farmers are clustered at the beginning, and much of Agee's prose engages with the conditions of the farmers' existence. Yet even the most limited overview exposes the book's critique of the representational practices common to the social reform journalism of both governmental projects and the photo-essay.

Famous Men's form most obviously disrupts these modes of representation. Its two "books" are of vastly different length, and include pieces of information that do not seem to contribute to what is conventionally considered documentation. Book One, for example, consists of "Preliminaries," including unattributed quotations from *King Lear* and the *Communist Manifesto*, an excerpt from a child's geography textbook, two footnotes, and a list of "Persons and Places" such as would be expected from a playscript.⁷⁸ Book Two spans over 400 pages, and, while it includes a written tour of the homes and surroundings of the tenant families as well as long semi-anthropological descriptions of objects and practices, it also incorporates poetry, personal anecdotes, sexual fantasies, newspaper excerpts, a list of "monosyllabic Anglo-Saxon words" (most

⁷⁸ Book One has also been read as including Evans's photographs. Mitchell writes:

The location of Evans's photos at the front of the volume is an even more aggressive declaration of photographic independence. In contrast to the standard practices of interweaving photos with text or placing them in a middle or concluding section where they can appear in the context provided by the text, Evans and Agee force us to confront the photographs without context . . . When we do finally reach the contents, we learn that we are already in 'Book Two' and that the photographs are the 'Book One,' which we have already 'read.' (291-292)

The layout of various editions may account for various interpretations of the contents of the two "books."

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of which are not monosyllabic), and lyrical meditational passages – all of which are atypical of the genre. When taken as a whole, the book’s structure, like the “fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement” that Agee notoriously claimed he wished his words could approximate, is akin not to a linear narrative but rather to a collection of objects (13).

The content of the photographs and the writing similarly violate the genre’s norms of representation. Unlike conventional citizen-witnessing, which uses images as supplements to document and condemn specific living conditions, in this work, Evans’s photographs stand alone, without title or comment. His subjects stare from the frames of each photograph into the eyes of the reader, who is given no guidance as to what these gazes might mean. Tagg describes Evans’s oeuvre as follows: “In Evans’s image, meaning is held back, seemingly less by the photographer than by the objects themselves, from which the viewer is cut off by an uncertain distance that reintroduces the presence of the lens between the eye and the scene” (“MR” 59). If citizen-witnessing conventionally presents and explains images of poverty so that they can serve as easy-to-read documentary evidence for a social change platform, *Famous Men*’s images, as Tagg points out, disallow this easy transformation of image into meaning.

Most obviously, however, the book emphasizes (and in so doing attempts to undercut) the invasive voyeurism of even the most altruistic journalism. W.J. T. Mitchell notes that “There is something deeply disturbing, even disagreeable, about this (unavoidable) aestheticizing response to what after all is a real person in desperately impoverished circumstances. Why should we have a right to look on this woman and

find her fatigue, pain, and anxiety beautiful?” (294). His reflections mirror the text, which poses similar questions. In one of his famous diatribes, for example, Agee explicitly aligns journalism with an unacceptable infringement on other people’s privacy, early in the book describing the practice of it as “curious,” “obscene,” and “thoroughly terrifying.” He writes that journalism is notable for “prying into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings, an ignorant and helpless rural family, for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings” (7). In this context, the citizen-witness – and, by Mitchell’s account, the reader – is no longer “good,” but is rather deeply compromised.⁷⁹

If traditionally the goodness of the citizen-witness reaffirms the ultimate perfectibility of the state, the citizen and democracy, here the shame of the citizen-witness is employed to critique the disjunction between democratic ideals and democratic practice. Using shame as both a marker of a fundamentally damaged democratic system and as the catalyst for producing an alternative democratic community, *Famous Men* models the way a subset of privileged U.S. citizens in the mid-twentieth century began to question and critique traditional political categories. In this essay, I explore both the appeal of shame politics and its significant limitations. As I will suggest later in the

⁷⁹ William Stott has compiled a list of even more ways *Famous Men* diverges from other modes of documentary case study, including ““It did not portray the tenants as brutes or puling babes” (292); “it did not try to demand that its audience be moved on behalf of its subjects” (293); and “It was not pragmatic and present-oriented, but tragic and elegiac” (293). “In short,” Stott writes, “not only did Agee’s text not cater to the accepted beliefs of the thirties, it obstructed and even denied them. It used the documentary genre to qualify or disprove the genre’s usual values” (294).

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essay, Agee's conceptualization of shame points forward to the present moment, in which a similar politics of shame has emerged in the West as a response to injustice. If this type of politics does offer the potential for a certain reconceptualization of the democratic community, I will argue that *Famous Men's* politics of shame – like many of its current manifestations – imagines community on the basis of similarity, erasing material difference and (re-)positioning the suffering white liberal as the hero of the polis.

On Shame and Shame Theory

In her 2007 book *From Guilt to Shame*, Ruth Leys traces a historical shift in the West from an emphasis on guilt, which focuses on the actions of a subject (“what one does”) to an emphasis on shame, which focuses on being (“who one is”) (11).⁸⁰ She discusses the movement of the logic of torture, for example, and notes the erasure of survivor guilt from the diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder in favor of an emphasis on the “traumatic image” and the “spectatorial logic” of shame. While Leys argues that the increased interest in shame theory occurs primarily in the last twenty years, she traces earlier considerations of shame in the works of Charles Darwin,

⁸⁰ Sixty years earlier, Ruth Benedict hypothesized a similar shift when, in her 1946 book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, she argued that U.S. culture at the time was becoming increasingly conscious of shame. Conversely, some in the field of legal studies maintain that the reverse has happened, and that guilt has overtaken shame as a legal category in the West only in the last century. Mark Drumbl cites John Braithwaite's argument thus, contextualizing this shift by noting Freud's emphasis on guilt at the turn of the century, the rise of the penitentiary, the rise of the city (which deemphasized social interaction in favor of anonymity), and positing that the Victorian sensibility was “disgusted” by shame-based modes of punishment.

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anthropologist Ruth Benedict, and psychologist Silvan Tomkins. Shame has also been theorized in legal studies; potently described by Frantz Fanon in his study of the psychological effects of colonialism, *Black Skin White Masks*; and theorized in the critical and philosophical works of Elspeth Probyn, Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, E.R. Dodds, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

Despite various disagreements and debates about shame certain common traits emerge.⁸¹ The most helpful for my reading of *Famous Men* are those theories of shame which portray it as a response to objectification by the gaze of the other. Shame in anthropology and legal studies is conventionally associated with a network of social or public gazes. In her argument that WWII-era Japan is a “shame culture,” for example, Benedict intimately links shame and sociality: “The primacy of shame in Japanese life means, as it does in any tribe or nation where shame is deeply felt, that any man watches

⁸¹ If one debate focuses on the relative importance of guilt and shame in the West, Leys points out another area of disagreement. While pre-1950s psychoanalysts and others tended to represent shame as a predominantly negative emotion, she notes, recent writers like Probyn, Agamben, and Sedgwick have rehabilitated it as ultimately productive (124). Yet another point of contention focuses on the distinction between guilt and shame, some wishing to distinguish one from the other (and in various ways at that) and others wishing to see them as a cluster of related affects. For example, Drumbl notes that in the restorative justice literature, “guilt arises from externally imposed judgment, shame emerges from internal acknowledgment that what one did was blameworthy” (1232). This external/internal distinction differs from Leys’s claim that the conventional distinction stems from the difference between “what one does” and “who one is” (11) and her further claim (like Tomkins) that the two are part of the same complex of emotions. Debates on shame take place as well amidst a larger intellectual conversation on the emotions in general. While some would have it that the emotions are “intentional,” in *Feeling in Theory* Rei Terada argues that emotions indicate the lack, not the presence, of the subject and subjectivity.

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the judgment of the public upon his deeds. He need only fantasy what their verdict will be, but he orients himself toward the verdict of others” (224). Leys points out in regard to Abu Ghraib that torture techniques rely on the role shame is purported to play in Arab culture, and that “all the methods that have been described in the current scandal are designed to publicly humiliate and shame the prisoner” (3). Similarly, Nathan Harris and Shadd Maruna note that legal theories about the use of shame in restorative justice rely on the importance of “the individual’s perception of social rejection or disapproval,” or what they call “the social threat.” (6). These theories suggest the importance of being the object of the gaze and, as Giorgio Agamben will suggest, the loss of sovereignty associated with such objectification.

The experience of being both subject and object – one that sees and one that is seen – is described by Agamben as the “fundamental sentiment of being a subject”; in other words, it is “to be subjected and to be sovereign. Shame is what is produced in the absolute concomitance of subjectification and desubjectification, self-loss and self-possession, servitude and sovereignty” (*RA* 107). Agamben uses the work of Emmanuel Levinas to claim that shame stems from the inability to escape one’s being: “shame is grounded in our being’s incapacity to move away and break from itself. If we experience shame in nudity, it is because we cannot hide what we would like to remove from the field of vision” (*RA* 104). In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben connects the shame of being both subject and object to the “new biopolitical body of humanity,” the “bare life of the citizen” who is both the object of state power and, in modern democratic theory, the subject of political power (9).

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Frantz Fanon's psychoanalytic consideration of shame as one of "the anomalies of affect" associated with colonization similarly hinges upon the subject/object split (10). In Chapter Five of *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon theorizes the way colonizing vision is structured to produce the desubjectification of the colonized. Fanon's colonial landscape is characterized as a network of judgmental gazes. He describes, for example, the way racism produces hypervisible bodies (as demonstrated when a child pointed him out, again and again, with the words "Look! A Negro!"); and repeatedly uses visual metaphors to describe racialized encounters. Fanon discusses the transition of self-perception from active subject to object which occurs when the self encounters the racist gaze: "I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects" (109). In this passage, the self as subject, the "I" with a "will" or "spirit," comes into conflict with the self as "an object in the midst of other objects." Fanon's description of being positioned as both subject and object corresponds to the notion of shame's split subjectivity and illuminates how particular modes of vision inscribe shame into the spectatorial structures of the colonial system.

Taking this positing of exposure, vulnerability and split subjectivity to its inevitable limit, Jacques Derrida in a well-known passage in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* describes his shame at being seen naked by his cat. In being seen by the cat, he imagines himself in the cat's position, betraying the seemingly rigid boundaries of a subjectivity which denies animality. He sees and recognizes himself being seen at the same time. Derrida notes the fragility of the definition of the human: "As with every bottomless gaze, as with the eyes of the other, the gaze called 'animal' offers to my sight

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the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say, the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announces himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives himself” (12). Shame, in this formulation, signals a subjectivity split not just between subject and object, but between human and not-human as well. In these conceptualizations, the phenomenological experience of feeling split and objectified reinforces and intensifies the feeling of vulnerability attendant to exposure.

All of the above theorists focus primarily on the lived experience of shame, considering the social and political circumstances that produce it, how it manifests in the body, and its relation to subjectivity – and these readings will be helpful when I turn to *Famous Men*. What is as yet undertheorized, however, is the public performance of shame by the privileged as a response to injustice. While Leys ultimately uses her book to condemn shame theory in a defense of what she sees as an embattled approach to the human psyche (psychoanalysis), she ends her introduction in a striking and perhaps paradoxical way, noting: “Many Americans, including myself, would not hesitate to declare that they experience intense shame for the prisoner abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib. Nothing that is said critically about contemporary shame theory in the pages that follow is meant to criticize the view that shame can be an appropriate response to such a situation” (16). This comment, strikingly different from her chapter up to this point (and indeed from the thrust of her argument), evokes an alternative approach to the study of shame which many of the above theories, in their associations with the specularity of the social landscape, allude to but do not directly grapple with: shame as a particularly charged altruistic political response. While the preceding studies almost predominantly

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focus on the lived experience of shame, then, I would like to consider its textual production and political use.

In her 2005 book *Blush: The Face of Shame*, Elspeth Probyn asserts that the performance of shame is political. Linking Silvan Tomkins's work on shame with Pierre Bourdieu's theorization of *habitus*, she argues that shame's expression in the body holds the potential for personal transformation, the academic rethinking of the role of the body, and political change. As an example of shame's productive potential, Probyn describes her shame-filled and teary reaction to approaching Ayers Rock, a contested site in Australia which is both a sacred space for Aboriginal people and a tourist location for the Australian government. She suggests that, as a white Australian who has benefited from the colonization of the land, shame is a viable political response. Such moments, Probyn claims, show how shame, by indicating "interest" in the other person and making "the feeling and minding and thinking and social body [come] alive," becomes "a prompt for [political] action" (34-35; 101).⁸² It is this increasingly common assumption about the political power of performing shame, albeit from a different angle, which I would like to examine and ultimately critique in Agee's work.

Famous Men enlists shame as a textual marker by mobilizing its conventional associations with the exposure to the gaze of the other.⁸³ In so doing, the book suggests

⁸² Probyn claims, after Tomkins, that "If you're interested in and care about the interest of others, you *spend* much of your life blushing. Conversely, if you don't care, then attempts to shame won't move you. *Shame* highlights different levels of interest" (x).

⁸³ In making this claim, I am not meaning to forward the argument that Agee deliberately draws on the *shame* theories I have listed above (which would clearly be impossible as many were published after

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that conventional social reform journalism unwittingly relies on objectifying structures of vision characteristic of colonial relations. In its imagining of an ashamed citizen-witness, the book goes further, asking the American reader and the nation itself to “look at your shame!”⁸⁴ The book ultimately critiques the roles of the citizen, the state, and democratic practice, ending by imagining shame as a gateway to an alternative (if, I will argue, equally problematic) set of social relations that might replace those it criticizes.

Shame and the Violence of Voyeurism

Since *Famous Men*’s publication, Lionel Trilling, James Lowe, Carolyn Wells Kraus and other critics have pointed out what they often call Agee’s guilt. They tend to read these explosions as manifestations of his personal response to the scenes he witnesses. Trilling, for example, explains these moments as “the observer’s guilt at his own relative freedom” (102). Lowe describes Agee’s self-flagellation as stemming from his failure to permanently attain a shared consciousness with those he witnesses: “As long as individuals are oppressed . . . knowledge or ignorance of implication in this oppression produces guilt or insensitivity in the advantaged that, together with the disabled consciousness of the oppressed, denies the full reciprocity among all individuals necessary for perfect and absolute unity” (87). Kraus argues that guilt is an appropriate

Famous Men was). Rather, I would like to suggest that despite interpretive debates, the concept of “shame” holds certain associations which Agee’s work implicitly reflects and mobilizes.

⁸⁴ In a posthumously published essay, forcefully titled “America! Look at Your Shame!,” Agee responds to a photograph taken during the 1943 race riots in Detroit, and narrates a story about his self-proclaimedly shameful refusal to speak out against overt racism. The essay, written soon after the publication of *Famous Men*, engages with similar topics and questions as the book.

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ethical response to the “presumptuousness” inherent to the nonfiction enterprise (292). While these critics tend to conceptualize shame as emanating from the realities of lived experience to the documentation of that experience, I would like to read *Famous Men*’s use of shame in a somewhat different way: as a literary device that acts in the service of (and, paradoxically, against) the text’s larger political goals.

Various scenes near the beginning of *Famous Men* are emphasized by eruptions of shame; these passages become dramatized representations of the way particular structures of vision uphold hierarchical social relations. An early passage titled “Late Sunday Morning” exposes the way that race relations in the South rely on modes of vision that are designed to produce shame. In “Late Sunday Morning,” Agee and Evans are invited by a white landowner to visit the house of African American sharecroppers. When they arrive, it becomes clear that the landowner’s motivation for the visit is to goad the farmers into a forced performance which will both physicalize and validate a system of hierarchical social relations. As the three arrive at the foreman’s house it becomes clear that they are interrupting a family gathering, a brief respite after a week of hard labor. By bringing Agee and Evans to the house on a Sunday, the landowner immediately performs his refusal to see the laborers as circulating within his set of social codes and conventions.

This performance of social domination becomes reinforced by a more formal and equally forced performance, when the landowner commands three young men to demonstrate, in Agee’s words, “what nigger music is like” (28). As the men perform a series of songs, Agee describes himself as “sick” that this anthropological performance has been commissioned for himself and Evans (31). He suggests that, just as the African

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American laborers are trapped in the performance of social hierarchy, he too, is not just a spectator but a performer as well: “now, in a perversion of self-torture, I played my part through. I gave their leader fifty cents, trying at the same time, through my eyes, to communicate much more, and said I was sorry we had held them up and that I hoped they would not be late; and he thanked me for them in a dead voice, not looking me in the eye, and they went away” (31). Both Agee and those he witnesses are associated with expressions of shame – manifested either in “sickness” and “a perversion of self-torture” or the reluctance to maintain eye contact.

A second passage, entitled “Near a Church,” replicates the initial depiction of shame in “Late Sunday Morning.” In this passage, Agee and Evans are admiring a rural church when Agee exchanges glances with a young African American couple walking down a nearby path. He attempts to catch up to them to ask where he might find a minister so that they might enter the building. The couple stiffens as they hear him approach, and walk faster. Unable to close the distance, Agee begins to run. He writes:

At the sound of the twist of my shoe in the gravel, the young woman’s whole body was jerked down tight as a fist into a crouch from which immediately, the rear foot skidding in the loose stone so that she nearly fell, like a kicked cow scrambling out of a creek, eyes crazy, chin stretched tight, she sprang forward into the first motions of a running not human but that of a suddenly terrified wild animal. (41)

In this passage, Agee as a white man is aligned with the pervasive threat of violence. He describes his attempts to correct the damage by “looking into their eyes. . . I wanted only that they should be restored, and should know I was their friend, and that I might melt

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from existence: ‘I’m *very sorry!* I’m *very* sorry if I scared you! I didn’t mean to scare you at all. I wouldn’t have done any such thing for anything’” (42, original emphasis).

Eye contact, however, does little to nothing and does not lead to communication:

They just kept looking at me. There was no more for them to say than for me. The least I could have done was to throw myself flat on my face and embrace and kiss their feet. That impulse took hold of me so powerfully, from my whole body, not by thought, that I caught myself from doing it exactly and as scarcely as you snatch yourself from jumping from a sheer height: here, with the realization that it would have frightened them still worse (to say nothing of me) and would have been still less explicable; so that I stood and looked into their eyes and loved them, and wished to God I was dead. (42)

The parallels between this passage and the end of “Late Sunday Morning” are striking; in both, Agee describes the inefficacy or impossibility of the mutual gaze, and aligns shame with bodily trauma (sickness, masochism, and suicidal impulses).

These passages dramatize shame, aligning the scenes not with rational documentation but rather with sentimentalism and melodrama. The first scene makes clear this commitment to theatricality, by describing the actual staging of a performance. Agee as journalist is meant to consume such a cultural product. By portraying the act of journalism as the act of consumption – and here consumption based on the suffering of the other person, Agee critiques the larger structures and practices of reformist journalism. This critique can be aligned with a passage near the end of the book, when he

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indicts Margaret Bourke-White for a hypocritically conspicuous consumption.⁸⁵ It fits journalism into a larger series of practices that utilize the performance of the other to produce pleasure and cement social and political domination.⁸⁶

Yet the scene itself becomes another performance, one with specific melodramatic associations. The description of the landowner, for example, evokes images of *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* nefarious Simon Legree, indicating that Agee "plays his part through" in a sentimentalist drama (31). Agee similarly performs a dramatized

⁸⁵ Near the end of the book, Agee includes as an appendix a reprint of a *New York Post* article about Bourke-White, in which the following description is given: "She's a tango expert; crazy about the theater; loves swimming, ice skating, skiing, and adores horseback riding. Sometimes, she explained, when she knows that the light will be right only a few hours of the day . . . she has her horse brought around to 'location' and rides until the light is right" (454). The article adds, "Movies occupy whatever week-ends she spends in New York, often as many as five in a day" (454). Coming at the end of a book about poverty, and directly before "a definition" of tenantry, this description of Bourke-White's activities seems incongruous (454). The reformist journalist is depicted as a conspirator with an upper class obsessed with leisure and the excessive consumption of cultural objects like the movies and the theater. The journalist's story becomes just another commodity for the voyeuristic pleasures of a consuming elite that includes the journalist herself.

⁸⁶ David Spurr points out that the relation between vision and domination is built into modern journalism. Johannes Fabian, Malek Alloula, Beverley Ann Simmons and others further show how hierarchical structures of vision are ingrained in a broader system of leisure and professional activities that came into prominence during the height of nineteenth century colonialism, such as tourism, anthropology, and medicine. The professionalization of the colonizing gaze produced and authorized an imaginary dichotomy between watcher and watched, subject and object, collector and collected. In doing so, it authorized violent dominance and effected violence upon the psyches of those who received that gaze. These scenes point out this interrelation between a system of dominance and professional practice.

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version of shame. He is not just “ashamed”; he is wracked by an intensely physicalized “perversion of self-torture” (31). The second scene intensifies the performative charge of the two scenes even more. It is melodrama in its purest form; shame here is described using one of melodrama’s classic images, that of Agee throwing himself at the couple’s feet. We see as well the suggestion of tragic suicide. The intervention of melodrama into a narrative framework that, as Gavin Jones points out, seems deliberately designed to distance itself from the sentimentalist pitfalls of conventional reformist writing (780), seems out of place. The literal allusion to performance in these passages points to the performative aspect of Agee’s shame, suggesting that these moments should be read not as documentation but as theater. Additionally, as William Dow argues about the use of melodramatic tropes in the works of Stephen Crane and Rebecca Harding Davis, such tactics ask the reader “to regard himself or herself as part of an audience and to become aware of both the details of class and the details of observation and attention” (46).

Agee’s performance of shame, I’d like to argue, is meant to draw attention to his implication, as a privileged citizen and a journalist, in the way certain structures of vision produce others’ shame. By emphasizing the uneven effects of objectification, *Famous Men* aligns itself with Fanon’s work. By performing shame, Agee asks the reader to see how the colonizing gaze produces and relies on a more insidious production of shame in the dominated. In “Late Sunday Morning,” the structural alignment of one person in the role of passive object and the other in the role of active spectator reinforces relations of racial dominance, a set of relations which Agee, in his frantic attempts to force a mutual gaze, cannot disrupt. This scene emphasizes the way that social reform journalism is implicated in the violent voyeuristic practices of a racist landscape aligned with that

which Fanon describes. The relations between Agee, the white landowner, and the black singers, the book implies, are preconditioned by already existing social relations which institutions and structures compound. Non-mutual, objectifying vision both manifests and reifies these social relations.

If the citizen-witness conventionally comes to stand in for the reader, Agee's shame exposes and becomes the reader's shame and the shame of the polis in general. In emphasizing the reliance of social reform journalism on voyeurism, he asks readers to see the violence of their own voyeurism. In so doing, he imagines an ideal community of privileged readers who both recognize their complicity in social dominance and wish to change it. This move ushers in the concept of a larger and even more ideal democratic community produced by more egalitarian modes of visual encounter. This alternative community is imagined as occurring within a decontextualized personal and domestic space alien to (if circumscribed within) the workings of the state.

Revising Vision

Famous Men critiques and disrupts the spectatorial and representational conventions of social reform journalism by emphasizing the objectification of vision. The middle of the book is marked by the attempt to practice a different kind of vision, one which focuses on the objects surrounding humans instead of the humans themselves. I refer to the approximately 200 pages in which Agee embarks on an exhaustively detailed description of, first, the physical surroundings of the Woods', Gudgers', and Ricketts' households; second, the objects in the Gudger household; and third, the more

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general objects and practices (“clothing,” “education,” and “work”) of the three tenant families and others like them.

Agee’s practices here demonstrate the family resemblance between journalism, tourism, anthropology, and espionage. In his description of the wider environment of the Woods’, Gudgers’ and Ricketts’ houses, Agee directs the reader to: “Leave this room and go very quietly down the open hall that divides the house [etc.],” vividly detailing each step on the way to the Ricketts’ house (75). In this narrative recounting, however, the reader becomes less a traditional tourist and more a spy, drawn into complicity by the narrator. The tour Agee conducts occurs at night and the reader is instructed to be “very quiet.” Later, the reader voyeuristically looks on as Agee, left alone in the Gudgers’ house, opens drawers and rifles through belongings, fastidiously noting each detail. Agee here performs the actions of the spy, and the reader, like him, sees the results of his invasion. Yet, far from being ashamed at his actions, he seems to revel in this role – to the point that he openly describes himself as a spy, and rehabilitates his voyeurism into an almost spiritual endeavor (134). Agee informs the reader that he respects “being made witness to matters no human being may see,” and claims that he approaches these objects with reverence (134, 136, 137, 188).

These passages shift the object of the gaze from the human to the objects associated with the human. In “Inventing the Found Object,” James S. Miller situates the exhaustive lists of *Famous Men* and other New Deal era photo essay books in the context of the ethnographic studies popular in the 1930s. Miller points out Agee’s ambivalence in the processes of “anatomizing and ordering the vestiges of this ‘vanishing’ world,” noting a kind of violence in the process (387). He reads this ambivalence as an anxiety

about a “crisis of historical knowledge” which manifests itself an ethnographic epistemology in which information is infinitely manipulable and in a capitalist modernity which erases the link between the object and its origin” (388). I would point out a different kind of ambivalence, which focuses not on the object itself, but on the relation between the object and its owner.

Famous Men posits that the examination of the objects that surround the person can lend the spectator insight into that person. Ideally, Agee claims, “it would be our business to show how through every instant of every day of every year of his existence alive he is from all sides streamed inward upon, bombarded, pierced, destroyed by that enormous sleeting of all objects forms and ghosts how great how small no matter, which surround and whom his senses take: in as great and perfect and exact particularity as we can name them” (110). He suggests that each human being is infinitely complex– and that it is impossible to capture this complexity in finite language. The focus on “that enormous sleeting of all objects,” then, is designed to help the reader understand in greater detail and complexity the other human being. This mode of vision seems to contradict and counteract the spectatorial logic of shame depicted in the earlier passages, in which vision is used as a weapon to categorize, humiliate, and objectify the other person. Here, vision is used to explore the other from various perspectives, and it is directed not at the person, but at the objects surrounding the person. The gaze is divided and diverted and its potential violence ostensibly muted.

Agee recognizes that describing all the objects linked to a particular human being is impossible. He asks the reader for assistance: “one can write only one word at a time, and if these seem lists and inventories merely, things dead unto themselves, devoid of

mutual magnetisms, and if they sink, lose impetus, meter, intension, then bear in mind at least my wish, and perceive in them and restore them what strength you can of yourself” (110-111). His attempt to draw from descriptions of the various material objects surrounding a person a mosaic-like representation of that person’s essence, is depicted as a process of human sociality, imagination, and cooperation between reader and writer. In these passages, then, Agee reforms the lopsided voyeurism of journalistic practice to imagine an alternative kind of democracy, one based on the recognition of differences linked not to race or class, but rather to the unique location of individual human beings in the world. Readers are asked to place themselves in this formulation, and to actively participate in producing it. Agee seems to be imagining a democratic network that stretches across time, space, and text to link together himself, the tenants, and the reader.

This kind of sociality depends on the recognition and imagined production of the complexity of the subject of representation. It transforms difference from something based on class, racial, and gender identities and boundaries into a difference which differentiates all human beings. One passage in this middle part of the book, entitled “Colon,” elucidates this philosophy. In it, Agee engages in an extended riff on how best to imagine the complexity of human life: “its structure,” he writes, “should be eighteen or twenty intersected spheres, the interlockings of bubbles on the face of a stream; one of these globes is each of you” (101). The social recognition of difference here does not divide humans into dominant and dominated, but produces a form of horizontal, intermixed, and fluid equality. By imagining difference not on the basis of social class, but at the level of the individual, this new kind of vision is meant to reinvigorate the lost democratic ideal.

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The strange way these passages conceptualize space indicates the concurrent erasure and displacement of political identities and structures inherent to this mode of thinking about democracy. On the one hand, democratic relation is imagined to take place outside of or before the polis in a nebulous imaginary space analogous to the state of nature (individuals are “bubbles on a stream”). At the same time, these philosophical musings are wedged within Agee’s exploration of the tenants’ domestic space, suggesting that the personal and familial realm – not civic or political space – is the best model for democracy.

While, as I will consider in the next section, Agee expands on his linking of the domestic, the natural and the abstract in a democratic space imagined as escaping from the strictures of the state, he abandons his experimentation with the democratic object. If the reader is temporarily lulled into accepting Agee’s investigatory explorations, the uncomfortable intervention of shame into the narrative disrupts his seemingly democratic spectatorial and representational practice. Near the end of this section of the book, Agee describes himself narrowly avoiding being caught rifling through the Gudgers’ belongings, reestablishing the uninvited nature of these explorations and reincorporating the potential for shame into a narrative that has for a time erased it. His actions here may be in good faith, but their outcome is similar to the scenes he earlier critiqued:

I hear her voice and the voices of her children, and in knowledge of those hidden places I have opened, those griefs, beauties, those garments whom I took out, held to my lips, took odor of, and folded and restored so orderly, so reverently as cerements, or priest the blessed cloths, I receive a

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strong shock at my heart, and I move silently, and quickly. . . . It is not going to be easy to look into their eyes.” (188-189)

After pages of meditative description, the sudden reminder of the uninvited nature of his examination shocks the reader along with Agee. The reader is left to question whether the attempt to represent the humanity of another person can justify the violation of that person’s privacy (a discomfort intensified by the image of Agee kissing and smelling the Gudgers’ clothing).⁸⁷ His shame, in its association with “Late Sunday Morning,” suggests that his tentative philosophy of the object may not take into account the self-identification of the journalistic subject with the object. Indeed, if we agree with Miller’s assessment of Agee’s practices as a kind of ethnography, we see that these practices, in their association of humans with objects, continue to participate in a network of colonialist visual practices. Agee’s gaze becomes shameful when discovered; it is an invasion, a violation doubled when reprinted for voyeuristic readers. His imagined difficulty at looking the Gudgers in the eyes indicates that his initial solution to reform

⁸⁷ Paula Rabinowitz argues that *Famous Men* exposes and indicates an uneasiness with the alliance between “voyeurism and class domination.” She writes: “Agee’s ‘printed words’ and Evan’s ‘motionless camera’ produce the power of the gaze as a sexual and class practice. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* links the construction of the gaze – as a relationship of bourgeois subject to its object – and the mobilization of class consciousness – as the resistance of that reified object to its history. In so doing, James Agee and Walker Evans express and critique their uneasy relationship to each other and to their objects of knowledge, shedding light on the connections between the psychosexual desires and political effectiveness of people like myself” (36). Scenes such as this one, then, trouble any readerly idealization of the motives, assumptions and practices of the altruistic liberal citizen.

journalism's practices may objectify the human subject at the same time it seeks to avoid that objectification.

I have now examined a moment in which shame emerges within the text to alert the reader to the way social reform journalism and the good citizen can be implicated in and reinforce hierarchical and oppressive social relations. I have also commented upon Agee's attempt to correct normative modes of representation by practicing a different kind of spectatorship, and pointed out the way in which the eruption of shame into the narrative illuminates his replication of objectification. Now I would like to show how at the end of the book Agee again enlists conventional aspects of shame to theorize a utopian form of sociality. The ideal democratic community takes place within a space marked simultaneously as natural, domestic, and unmaterial. The construction of community within such an imaginary space is based in the risk of shame and (problematically) imagines as its catalyst the deliberate exposure of vulnerability and self objectification.

The Sociality of Shame

The end of the book describes two incidents in which Agee imagines the possibility of an alternative kind of democracy grounded in the mutual gaze. These two events evoke the possibility of a utopian sociality, an intimate democracy in which social barriers are erased and humans mutually witness each other's vulnerability.

In the first of these incidents, which he calls "introits" or entrances, Agee describes how he joins the Gudgers in their home to escape a thunderstorm. In the midst of this, the mutual gaze at which Agee has hinted throughout the book but never fully

achieved comes to a physicalized peak when he locks eyes with a young tenant named Louise:

I come soon to realize that she has not once taken her eyes off me since we entered the room: so that my own are drawn back more and more uncontrollably toward them and into them. From the first they have run chills through me, a sort of beating and ticklish vacuum at the solar plexus, and though I have frequently met them I cannot look into them long at a time without panic and quick withdrawal, fear, whether for her or for myself I don't know. (400)

Here, vulnerability is expressed not just in the image of humans huddled in a house, seeking shelter from a massive storm. The reader is asked to consider the exchange of gazes as an expression of mutual exposure and vulnerability. By practicing what Tomkins calls "interocular intimacy," Agee and Louise are violating a deeply rooted social taboo (Tomkins 144). Most obviously, the association between eye contact and sexuality makes this extended gaze a potential violation of social norms, especially on Agee's part, as the older man in the pair. In the potential transgression of the interocular taboo, both Agee and Louise risk the shame and danger of being seen seeing (Tomkins 400). If the dangers of eye contact are made apparent in this scene, the unique character of the experience which involves the mutual vulnerability of all involved seems to stave off temporarily the possibility of shame, although the description teeters on the edge of transgression.

The second, and professedly more significant, introit culminates in another model of human interaction based around an even more palpable erasure of shame. In this

famous passage, Agee's car is stuck in the mud which follows the thunderstorm. He comes back to the Gudgers' and stands in the dark outside of their home. Just as Agee is overwhelmed with shame, so too is this passage; indeed, the word "shame" is mentioned three times:

standing here, silently, in the demeanor of the house itself *I grow full of shame . . . and shame the more*, because I do not yet turn away, but still stand here motionless . . . and am aware of a vigilant and shameless hope that – not that I shall move forward and request you, disorder you, but that 'something shall happen,' as it 'happened' that the car lost to the mud: and so waiting, *in doubt, desire and shame*. . . (411)

Agee's shame here derives from his inability to move away from the house; in his failure to move, he displays a vulnerable desire to be seen and cared for (rather than a desire to see). Yet his inability to move, if it is shameful, also includes its opposite: "a vigilant and shameless hope" (411).

When George Gudger comes out into the darkness, the potential for social judgment is made manifest. Gudger disrupts expectations by viewing Agee not with the judging eye of the stranger but with the welcoming eye of the mutual friend. Externality and shame are instantly transformed into literal and metaphorical insiderness when George Gudger invites Agee into his home and Annie Gudger makes him a meal. The passage culminates with Agee and the Gudgers sharing a late-night conversation:

there is a particular sort of intimacy between the three of us which is not of our own creating and which has nothing to do with our talk, yet which is increased in our tones of voice, in small quiet turns of humor, in glances

of the eyes, in ways even that I eat my food, in their knowledge how truly friendly I feel toward them, and how seriously I am concerned to have caused them bother, and to let them be done with this bother as quickly as possible. (417-418)

This scene, when taken in conjunction with the thunderstorm scene, establishes a human intimacy which indicates for Agee the utopian possibilities of a new kind of sociality. This intimacy is subdued, and features a physical tableau of equivalence. The three are seated together on the inside of the house, and exchange “glances of the eyes,” which are more gentle than direct, aggressive or voyeuristic gazes. Here, the reader meant to witness a moment in which hospitality transcends the possibility of shame.

The personal, individual and domestic in this passage seamlessly and somewhat inscrutably translates into the universal. Agee claims that these moments of unplanned human intimacy and hospitality represent the grounds for a larger human solidarity. Ultimately, his vision is a utopian one, which prefigures a future in which humans come together across difference:

there is a marching and resonance of rescuing feet which shall at length all dangers braved, all armies cut through, past, deliver you freedom, joy, health, knowledge like an enduring sunlight . . . that it shall come at length there can be no question: for this I know in my own soul through that regard of love we bear one another: for there it was proved me in the meeting of the extremes of the race. (392)

Agee foresees this kind of future because, he claims, he experienced its nascent form in these introits.

The exposed good citizen in this construction becomes temporarily unmoored from his or her relation to the state, and initiates an alternative democratic sphere in which all become both subjects and objects. In these passages, the seeming absence of institutions and power structures (the state of nature marked by the thunderstorm and the domestic space within nature) allows the human participants to interact on a more intimate level. Agee suggests that whereas the structures and the taboos of state-authorized sociality produce judgment and shame, lack of social norms/taboo preclude judgment, allowing for human intimacy. This notion that social structures, rules, and taboos indicate a damaged social structure points to Agee's investment in a fantasy of a Rousseauvian state of nature and an intimate unplanned anarchism.⁸⁸ This space is, within the context of the book, transformed into an abstract imaginary space in which humans march together in liberatory solidarity.

It seems to be the risk of shame in the exposure of bodily and interpersonal vulnerability that allows for these utopian moments. This vulnerability is characterized by the ever-present possibility and refusal of judgment, and therefore these scenes imagine the simultaneous avoidance and risk of shame. Agee thus reimagines the act of good citizenship as one in which the citizen actively produces himself or herself as the object of the other person's gaze. Good citizenship becomes lodged not in witnessing, but in being witnessed.

⁸⁸ John Summers has recently written about Agee's alliance with the principles of anarchy, pointing out a variety of moments from the late 30s to the late 40s when Agee explicitly aligned himself with it (621). Summers argues that in *Famous Men* and other texts, Agee celebrates an anarchism "whose first principle acknowledges no first principles, whose success depends on consciousness of its inadequacies. It entails a receding horizon, a failing struggle against the trappings of institutions and ideologies" (627-8).

Such a construction may at first seem similar to Emmanuel Levinas's theorization of the ethical encounter, in which the self encounters the face of the other. In that face is both absolute alterity and, as Judith Butler points out, the "precariousness of the other" (Levinas in Butler 134). In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas writes "The disclosing of a face is nudity, non-form, abandon of self, ageing, dying, more naked than nudity. It is poverty, skin with wrinkles, which are a trace of itself." To encounter the face, it seems, is to encounter a vulnerability very much akin to that Agee offers up as the catalyst for a democratic community without regard to the state. Levinas seems, similarly, to see the encounter as inducing the vulnerability of the self as well. His formulation similarly works through the potential and erasure of shame: "Under the eye of another, I remain an unattackable subject in respect. It is the obsession by the other, my neighbor, accusing me of a fault which I have not committed freely, that reduces the ego to a self on the hither side of my identity, prior to all self-consciousness, and denudes me absolutely" (88). Finally, Levinas's construction of the face-to-face seems further aligned with Agee's description in its disavowal of the political: "The face of the neighbor signifies for me an unexceptionable responsibility, preceding every free consent, every pact, every contract" (88). As opposed to Agee, however, Levinas does not imagine this precession spatially in a state of nature, but rather philosophically, as before subjectivity.

What Agee, in his idealization of an encounter seeming to precede the state, ignores – and what Derrida, Butler and Levinas have addressed – is the potential violence of the face-to-face encounter and the difficulty and even impossibility involved in translating such an encounter into a politics. It is Agee's apolitical fantasy of human

communion inaugurated by the risk of shame, which I would like to critique in the next section.

Shame and the Politics of Privilege

Recent years have witnessed not just a resurgence of interest in shame theory, but the rise of shame politics as well. When I read Leys's comment in *From Guilt to Shame* about Americans' professed shame at Abu Ghraib, what struck me was the way she naturalized and legitimized the political performance of shame (Leys 16). This response was reiterated when I read Probyn's *Blush*. Even Agamben has theorized the "shame of being human" as "the beginning of a revolution" (*Means Without End* 132). The performance of shame has become increasingly common in the recent political landscape.

Shame-based politics can be placed in the context of an increased interest in emotion and feeling in the works of professional observers (mainly anthropologists, journalists, and critics). Anthropology in particular has seen a rise in self-reflexive writing since the 1960s.⁸⁹ It is the enduring quality of this approach to imagining

⁸⁹ Susan Trencher describes reflexivity in anthropological writing as "critical reflection by the anthropologist on his or her own practice, included as part of the intention in ethnography" (*Mirrored Images* 9). Paul Rabinow centered his *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (1977) on his own experience, arguing that "the very strength of anthropology – its experiential, reflective, and critical activity – has been eliminated as a valid area of inquiry by an attachment to a positivistic view of science, which I find radically inappropriate in a field which claims to study humanity" (5). And, in his most famous performance of "thick description," Clifford Geertz describes how he and his wife got caught up in a Balinese cockfight, using personal narrative to analyze the semiotic significance of cockfights as a cultural practice. Most relevant to my discussion here, in a 1996 collection of essays, anthropologist Ruth Behar

democratic relations that I think warrants sustained inquiry into the implications of developing a politics of shame. As further evidence of this resurgence of the politics of shame, I would like to point to and discuss another text which, in its performance of shame, can illuminate the possibilities and limitations of *Famous Men*'s political philosophy. "Sorry Everybody," a website anonymously produced in the wake of George W. Bush's reelection in 2004, collected thousands of pictures of people who didn't vote for Bush holding signs that expressed some variation of public apology. Responses from

cites Agee as an early theorist of what she calls "vulnerable observation." Stating that "in anthropology everything depends on the emotional and intellectual baggage the anthropologist takes on the voyage" (8), Behar claims that anthropologists should incorporate their fear, grief, shame, and pain into their writing. The heroic aspect of such a "voyage" is cemented by her later mythologization of vulnerable observation as a "quest." Behar draws on the language of civic witnessing, claiming that "Anthropology . . . is the most fascinating, bizarre, disturbing, and necessary form of witnessing left to us at the end of the twentieth century" and that "anthropology that doesn't break your heart just isn't worth doing anymore" (5, 177).

Trencher argues that this development is supported by many changes in intellectual and public culture in the U.S. after WWII. In the 1950s the increasing call for both positivism and an anthropology of the enemy led to a rise in government jobs for anthropologists. Science and citizenship were paired together: "Embedded in American sense-making of the value of science was its tie to the Enlightenment, and its promise as a means to solve society's problems, including 'social inequalities and injustices.' Science was to be used to build the 'good society' (Bellah 1985) where egalitarian and individual *cum* 'human rights' would bring about 'liberty and justice for all.'" (180). Such a model was increasingly challenged in the 1960s when the awareness of American neo-colonialism around the world became increasingly unavoidable. Trencher situates the rise of reflexivity in the 1970s as "incipient postmodern practice" accompanying a Habermasian legitimation crisis. By the 1980s and 90s, as notions of collective struggle were increasingly replaced with ideals of "constrictive individualism," self-reflexivity was a dominant mode of representation within anthropology.

others outside the U.S., especially Europe and South America, performatively accepted the apology.⁹⁰

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, From Guilt to Shame, Blush, and “Sorry Everybody” all imagine shame as a viable response to the helplessness of witnessing political injustice. Each posits a witness or community of witnesses responding to an action that has already taken place: the tenant families – both white and black – are already oppressed, Australia was already colonized, the Abu Ghraib photographs were already taken, and Bush was already re-elected. Political shame, these texts suggest, is performed after the fact, and is a way to process, perform, and in some way regain discursive control of political helplessness. Shame, too, symbolically separates the witnesses from the actions they critique, which were carried out in their name.

The political performance of shame, then, becomes a way to negotiate the inevitable limit of democracy: the impossible ideal of political representation inscribed in the very concept of the democratic state. If in democratic theory the state is imagined as an extension of the people, these witnesses use shame to mark the erasure of their political positions. They highlight the disjunction between the imagined possibilities of democratic theory, in which all are represented and justice is served, and the way democracy is practiced, in which certain opinions are ignored while antidemocratic practices like colonization, invasion, and violence are authorized and justified through recourse to democracy’s structures and principles. In the face of the seeming lack of shame (and indeed, open celebration) with which colonial and neocolonial ventures are

⁹⁰ See “Sorry Everybody.” <<http://www.sorryeverybody.com>>. The website now has a sequel: “Hello Everybody,” which was produced after Barack Obama won the U.S. presidential election in 2008.

carried out, these witnesses, much like Agee, personify, perform, and testify to what they see as the shame of democracy's failure. In so doing, they mark themselves as the subject and object of politics.⁹¹ Shame becomes a mode of good citizenship.

Shame not only speaks to the failure of the practice of democracy; it can, as in *Famous Men*, also provide a way to imagine alternative manifestations of democratic community. The political performance of shame, these texts suggest, can indeed produce what Benedict Anderson has called an "imagined community," seeming to encourage alternate imaginings of the democratic polis and allowing for a critique of the limits of democratic practice. The initiation and use of "Sorry Everybody," as indicated in a subheading titled "Explanation," addresses this possibility when the site claims that it allowed participants to "reassure each other that we weren't alone, to remember that one loss won't marginalize us forever" ("Hello Everybody: Explanation). In this scenario, the performance of shame creates community among those who try, but are unable, to produce political change. The site, too, provided a discursive foil to the Bush administration's rhetoric and actions. Instead of aggressive, violent assault, it performed a different America – one that was passive, ashamed, and friendly. Reactions from others around the world (primarily Europe and South America) in which the apology was accepted with similar placards, also produced an imagined transnational community of politically like-minded individuals. Like the "imagined community" in *Famous Men*,

⁹¹ The relation between self-objectification and shame politics is reinscribed in "Sorry Everybody's" display in which participants photographed themselves holding placards. The participants thus became artistic objects sending a particular political message.

“Sorry Everybody” became a metaphorical location to construct an alternate democratic community, here an international one.

Yet these shame-based communities cannot be the grounds for a sustainable democracy. What “Sorry Everybody” points out and *Famous Men* elides is the way in which shame produces an imagined community on the basis of similarity, not difference. In order to imagine this kind of community, shame politics can erase or ignore materially inscribed social differences. In “Sorry Everybody” the mutual and voluntary expression of shame binds people together and produces comfort. Moving from the site back to the book, we can see more clearly that the community that is produced by Agee’s book is also based on similarity, but a more sinister manifestation of it. When Agee comes together with the Gudgers, for example, racial similarity binds their temporary community: when George Gudger finds Agee outside of his home, he invites him in after explaining that “he had thought I was a nigger” (412). Community here is grounded on an objectification of the other person that supports racial hierarchy.

If racial difference grounds *Famous Men*’s temporary community, gender hierarchies, too, are not relieved in Agee’s seemingly utopian vision. Agee’s elision of the power differential between men and women in the first introit makes the reader question, as Kaja Silverman has, Agee’s interpretation of the gaze between him and Louise. Rather than a mutual violation of the interocular taboo initiated and maintained by Louise, Silverman argues that this encounter “turns on [Louise’s] psychic violation” (136). In Silverman’s examination of the passage, what Agee paints as shared vulnerability becomes an invasion. Her reading intimates that the passage erases gendered power differentials embedded within the exchange of gazes. Similarly, the

idyllic meal shared in the ultimate introit is imagined to be made possible by the meal Annie Gudger habitually provides her husband and his guest. A gendered critique of one of the founding premises of his vision of human communion suggests again that the book's idealized way of seeing may in fact reinforce, rather than alleviate, social hierarchy.

Class barriers – the focus of the book – are similarly reinscribed in its narration. In the end, the primary community of the book is created not between Agee and the tenant families, but between Agee and his privileged readers. We can see this, for example, in the way that, throughout *Famous Men*, Agee shares his innermost feelings, flaws, and failings with the reader but not with the Gudgers, Ricketts, or Woods. His concern is to mobilize and produce community in his readership.

Seen from these perspectives, Agee's interpretation of the scenes as models of democratic community becomes questionable. Agee's depiction of the utopian possibilities of shame relies upon imagined similarity and objectification of the other person; material and social difference is erased or underplayed to facilitate the imagining of this hypothetical community. A problem with crafting a politics on the basis of self-objectification is that to do so can reinforce the very social hierarchies which the citizen-witness ostensibly attempts to dismantle.

Despite Agee's attempts to relocate the heroic associations of citizen-witnessing from the witness to the witnessed, *Famous Men* normalizes his values and feelings as the center of the imagined ideal democracy. The explosion of strong emotion, and the continuing attention to it, redirects focus onto the suffering observer rather than the conditions he or she describes, further (re)producing the figure of the citizen-witness as

the center of the social scene. The ideal democratic encounter which is witnessed at the end of *Famous Men* becomes an expression of Agee's internal life. The knowledge Agee gains "in his own soul," and his narrative about that experience, draws the reader's attention as Agee's internal life takes dramatic precedence over those whose lives he witnesses (392).

This focus on Agee rather than those he witnesses is replicated in the book's paratexts and responses, in which the material conditions of poverty in the U.S. South take a back seat to the sensationalistic centrality of Agee himself.⁹² Even after his death, Agee (and not the tenant families) was transformed into a legendary character by his contemporaries and later readers, especially young white Civil Rights workers in the 50s and 60s. Alan Spiegel and David Madden have written most extensively on this continuation of this phenomenon in what Spiegel has describes as "cults" around Agee.⁹³ The depiction of Agee as a hero, as Spiegel and Silverman point out, was encouraged by Agee's own self-representation.⁹⁴ If the book struggles to overcome hierarchy, ostensibly

⁹² In his introduction, for example, John Hersey describes how Agee "drank enough to stun a rhinoceros" and claims that he "died of a broken heart" (vii, xxxv); in his, Walker Evans associates Agee with the tragic heroism of King Lear, noting about his plain clothing that "In due time the cloth would mold itself to his frame. Cleaning and pressing would have undone this beautiful process. I exaggerate, but it did seem sometimes that wind, rain, work, and mockery were his tailors" (xli-xlii).

⁹³ These cults, Spiegel claims, manifest in various forms, including "the cults of Poor Jim, Saint Jim, and Plain or Country Jim" (6).

⁹⁴ Spiegel, comparing Agee to other self-fashioning artists like Walt Whitman, argues that in his self-reflexivity Agee portrays himself as a hero, a "Janus-faced modern" who "conflat[es] indigenous national fantasy (i.e., 'orphan' heroes, lost families, everlasting roots, etc.) with the blessed mystery of his own

broadening out the notion of “famous men,” then, the book and responses to it simultaneously support that same hierarchy, maintaining the privileged citizen-witness as the (anti-) hero of democracy.

Relatedly, and most importantly for this dissertation, narratives wielding shame often undercut their critique by reincorporating shame into a triumphalistic and decontextualized fantasy of democratic citizenship. In *Famous Men* and other witnessing texts, shame and other emotive expressions of vulnerability become constructed as the new solution to the problems of the polis. Yet it seems that the move toward the political in Agee’s book is in fact a move away from it. Trencher argues that the rise in anthropological self-reflexivity in the 1980s and 90s participated in an increasing move away from notions of collective politics and towards a “collective individualism . . . in which there is a marked absence of civic consciousness” (185). Collective individualism is prefigured in Agee’s text. *Famous Men* imagines individuals unmarked by race, class or gender circulating like “bubbles on a stream” within spaces that – simultaneously natural and domestic – are constructed as escaping the structures of the political state. This imagining, I have shown, pairs with a seemingly fluid move to universal human solidarity. Instead of drawing attention to the material effects of political and economic structures of domination, this manifestation of “collective individualism” distracts from them.

mental turmoil, his intellectual honesty, his orneriness, confusion, and perversity” (24). Silverman focuses in on what I would assume are similar moments to those I have located, in which Agee “excoriates himself for his shortcomings as a writer or man and expresses his desire for humiliation or punishment” (135). She claims that these moments indicate “false care,” performing a masochistic “heroic fantasy” that focuses on the self while ostensibly caring for the other (135).



A last critique of Agee's Levinasian construction of ideal community comes from Levinas himself (here, via Butler and Derrida). Levinas's ethical encounter with the face of the other is both violent and impossible. As Butler points out, "Levinas writes, 'the face of the other in its precariousness and defenselessness, is for me at once the temptation to kill and the call to peace, the "You shall not kill"' (PL, 167). Why would it be that the very precariousness of the Other would produce for me a temptation to kill? Or why would it produce the temptation to kill at the same time that it delivers a demand for peace?" (134-5). In *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, Derrida similarly asks:

Levinas does not say it in exactly this way, but what is he doing when, beyond or through the dual of the face to face between two 'uniques,' he appeals to justice, affirming and reaffirming that justice 'is necessary,' that the third 'is necessary'? Is he not trying to take into account this hypothesis of a violence in the pure and immediate ethics of the face to face? A violence potentially unleashed in the experience of the neighbor and of absolute unicity? The impossibility of discerning here between good and evil, love and hate, giving and taking, the desire to live and the death drive, the hospitable welcome and the egoistic or narcissistic closing up of oneself? (33)

Agee elides the violence surrounding and potential within the encounter with the other.

Furthermore, where Agee easily moves from this seemingly idyllic encounter to an image of the political, Derrida and Butler have both pointed out the impossibility of such a move. "Within the ethical frame of the Levinasian position," Butler writes, "we begin by positing a dyad. But the sphere of politics, in his terms, is one in which there



are always more than two subjects at play in the scene. . . . what if violence is done to someone I love? What if there is an Other who does violence to another Other? To which Other do I respond ethically?" (140). The violence of the ethical encounter, therefore, is the question of decision attendant to the inescapable entrance of the "third party," otherwise known as the political.

Narratives that imagine political concepts such as the citizen, democracy, and community express complex, powerful and often contradictory messages, messages which necessitate close examination. It is clear in this instance that the attempt to conceptualize an alternative democratic polis and practice on the basis of shame is fraught with difficulty, and may reinscribe the very hierarchies it seeks to challenge. The contemporaneity of "Sorry Everybody," *Blush*, and the response to Abu Ghraib photographs, along with the resurgence of interest in shame theory and self-reflexivity, indicate that the politics of shame early and distinctively manifested in Agee and Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* have not waned but have in fact become more thoroughly inscribed in the way the liberal public encounters and performs itself within the political landscape. If it is necessary to recognize the community-building possibilities of shame politics, it is equally important to note the inherent material and philosophical limitations of this approach to democracy.

While Agee erases the violence attendant to his ethical vision, and imagines an easy leap from the ethical to the political, I will move in the next chapter to the works of three war journalists who more self-critically mark the limits of, and thereby undermine, their Levinasian projects. By refusing to reincorporate their own failures into projects of civic heroism, these writers imagine an ethics of encounter and representation that cannot



succeed. In doing so, they point to the ways state and interstate structures, discourses and practices discourage and prevent ethics.



Chapter Four

War Journalism, Global Citizenship and the Limits of Altruism

The texts I have considered up to now tend to portray the citizen-witness as heroic and self-sacrificing. Writers such as Nellie Bly, Jack London, Jacob Riis, John Howard Griffin and Grace Halsell invent narrative personae that uncritically traverse the ethically and politically complex terrains of witnessing and representation. Even when writers such as James Agee attempt to destabilize the power dynamics inherent to the observer/observed relationship, their texts often rely upon or reinscribe the same power relations they seek to disrupt. One potential alternative, it seems, would be to discard altruism altogether, embracing the anti-ethical. I feel, however, that such approaches are unsatisfactory. These solutions, I would argue, glorify the role of the heroic, tough, and masculine subject within mass culture. They buttress the fantasy of the self-sufficient individual who can escape or subvert the social and the political, a fantasy that reinscribes patriarchal and capitalistic norms and ideals.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ This potential is dramatized in the first book of *Transmetropolitan* (1997), a graphic novel that paints a futuristic fantasy about a Gonzo journalist named Spider Jerusalem. Spider is the classic new journalist: “we both know you could never write about politics from a distance,” the reader hears via a phone call with Spider’s editor in the first few pages (5). Spider is the epitome of the anti-ethical misanthrope: his first act as he emerges from his bunker in the hills is to blow up a bar, and he claims cynically that “there’s one hole in every revolution, large or small, and it’s one word long – people. No matter how big the idea they all stand under, people are small and weak and cheap and frightened. It’s people that kill every revolution” (41). Nevertheless, in his abstract drive for justice, Spider seems to stand apart from these “people” he so disparages. Shouting on the last page “I’m here to stay! Shoot me and I’ll spit your goddamn bullets back in your face! I’m Spider Jerusalem, and fuck all of you! Ha!” (70), he is the ultimate “fuck you” hero, crudely sexual, violent, and macho. In the fantasy that is *Transmetropolitan*, the real man abandons ethics



I am more interested in those works that trouble in a complex fashion the relation between self and other. While I have explored up to this point the ethical conundrums of national citizenship, in the next two chapters, I will introduce a new mode of relation (one that complicates the picture even more): global citizenship. In this chapter, I will expand on the way the altruistic language of global citizenship butts up against the material privileges of national citizenship.

Civic rhetoric in mid-century engaged intimately with the problem of national power in a global landscape. As the Cold War intensified in the middle part of the twentieth century, the United States increasingly distinguished itself from the USSR by portraying itself as an arbiter of democracy around the world and, in the 1950s, the call to rebut the threat of Communism was used to justify intervention in Vietnam. Nationalism and capitalism, as today, were aligned with the democratic ideal. The end of WWII, however, also ushered in institutions and documents that relied upon and developed the idea of global citizenship. The middle of the century saw revolutionary struggles against colonial domination (such as Vietnam's) that very much relied on discourses of universal human rights.⁹⁶ As these discourses developed, the writings of citizen-witnesses reflected the complicated relation between national citizenship and global citizenship.

for politics. The individualistic hero emerges out of the masses of the corrupt and the weak to offer up what Spider refers to as "the truth" (62). As I discuss in the introduction, many of the self-styled New Journalists (and some critical work on them) reinscribe in a somewhat less excessive fashion the fantasy of the masculine hero that emerges so sharply here.

⁹⁶ Ho Chi Minh's September 1945 Declaration of Independence cites America's Declaration of Independence, France's Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, and the contemporary institutionalization of human rights. He writes, "We are convinced that the Allied nations which at Tehran

War journalism brings out the disjunction between the two modes of citizenship that occurs when discourses of citizenship translate (or do not translate) into practice. In this chapter, I consider three texts written during different wars where the policies of the U.S. state align democracy with capitalism by either asserting itself as protector of capitalist democracy or refusing to intervene in the violence of new capitalist states. These wars draw out the way the economic and political demands of the U.S. state shape its definition of both democracy and citizenship. The first text I examine is *Dispatches*, a 1977 collection of essays Michael Herr wrote for *Rolling Stone*, *Esquire* and *New American Review* during the Vietnam War, justified as a democratic intervention into the spread of Communism. The second is William Vollmann's *An Afghanistan Picture Show* (1992), a narrative about his 1982 trip to Afghanistan during the country's war with the Soviet Union, written also as a retrospective reflection on the author's aborted efforts to urge global civic solidarity and U.S. financial support. The last is Joe Sacco's *Safe Area Goražde* (2000/2), a work of comics journalism detailing the experiences of a community of Bosnian Muslims during the genocide that followed the collapse of Communism in the former Yugoslavia. These texts elucidate the way the ethical and philosophical idealism of global citizenship is constrained by the demands of the increasingly powerful U.S. nation-state. They simultaneously perform and question altruism and its related practice, hospitality. While implicitly enlisting in a project of ethical representation, each writer destabilizes in various ways the foundations, practices and effects of altruism. Each

and San Francisco have acknowledged the principles of self-determination and equality of nations, will not refuse to acknowledge the independence of Vietnam," referring directly to 1943's Declaration of the Three Powers, in which the Allies committed themselves to replacing the League of Nations with another international body, and the signing of the UN Charter in June of 1945.

indicates the limits of altruism in practice, imagining good citizenship as an act bound by the limitations of the self. By placing the exposure of the limit in the context of a larger global-political landscape, I argue, each writer ultimately fashions an even more compelling and potentially productive ethic of representation.

Journalism and the (Un)ethical

Dispatches, *An Afghanistan Picture Show*, and *Safe Area Goražde* each recount the adventures of a young man intent upon uncovering the hidden stories of a war. Herr lives with Marines, trying to document the day-to-day experiences of those who bore the brunt of war. Vollmann interviews Afghan refugees in Pakistani camps along with the mujahideen still fighting against the Soviet incursion into their country. Sacco narrates the tales of Bosnian Muslims who face extermination at the hands of Serbian aggressors. Each writer implicitly contrasts his project with that of conventional journalism, suggesting that mainstream representations erase such stories and in so doing, cover over and promote violence.

The popular and increasingly dominant mode of mass communication at each of these historical moments was television. Vietnam was the first war in which American viewers could stay updated through images and narratives transmitted relatively quickly over their television sets (hence its appellation as the “first living room war”).⁹⁷ By the

⁹⁷ David Culbert writes that “It is inaccurate to remember America’s Vietnam War as a so-called ‘living-room war,’ in which nightly images of violence turned viewers from hawks to doves. Most shots were taken far from the scene of an actual fire fight, and there are far more instances of helicopters taking off [sic] and landing than of close-range fighting” (205). Graham Spencer points out that the time it could take a dispatch to reach the network could be over thirty hours (57). Whatever the efficacy and content of



time the former Yugoslavia was racked by genocide, images were broadcasted around the world in real-time.⁹⁸

Pierre Bourdieu has launched perhaps one of the most well-known and scathing critiques of television journalism. In a 1996 series of essays titled *On Television*, Bourdieu argues that “real information, analysis, in-depth interviews, expert discussions, and serious documentaries lose out to pure entertainment and, in particular, to mindless talk show chatter between ‘approved’ and interchangeable speakers” (3). He claims that the very rapidity that television news prides itself on prevents critical thinking: “By giving the floor to thinkers who are considered able to think at high speed, isn’t television doomed to never have anything but *fast-thinkers* . . . they think in clichés, in the ‘received ideas’ that Flaubert talks about – banal, conventional, common ideas that are received

television journalism during the Vietnam War, the relatively immediate transmission of wartime images was unprecedented.

⁹⁸ The first Gulf War was the first war to feature so-called saturation coverage. As Nathaniel Lande points out, “The gulf conflict – the first full-scale war fought in the age of worldwide satellite communication – is being relayed immediately, moment by moment: every air-raid warning, bombing sortie or peep from the diplomatic community resounds across the globe as it happens” (363). Donald Matheson and Stuart Allan note that saturation coverage perpetuates a kind of false consciousness, “The advent of rolling 24-hour ‘real-time’ global television news services, with CNN leading the way, had helped to transform the conflict into a media spectacle akin to a video game. Largely displaced by this ‘Nintendo effect’, critics pointed out, were the consequences of war – that is the horrific loss of human life” (11). It wasn’t until the conflict in Kosovo that the Internet became a significant mode of mass communication. Kosovo also ushered in what has been called “Info-war; cyber-war; net-war; anti-war; virtual war; spectator-sport war; humanitarian war; zero-casualty war; post-modern war” (Carruthers 237). Digital technology enabled warfare to be enacted from afar, erasing the effects of violence for those who perpetrated it.

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generally” (29). Finally, he argues, television journalism’s participation in the entertainment industry produces an apolitical, ahistorical and fragmentary vision of the news:

‘Current events’ are reduced to an impassioned recital of entertaining events, which tend to lie about halfway between the human interest story and the variety show. . . . The result is a litany of events with no beginning and no real end, thrown together only because they occurred at the same time. . . . There is a patent lack of interest in subtle, nuanced changes, or in processes that, like the continental drift, remain unperceived and imperceptible in the moment, revealing their effects only in the long term. (6-7)

The effect of the focus on sensationalistic human interest stories, Bourdieu argues, is depoliticization.⁹⁹

Interestingly, he notes, the move towards short, fragmentary, falsely polarized and sensationalistic “news” is justified by a claim to “democratic” legitimacy. Audience ratings (marketing) and “visibility” – couched as responding to the demands of the people – become the new standards of journalistic worth. The apolitical is authorized by a claim to the political itself. In a field structured around two modes of relation - competition and collusion – news outlets partner with and support the competition to get the latest “scoop” (36). In turn, journalists collude with the expectations of the field in order to gain and

⁹⁹ Clearly, this problem is not specific to television. Critics have targeted sensationalism in the news since the 1800s.

retain influence. The result, Bourdieu claims, is that spectators are fed news that is utterly uncontroversial, stripped of context and reflection.

Bourdieu targets the news media generally, but other critics have focused more specifically on war reporting. Oliver Boyd-Barrett argues that war reporting “obfuscates the reasons why the media . . . often fail to capture both the deep-level and proximate causes of wars or explain their actual durations and aftermaths, and hide the extent of media manipulation by official monopolization of information flows.” In so doing, he claims, “the genre plays into the hands of power” (25). Herr, Sacco, and Vollmann contribute to a wider critique of war reporting, and offer alternative approaches to representation.

In *Dispatches*, Herr claims that journalism as it was often utilized during the Vietnam War did not challenge state power but colluded with it. News media organizations are depicted as “ultimately reverential toward the institutions involved: the Office of the President, the Military, America at war and, most of all, the empty technology that characterized Vietnam” (214). Conventional journalism, therefore, becomes aligned with a “good citizenship” that works for a state disassociated from and increasingly at odds with its citizenry.

The obsession with technology and the spectacle pervades these powerful institutions at the expense of the soldiers and their stories of suffering. During the Vietnam War, it is suggested, spectacle, abstraction, and image helped to convince the American public that the war was glorious and worth their support. The transformation of individual suffering into abstraction and spectacle is strikingly marked in Herr’s representation of the besieged American Marine base Khe Sanh. Whereas Herr describes

a base constantly threatened and men living in fear masked by bravado, the official military and journalistic representation of the base to the American public transforms it into a representation of abstract terms that glorify war: “Khe Sanh was famous, one of the very few place names in Vietnam that was recognized by the American public. Khe Sanh said ‘siege,’ it said ‘encircled Marines’ and ‘heroic defenders.’ It could be understood by newspaper readers quickly, it breathed Glory and War and Honored Dead” (105). The visual appearance of the base supports this larger media representation; even the practicalities of military action like Pegasus, an operation designed to relieve Khe Sanh, “came to look more like a spectacle than a military operation” (156).

The emphasis on decontextualized spectacle did not uncover historical events, but rather obscured them. Herr writes: “Conventional journalism could no more reveal this war than conventional firepower could win it, all it could do was take the most profound event of the American decade and turn it into a communications pudding, taking its most obvious, undeniable history and making it into a secret history” (218). Language erases or downplays loss of life: “Nothing so horrible ever happened upcountry that it was beyond language fix and press relations, a squeeze fit into the computers would make the heaviest numbers jump up and dance” (42). Representation in this formulation directly counters the basic premise of journalism: to uncover “the truth.” If, in this passage, Herr aligns conventional institutions of both journalism and the military as unequal to the task of negotiating Vietnam, he also makes it clear that this kind of incommunicative “making secret” is part of the war effort.

In Herr’s work journalists attempting to glean “the truth” of Khe Sanh from official sources are almost comically thwarted. A classic scene in *Dispatches* depicts a

Catch-22-esque media briefing (known by journalists as the “Five O’Clock Follies”) in which all a general will tell the media about the men at Khe Sanh is that they are “clean” (150). During another interview, when asked what the military command centers would do if Khe Sanh and all its surrounding backup bases were attacked by the Viet Cong, a general states, like a “crack trapper anticipating something good . . . ‘That . . . is exactly . . . what we . . . *want* him to do’” (149, original emphasis and punctuation). Here, the Marines are depicted as the singular, abstract commodity of “Khe Sanh,” good to signify “war” and, by their heroism, to increase support for that war. The support of the American public for the Vietnam War is premised on and intensified by media representation of that war as something abstract, glorifying, and spectacular.

If language obscures the effects of violence, mass culture’s images actively collude in transforming death into spectacle. Thomas Doherty has written that “virtually all Vietnam war memoirs preconceive war in Hollywood terms and continue to mediate the combat in those same terms” (In Carruthers 243). *Dispatches* draws attention to such a governing framework, suggesting that growing up in a media-saturated culture desensitizes the American viewer to the connection between what is seen and what *is*. Perhaps the most telling example of this comes when Herr compares his witness of “group death” to gazing at *Life* magazine photographs as a child:

Even when the picture was sharp and clearly defined, something wasn’t clear at all, something repressed that monitored the images and withheld their essential information. [. . .] I could have looked until my lamps went out and I still wouldn’t have accepted the connection between a detached leg and the rest of a body, or the poses and positions that always happened

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(one day I'd hear it called 'response-to-impact'), bodies wrenched too fast and violently into unbelievable contortion. Or the total impersonality of group death, making them lie anywhere and any way it left them, hanging over barbed wire or thrown promiscuously on top of other dead, or up into the trees like terminal acrobats, *Look what I can do*. (18-19, original emphasis)

In this passage, the trained spectator is unable to connect dead and suffering bodies to the history behind them. The marks of violence and cruelty become "poses" and "positions" like the bodies of moveable dolls, like circus figures, the sign of the stunning but playful efficacy of technological murder. We see the difficulty Herr has in extracting himself from American media culture when he discusses the feeling that being a correspondent is like "making a movie." This movie is "glamorous," glorious and ultra-masculine. In this way, Herr (sometimes willingly, sometimes unwillingly) participates in the culture of spectacle the military and official journalism promote. He writes: "It took me a month to lose the feeling of being a spectator to something that was part game, part show" (168).

Vollmann similarly critiques conventional journalism's abstraction of human life. When he mentions the kinds of information available in popular news magazines, it is in the most comically general terms: "He picked up *Time* first. Israel had been doing something in Lebanon. He saw an Afghan staring at him from another table. He ignored him. He looked at *Newsweek*. *Newsweek* appeared to agree with *Time*" (76). In this passage, the vagaries and generalities of journalism seep seamlessly to the privileged reader, encouraging ignorance of specifics (here, the Afghan man). As in Bourdieu's

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critique of television journalism, magazine journalism is imagined to offer interchangeable and uncontroversial stories.

Part of the abstraction of the news, Vollmann suggests, is the unwillingness of journalists to investigate fully the USSR's invasion in Afghanistan: "'You are not well, Young Man,' the General told him. 'Why must you go into Afghanistan? You can take pictures of Afghans with guns in Pakistan. The journalists do it. It will be all the same to the Americans'" (51). In this passage, one representation stands in for the other as context is erased. Vollmann, like Herr, implies that the outcome of abstraction is the unwillingness of the American public to commit their energy and money to ending a conflict.

Like Herr and Vollmann, Sacco condemns mainstream news. Media critic Graham Spencer has argued that media coverage of the Bosnian War with its general lack of political or historical context "served to reinforce the irrationality of conflict and so underscore the hesitancy of the West, who worked to resist being drawn into action. Significantly, much reporting ignored the historical and political factors which had motivated the conflict, and so could draw no intelligible conclusions about how the war could be stopped" (103). In a passage that very much resonates with Spencer's analysis, Sacco critiques the hit-and-run nature of conventional journalism's depiction of Goražde, a town of mainly Bosnian Muslims surrounded by hostile Serb forces.

One passage in the middle of the book demonstrates the transformation of individual suffering into generality (see Figure 1). Sacco writes that "most journalists blew in [to Goražde] with the U.N. convoy in the morning, hit the hospital for some English-language quotes from Dr. Begovic, noted the mini-centrales on the Drina, and

did some man-in-the-street and/or a quickie stand-up on the second bridge, and blew out with the U.N. convoy in the afternoon” (130). Each of these phrases is encapsulated in a narrow panel linked together by the text boxes. In the first and last panel, trucks containing shadowy figures approach and leave. The same image of a cameraman’s back flanks the left side of the middle three panels and in these same three panels a journalist is depicted first holding a microphone to the doctor, checking her watch as the cameraman records the mini-centrales, and talking into the camera, oblivious to the small boy just behind her looking up towards her.

Akin to the “briefness” of the panels, this visit is about fast, quick “information.” Journalistic productivity – finding the best representative images and quotes in the least amount of time – here erases all that is not apparent to the eye and all that cannot be encapsulated in a brief sound-byte. Dr. Begovic’s stories are turned into “quotes” that are significant mainly because they are in English, and the mini-centrales become a representation of self-sufficiency. The tiny boy and what might lie behind his gaze is less important than the performance of journalism: the “man-in-the-street and/or a quickie stand-up.” Like Vollmann’s reading narrator, the practicing journalist ignores what is literally in front of her (or at least in close proximity).



Figure 1. “Man-in-the-street and/or a quickie stand-up.”

Of the three writers, Sacco most directly points out the relation between abstraction and the perpetration of violence. If the above series of panels displays the processes of generalization, its inevitable outcome is exposed when Sacco describes how foreign journalists in Bosnia deal with the beginning of the 1995 Dayton peace talks.¹⁰⁰ While waiting for the outcome of the talks, he tells us the journalists “pondered the sticky problem of Goražde’s presence deep in Serb-held land. Some felt that a peace settlement would be facilitated if the Bosnian government traded the enclave to the Serbs for more territory around the capital, Sarajevo” (3). Sacco posits the notion of a trade as deeply unethical in that it erases the brutal fact that Goraždans would risk slaughter. The abstraction of concepts like “peace,” “Goražde” and “trade” erase the individual subjects and suffering that those abstractions represent.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ In Dayton, Ohio, negotiators were trying to figure out a way to end the war swiftly and peacefully.

Goražde was in a U.N. “safe area”; the Muslims there were considered protected by international forces.

¹⁰¹ The abstraction and erasure of suffering during the Bosnian War was structurally ingrained in the modes of representation common to current-day news representations of war. Beginning with the 24-hour news

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The next page, however, heightens the material outcome that is hidden under the abstract language of trade. A white, shell-pitted road slices up the center of this full-page image, receding into the distance. Leafless trees and bombed-out buildings flank the road. Both sides of the road are lined with hundreds of people staring down the road in the direction of the viewer. They are individual and distinctive: they wear different outfits, and their bodies stand in different positions. A woman reaches for a child who has leapt out into the road. None of the faces smile; rather, their brows furrow as they stare into an unknown space. A few soldiers stand with their backs turned to the crowd. At the bottom of the page, in a small text box, Sacco records an American correspondent's words: "I wish Gorazde would go away" (4, see Figure 2).

While for the foreign journalists, the people of Gorazde have become abstract topics for discussion that can be made to "go away," Sacco visually depicts the individual people whose lives are at stake in this erasure. Perhaps even more ironically than in *Dispatches*, where suffering is subsumed into a "war effort" whose goal is to produce death, here the lives of Gorazdans are imagined as obstacles to the resolution of a war. Sacco's juxtaposition of individual bodies with the wish for their erasure, however, highlights that fact that the "trading" of a territory in effect authorizes mass killing.

coverage during the Gulf War, wars were more and more presented as "video games." As Matheson and Allan point out, "Throughout the 1990s, Western news organizations were rationalized in the name of cost savings, their budgets for international newsgathering slashed dramatically as economic pressures were brought to bear" (12). The decade, therefore, saw an increasing emphasis on war-as-entertainment and a decline in funding for complex political or historical commentary.

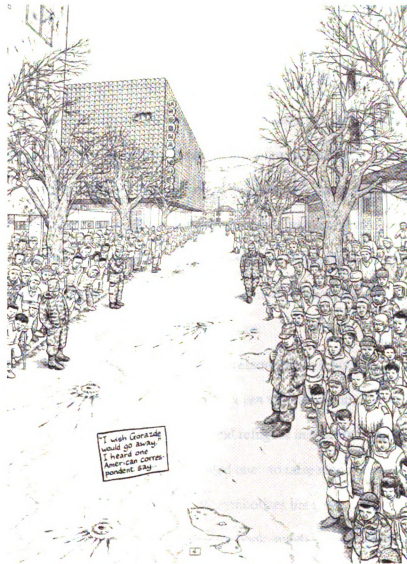


Figure 2. "I wish Gorazde would go away."

Hospitality and the Ethics of Representation

The media outlets to which Herr, Sacco and Vollmann refer transfer specificity into abstraction and generality. In each of the three texts, abstraction either hides violence or justifies its perpetration. Suffering becomes abstract as people become concepts. This type of journalism allows the receivers of seemingly objective

“information” not only to identify with this abstraction, but also to view war as a spectacle produced for entertainment value.

All three writers distance themselves from conventional journalism’s erasures of violence. While, like Bourdieu, none seem to wish to demonize individual journalists, the immediate imperative for all writers is to reinsert into representation the stories of the individuals who endure the bodily effects of war. All attempt to ethically represent the stories of the others they represent: American soldiers in Vietnam, Afghan civilians and soldiers, and Bosnian Muslims. In so doing, the three writers rehumanize those whose wartime experiences are erased, practicing an altruistic mode of representation that pushes back against the erasure or validation of violence.

Vollmann’s idealistic “Young Man” for this reason makes it his first priority to offer access to the experiences of the Afghan *mujahideen* who are fighting in the hills against the Russians, as well as Afghan civilians and refugees in Pakistani camps.¹⁰² This goal is ostensibly linked with an ethically motivated one: to raise money for the Afghan defense forces. The “Afghanistan Picture Show” symbolizes his general idealistic attempts to raise public consciousness, including: “a book, maybe, or a slide show, or a radio show, or sale of his photographs on the street, or mailing campaigns to libraries and churches, or fund-raising booths? – Later, he tried every single one of these” (79)). Vollmann recounts a series of interviews with everyday people like waiters, the administrators of the refugee camp, the *mujahideen*, and an Afghan Brigadier living in

¹⁰² Vollmann narrates his escapades in the third person, using the droll moniker “The Young Man” to indicate his feelings of distance and alienation from an earlier self.

Pakistan. The book includes not just Vollmann's interviews, but the less formal interactions he has with people.

Similarly, Sacco lives with and forms close bonds with the Bosnian Muslims whose experiences are symbolically erased or made abstract by conventional journalism. He records a broad swath of stories from those who are victimized, isolated and racially targeted by the Serb military; such stories range from the everyday to the life-changing. He describes, for example, social gatherings where he and his new friends party "like the resurrected," and conversations with young women who talk about the intense boredom of their isolation. He recounts everyday discussions between him and his friend and translator Edin, and Edin's mother's self-sacrificing kindness when he (Joe) gets sick.

Herr attempts to produce an ethical representation of the Marines in the face of a monolithic communications system that erases their suffering. The story of the war produced by the mass media, he writes, "wasn't being told for [the Marines], that they were going through all of this and that somehow no one back in the World knew about it" (206). Herr, then, wants to tell an alternative story that would emphasize not only their suffering but also the complexity of being a soldier in wartime, positioning himself as a narrator uniquely capable of accessing these ignored narratives.

In Herr's record of the events at Khe Sanh, his project to rewrite "the official story" becomes clear. Herr chooses to record the day-to-day experiences of the men there, focusing particularly on their individual backgrounds, jokes and conversations he overhears, the dangers to which they must adjust and the traumatic effect of this constant exposure. The reader gains access to numerous stories including one about a soldier who is physically and psychologically incapable of making himself walk to the helicopter

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which would take him away from Khe Sanh and another about men who have to live “like animals who were so spaced out that they began taking pills called Diarrhea-Aid to keep their walks to exposed latrines at a minimum” (86-87). Herr lists off a series of Khe Sanh stories that official journalism does not record:

I thought about the graffiti that John Wheeler had discovered on a latrine wall there, ‘I think I’m in love with Jake,’ and about the grunts who had gone running up the trenchline to find a stretcher for me to sleep on, about Mayhew’s space blanket, about the kid who had mailed a gook ear home to his girl and could not understand now why she had stopped writing to him. (148)

Just as graffiti marking homosexual love challenges official discourse about the straight, “ultra-masculine” American soldier, the other stories similarly fall outside of the dominant economy of representation. Stories about men’s individual backgrounds do not actively further the war effort, and subversive discussions of danger and trauma actively challenge it. These stories, like the love, human compassion, and psychological damage they portray, are repressed by the official, institutional outfits of information production.

Each of these writers is, in a certain way, enacting a mode of discursive hospitality. Such hospitality involves on a most basic level, an openness to representing specific stories and experiences not always allowable in mainstream journalism. In their attempts to witness ethically, Vollmann, Sacco and Herr direct the reader’s attention to the stories of those who suffer physically, emotionally, and mentally from war.

Vollmann’s *Young Man*, therefore, travels into refugee camps in Pakistan as well as into Afghanistan itself in order to allow his “picture show” to host images and stories usually

erased by the mass media. Sacco and Herr similarly position their works as host to uncirculated stories. Discursive hospitality, I'd like to argue, lies at the core of the citizen-witnessing ethos. Yet each of these writers take discursive hospitality one step further. In "Force of Law," Jacques Derrida writes that: "To address oneself to the other in the language of the other is [. . .] the condition of all possible justice" (245). Sacco, Herr and Vollmann transform their works into radical acts of hospitality when they attempt to reproduce in various ways the languages of their respective others.

An Afghanistan Picture Show hosts the narratives of others by offering up transcripts of lengthy interviews. For example, in a twelve-page passage starting with a subsection titled "Too many puppets, too many strings," he reproduces an interview with "the man whom I call the Reliable Source" (174), a Pakistani man who narrates a complex historiographic trajectory about the war. Such a trajectory destroys for Vollmann the ideal of ideological purity and exposes complex networks of political influence. He also reproduces the written words of others. In one three-page section, for example, Vollmann reproduces a letter written by the Brigadier to President Ronald Reagan. The letter seeks to remind Reagan of an interview the Brigadier had with a U.S. state envoy to Afghanistan in which he agreed to lend the Brigadier a set of weapons, communications devices and money. The Brigadier indicates that the goal of his letter is to "put our problems on your table for a very kind and just favour which is based on share humanitarianism and anti-communistic expansionism ideals" (47).

Sacco even more explicitly hosts Bosnians' stories. Alongside his recollection of his own everyday experiences in Bosnia, Sacco as narrator often recedes into the background, and whole portions of his book are dedicated to first person narratives in the

voices of the survivors of violence. He retells the traumatic, violent experiences of deaths, injuries, and displacements that many Goraždans experienced in the months and years prior to his visit, marking these stories off by a black frame. If the white-framed narratives are Sacco's space, the black-framed narratives belong to the people of Bosnia. In these passages, interviewees recount their personal and political histories. The stories are written in quotation marks, in the voice of each survivor, and are narrated in past tense, as memories.¹⁰³ Sacco's illustrations graphically depict wounded or dead bodies; they force the reader to see the results of violence on human bodies.

The stylistic aspects of Herr's text similarly attempt to speak in the "language of the other." As part of this ethical transfer of the "language of the other," he adopts the ultra-masculinist style of Marine discourse. He often writes in choppy, fragments and refers to death stoically. He employs the particular lingo of both the grunts and the sixties at large, not only using terms like "gook" to refer to the Viet Cong, but also (to appropriate Matthew Stewart's exhaustive list): "cool," "cooled things out," "uptight," "digging it," "cream you," "scarfed," "spaced," "fucked up," "going down," "strung out,"

¹⁰³ The first of these narratives starts on page 18, and is titled "Brotherhood and Unity." It begins with a drawing of Edin's face and a quote: "I spent a very nice childhood." This short narrative establishes the image of the idyllic community commonly associated with multicultural Bosnia before the war. It ushers in a historical narrative, commented on by Edin, which recounts a past history of violence. Such a history is shown to be grounded in the personal, the familial, and the narrative: Edin states, "My grandfather and grandmother sometimes tried to explain to me what happened during World War II, but I did not listen. or listened with one ear" (23). If this first section alternates between Sacco's objective historiography and Edin's personal narrative, these sections are quickly overtaken by personal narratives of pain and suffering.

“chop,” “grease,” “wired,” “wasted,” “thousand-yard stare,” “candy-assed,” and “zapped” (Stewart 192).

Emmanuel Levinas’s and Jacques Derrida’s work on the goals and limits of ethical hospitality help to underscore Herr’s, Sacco’s and Vollmann’s journalistic projects. I read the journalists’ acts of textual hospitality as being akin to the deliberate performance of what Levinas’s ethical “substitution,” in which the self is hostage to the other person in a relation of responsibility that predates subjectivity. He states that this “extraordinary event” of responsibility “can not have begun in my commitment, in my decision” (*Otherwise Than Being* 10) but rather issues from a time “before my freedom in an immemorial past, an unrepresentable past that was never present and is more ancient than consciousness of....” (“Ethics as First Philosophy” 84). According to Levinas, the individual may choose either to accept or refuse this responsibility for the other. Recognizing the extent to which being a self is already substituted for, or a hostage to, the other individual, he writes, offers the world “pity, compassion, pardon, and proximity,” qualities that are necessary for a community that exceeds similarity: “[t]he unconditionality of being hostage is not the limit case of solidarity, but the condition for all solidarity” (*OTB* 117). If Levinas is notoriously critical of “politics,” I would, however, like to take seriously his linking of substitution and solidarity as a moment where his thought opens to the possibility of the political. The journalists’ choice to host the words of those they represent in place of their own, I would suggest, represents the attempt to perform a deliberate political and ethical act of substitution. Yet each of the writers marks in his work the limits of such an act.

Philosophical Limits

Of the three writers, Herr most explicitly marks the relation between his narrative and the ethical imperative, when he states:

After a year I felt so plugged in to all the stories and the images and the fear that even the dead started telling me stories, you'd hear them out of a remote but accessible space where there were no ideas, no emotions, no facts, no proper language, only clean information. However many times it happened, whether I'd known them or not, no matter what I'd felt about them or the way they died, their story was always there and it was always the same: it went, 'Put yourself in my place.' (31)

The imperative "put yourself in my place" can be read, perhaps, as these journalists' ultimate goal. They physically attempt to put themselves in the place of the other, traveling abroad and to otherwise off-limits spaces to represent unheard stories. The statement also points to the ethical imperative of the kind of representation they attempt to perform in their books. Herr imagines the ethical imperative as issuing from the mouths of the dead, and I have up to now read the phrase "Put yourself in my place" as pointing toward the project of these journalists. I have argued that Herr, Sacco and Vollmann attempt to refashion their representations of war to be more hospitable to the stories of others whose narratives have been erased, lost, or made abstract. In these moments the writers remove themselves from their narratives and attempt to speak in the language of the other.

Levinas and Derrida point to the inherent violence enacted by representation. Levinas states that "Language is born in responsibility. One has to speak, to say I, to be in

the first person, precisely to be me (*moi*). But, from that point, in affirming this me being, one has to respond to one's right to be. It is necessary to think through to this point Pascal's phrase, 'the I (*mon*) is hateful'" (*EFP* 82). Such accidental hatefulness, I would argue, is structurally embedded in the project of representation, and is aligned with the accidental violence of hospitality itself. In *Of Hospitality*, Derrida describes hospitality, as follows: "[A]bsolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner [. . .], but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I give place to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names" (25). All become hostages of all ("the guest becomes the host's host" (125)). Derrida describes the simultaneous existence and codependence, in this concept, of unconditional hospitality and the idea of a law of hospitality, and discusses the potential violence of hospitality as "right" – the violence directed both against the host (or hostage) and against the other person (the stranger, the foreigner). Against the other person exists the violence of sovereignty: "No hospitality, in the classic sense, without sovereignty of oneself over one's home, but since there is also no hospitality without finitude, sovereignty can only be exercised by filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence" (*AEL* 55). The host, by giving up everything, also experiences a kind of violence: "But here, in the assignation of responsibility, the election of the hostage seems not only more 'originary' (in truth, as always, more originary than the origin) but violent, indeed traumatizing – more so, it seems, than the sometimes pacifying vocabulary of the welcome and of the hospitality of the host might suggest" (*AEL* 59).

When Derrida writes that “[t]o address oneself to the other in the language of the other is . . . the condition of all possible justice,” he adds that “in all rigor, it appears . . . impossible” (“Force of Law” 245). If we return to the specifics of Herr’s quote, we remember who is ostensibly speaking. “However many times it happened,” Herr writes, “whether I’d known them or not, no matter what I’d felt about them or the way they died, their story was always there and it was always the same: it went, ‘Put yourself in my place’” (31). What would it mean for a journalist to put himself in the place of the dead and speak from that place? How might such an ethical imperative affect representation? What would it do to the journalist? Speaking from the position of the dead is the limit case of ethical representation, the place that indicates both the ultimate goal and the impossibility of the ethical endeavor. Levinas acknowledges the trauma of the encounter with alterity as a necessary facet of substitution, and Derrida points out the impossibility of justice. The works of Herr, Vollmann, and Sacco similarly illuminate the violent properties of total hospitality.

If speaking from the position of the dead is the limit case, when we return to the moments in the text I have marked as hospitable we see that even they are marked by cracks and fissures. Each narrative indicates insistently the role of the writer in interpreting and presenting personal and institutional histories. The black-bordered sections of *Safe Area Goražde*, for example, are permeated by Sacco’s influence. Sacco’s commentary on Bosnians’ narratives asks the reader to notice his other roles as historiographer, arranger, illustrator and commentator.¹⁰⁴ Vollmann’s presence in

¹⁰⁴ “The First Attack” alternates between the narratives of five Bosnians: Edin, Emina, Rumsa, Ibro and Izet. Edin narrates from the position of distanced witness (“I only watched, I couldn’t do anything . . . I

response to “the language of others” is even more explicit and problematic, as he ceaselessly comments on and critiques the words he reproduces. His reproduction of the Brigadier’s letter, for example, is accompanied by commentary that states “It is a remarkable and pathetic document” (45) and he ends his narration about his interview with “the Reliable Source” by stating “Well, and so the Reliable Source was wrong, for the Soviets did not, of course, leave Afghanistan in 1989, and yet the Great Game may not be over” (188). Unlike texts such as John Hersey’s *Hiroshima*, in which Hersey reproduces the stories of survivors of the atom bomb and completely erases signs of his interaction with the narrators, these authors mark their physical and interpretive presence in their narratives. In so doing, I argue, they acknowledge the textuality of their books and point to the inherent ethical complications involved in projects of representation.

Herr’s adoption of others’ language indicates a different – and fundamental – ethical conundrum: that by practicing an ethical relation with another the altruistic self may disallow a second ethical relation. This can be indicated by Herr’s use of the word “gook.” *Dispatches* – if it humanizes the U.S. Marines – participates in the abstraction and dehumanization of the Vietnamese other. While Herr assumes he can read the faces

was on guard in Kopaci, on the line, 2000 meters away, maybe more” (79)). The others recount from the perspective of survivors: Izet, for example, says “I had seen dead women, children, and men, and I thought it’s better to be killed while running than to stay in the same place.” Sacco depicts Izet’s experience in a series of panels. Izet’s character says to his family “Follow behind me!” and his wife responds: “Don’t go! You’ll be killed.” As a narrator, Izet states “My daughter followed me, but my wife didn’t move. ... I got a bullet in my leg...” (81). Izet’s narrative ends five pages later with a panel in which Izet stares out at the reader. “They say a bullet hit my wife in the head just in the place where I left her.” Sacco notes in parenthesis at the bottom of the panel “(He declined to talk about the fate of his son)” (86).

of these silent Vietnamese, unlike Sacco and Vollmann he never attempts to transmit the story of a non-American “other person.” In Herr’s account, the Vietnamese (whether on the “friend” or the “enemy” side) recede into the background, becoming mute figures who only watch:

Hundreds of refugees held to the side of the road as we passed, many of them wounded. The kids would laugh and shout, the old would look on with that silent tolerance for misery that made so many Americans uneasy, which was usually misread as indifference. But the younger men and women would often look at us with unmistakable contempt, pulling their cheering children back from the trucks. (73)

Levinas’s meditations on justice, the justice produced by the entrance of the third party, are helpful here. In *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, Levinas writes “The responsibility for the other is an immediacy antecedent to questions, it is proximity. It is troubled and becomes a problem when a third party enters” (157). The entrance of the third party, he writes, is “the very fact of consciousness” (158); it initiates consciousness. With the third party, too, comes justice: “The extraordinary commitment of the other to the third party calls for control, a search for justice, society and the State, comparison and possession, thought and science, commerce and philosophy, and outside of anarchy, the search for a principle” (161). Herr’s use of the term “gook” points out the inevitable entrance of politics into the ideal of the ethical relation. It suggests that the ethical must move into the political, with its awkwardness, discomfort and violence.

Looking at the third party from another angle, we can also authorize even more fundamentally the positionality of the citizen-witness at the meeting of the ethical and the

political. In his consideration of representation, Paul Ricoeur writes that the citizen (along with the historian, the judge, and the educator) stands in the “impartial” position of the third party (314). If such a position structurally requires impartiality, however, Ricoeur argues that the moment of decision exposes “the impossibility of occupying the position” (295). Taking as his two examples of the third party the judge and the historian, he argues that the perpetuation of trials and the selective construction of archives illuminate the inherent violence of the decision. The decision, however, is important, when taken in the context of “the great crimes of the twentieth century”:

One of the theoretical stakes of the comparison concerns the status of singularity, at once moral and historical, assigned to the crimes of the last century. On the practical level, the public exercise of both forms of judgment is the occasion to underscore the therapeutic and pedagogical role of *civis dissensus* raised by controversies animating the public space of discussion at the points of interference of history in the arena of collective memory. (295)

Yet, Ricoeur argues, if the historian and the judge are positioned as impossibly impartial third parties, their different modes of judgment produce them as two opposing parties. Between them, he writes, is positioned the citizen who similarly must (fail to) decide impartially between the two modes of dealing with testimony.

Ricoeur locates the citizen as a classic third party in response to testimony. Yet the texts I examine suggest that the citizen as witness also produces a kind of testimony as part of his or her position as the third party. The work of literary journalists such as

Herr, Sacco, and Vollmann not only emphasizes the impossibility of impartiality; they also point out the limits of the ethical relation as it inherently moves into the political.

Journalistic Limits

In a series of striking and often humorous moments, Herr, Sacco, and Vollmann undermine and point out the limits of altruism. In what follows I will examine the ways the three writers deliberately expose the self-interest at the heart of altruism; illuminate their self-critical upending of the politics of hospitality; and point to the ultimate limits of altruism – and good citizenship – as performed in embodied moments of cowardice, sickness and death. By challenging the self's traditionally invisible and/or neutral role in altruism, I will argue, these writers both point to the structures of global political power (namely, the inequality structured into national citizenship) that discourage heroic good citizenship and craft a new ethics of impossibility.

As Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan write, the war journalist is often considered the paragon of journalistic virtue: "War journalists are thought to do what all journalists do, only in a more heightened, vibrantly important fashion. . . . Images of the war reporter as adventurer or risk-taker, in the optimum sense, or as daredevil, fortune-hunter, or rogue, in the negative, help to fuel their celebration in novels, films, plays, and other fictional treatments" (4). The narrators' attempts at altruism might be easily slotted into such preexisting models of heroism. Each of these writers, however, exposes to various degrees the foundations of altruism as being as much or more about the self as about the other. In these texts, self-interest becomes coded parodically in masculinist and heterosexual terms. Sacco, for example describes his first trip to Goražde as follows:

“They whisked us off to a hotel! / A hotel! . . . There were hot meals and beds and a view of the Drina for the reporters and celebrity writers and ambassadors and cartoonists that were sure to pour in! My colleagues and I, we were prancin’ and dancin’, giggly in Gorazde, glorious by association! / Gorazde! Which had just wrested the spotlight from that media darling Sarajevo!” (5-6). When Sacco has the opportunity to listen to the stories of Gorazdans, instead he “was trying to break the ol’ ice-aroo with Emira, the 19-year-old translator who’d been assigned to us for the afternoon” (6). Next, he shows up at a party, “having a ball, man, drunk on moonshine brandy and letting loose with some nutto locals ready to turn the presence of a few foreign journalists into a major swingfest” (8). Here, Sacco’s narration parodies his earlier excitement, exposing it as stemming not from altruism but from access to luxury and the big scoop, women and booze.

In the first chapter of his book, “Breathing In,” Herr offers up similar motives:

There wasn’t a day when someone didn’t ask me what I was doing there. Sometimes an especially smart grunt or another correspondent would even ask me what I was really doing there, as though I could say anything honest about it except ‘Blah blah blah cover the war’ or ‘Blah blah blah write a book.’ Maybe we accepted each other’s stories about why we were there at face value: the grunts who ‘had’ to be there, the spooks and civilians whose corporate faith had led them there, the correspondents whose curiosity or ambition drew them over. But somewhere all the mythic tracks intersected, from the lowest John Wayne wetdream to the most aggravated soldier-poet fantasy, and where they did I believe that everyone knew everything about everyone else, every one of us there a

true volunteer. . Not that you didn't hear some overripe bullshit about it:
Hearts and Minds, Peoples of the Republic, tumbling dominoes . . . Which
wasn't at all true of me. I was there to watch. (19-20)

Here Herr posits altruism as just so much propaganda. He portrays the underlying decisions to go to war as less lofty and more complicated: a choice influenced not just by masculinist myths and fantasies, but by the voyeuristic impulse.

Vollmann critiques his altruistic motions in even harsher terms. A passage titled "The red hill [1]" begins: "Once there was a Young Man who wanted to be more than he really was. This made him unhappy. He decided to go to Afghanistan and take pictures of the bullets whizzing past his ears. Unfortunately, he had a stomach ache." Such a picture of weakness will not do, and he restarts with "The red hill [2]": "Once there was a Young Man who wanted to go to war. Unfortunately, no one would take him at first" (12). Here, Vollmann uncovers altruism in the most traditionally self-serving and masculinist terms: his journey is ultimately about himself. He marks as well the transition of self into the guise of other, reframing his initial failure from self (stomach ache) to other ("no one would take him"). His ultimate fantasy is one of heroic violent self-aggrandizement: "why, he'd grab one of these here *topaks* all cocked and loaded with *golai* swiped from some Soviet ammunition dump, knock out the lights and maybe shoot somebody's cap off just for effect (if only he could shoot!)" (14). Masculine heroism in these passages is ludicrous and self-serving.

The writers position themselves as citizen-witnesses abroad, both mobile and protected by their particular status in relation to the U.S. state. They each self-reflexively emphasize their own privilege. Herr exposes his social position in a conversation

between himself, another journalist (Lengle) and two Marines (Krynski and “the Avenger”). When the Avenger tells Krynski that Herr and Lengle don’t have to be in Vietnam, Krynski replies, stupefied, “Now what’s *that* supposed to mean? . . . You mean you guys *volunteer* to come over here?” “Well, dumb shit,” replies the Avenger, “what’d you think . . . you think they’re just some dumb grunt like you?” (201).¹⁰⁵ If Herr emphasizes his privilege as a middle-class professional in relation to class relations within the nation, Vollmann and Sacco draw attention to the particular privileges attendant to U.S. citizenship. Vollmann, for example, stays with a Pakistani General before entering Afghanistan; the means by which he has arranged his stay remain undescribed, taken for granted. Sacco similarly links the warm welcome he receives in Bosnia to what he represents: “Goražde was in love with me. People I didn’t know hailed me by name. Whole high school classes jumped up when I entered the room. Drunks offered me the town slut. Soldiers wanted to talk girls, and girls wanted to flirt, they wanted me to carry them off to a Gap outlet in the sky” (57). He is valued as a commodity, like the Gap – here, a commodity representing ideal conceptions of “America,” “power,” and “freedom”: “I’d like to tell you it was me they loved, but that wouldn’t be the Real Truth. What really made ‘em swoon was how I’d gotten there, not by foot and over mountains through enemy minefields, but by road – the Blue Road, the U.N. route to Goražde” (57). In this passage, Sacco deconstructs popularity, camaraderie and sex appeal as in fact the desire to appropriate his access to the official protection and mobility his citizenship gives him.

¹⁰⁵ Explicit here are the politics of status – who gets to be a journalist and choose to risk his life, and who is marked as “dumb” and is required to risk his life.

These passages suggest that if altruism is coded as masculinist heroism, at the core of it is a privileged self-interest authorized by national citizenship. In his Preface, Vollmann posits a darkly comic view of his motives: "I myself, like many a milksop before, chose the path of altruism, on whose more fatiguing switchbacks one may encounter starving children, and lean one's weight on their little heads in the guise of patting them. The question for me was who to aid; for I could see the sun shining on the rifle sights of the folks whose opinion of me was of so much consequence." Here, Vollmann suggests that altruism is a way to gain the approval of other activists, and that it gains the practitioner relief and comfort at the expense of those who are the targets of altruism. Vollmann's reversal here of the terms of hospitality (the children host his weight, not the other way around) indicates the next angle through which these writers critique altruism: in practice.

Herr, Sacco and Vollmann attempt to practice discursive hospitality, yet each insistently points out that in the process of gaining access to and transmitting such stories, he is in actuality the beneficiary of a hospitality more altruistic than that which he later extends. Each is hosted by people who risk being damaged by hospitality, either because of economic pressures or because of active endangerment.

Herr's hosts persistently offer him their belongings, services, and protection. One Marine named Mayhew attempts to make Herr take his air mattress (128). The Marines similarly protect Herr: "they were my guns, and I let them do it. I never let them dig my holes or carry my gear, there were always grunts who offered, but I let them do that for me while I watched, maybe for them, maybe not" (67). Hospitality here involves discomfort and even self-endangerment. Herr imagines, however, that he reciprocates

hospitality, that he engages in a literal act of substitution. He writes: "We covered each other, an exchange of services that worked all right until one night when I slid over to the wrong end of the story, propped up behind some sandbags at an airstrip in Can Tho with a .30-caliber automatic in my hands, firing cover for a four-man reaction team trying to get back in" (67).

Sacco subtly problematizes the hospitality extended to him by Edin and his family: "Yesiree, you couldn't beat the fresh produce at Edin's.../ I had it made. / Another plate? / didn't mind if I did! / his mother piled it on!" (35). A few pages later, he writes: "Every morning, before tending to the animals, Edin's mom would tiptoe into the room where I slept to get the wood fire going in the stove./ . . . / Radiation, convection, conduction, I accepted the stove's heat graciously any way it came" (44). Sacco here revels in the role of guest. If hospitality in these passages seems fairly straightforward, the reader is asked to recognize the labor and danger that go into keeping the narrator fed and warm: "People had to go far for their wood," Sacco writes, "The trees on nearby hills had already been cut down. / These men had hauled their load some four or six kilometers to town" (45). "In '92," he tells us, "through this apple tree orchard planted by his grandfather, Edin's Muslim neighbors had crawled to the river under the fire of attackers who included some of Edin's Serb neighbors. / The Serbs now controlled the river bank directly opposite and could plainly see whoever was walking around in the field" (34). The orchard abuts the garden where food is grown.

Vollmann critiques the risks of hospitality even more explicitly when he describes travelling over the mountains with the Afghan mujahideen in order to enter Afghanistan. If Herr describes his attempts to counterbalance the hospitality of the Marines, Vollmann

does no such thing, writing instead: "The Mujahideen did everything they could for him. They carried his pack, held him by the hand, and let him lean his weight on them as they made their way up and down the mountains. They even carried him piggyback where the fordings were especially difficult" (219). He slows them down: "'You go slow-slow,' Poor Man told him. 'What takes us fifteen minutes take you ten days, ten years'" (220). Vollmann explains to the reader: "[The Young Man's] slowness was endangering their lives. Without him they could have made the journey in one long day" (220).

Vollmann critiques the conditions which surround the hospitality he receives, suggesting that his special treatment is linked directly to his status as an American: "In Karachi he'd met two men who befriended him. They paid for his lunch (*nan*, oil and curried egg), bought him a leaf-wrapped packet of betel nut to chew, showed him the tomb of Mr. Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, and took him on a bus ride to Clifton Beach, where in September the giant sea tortoises came to lay their eggs" (32). When Vollmann moves on from Karachi, one of his impromptu hosts calls out to him from the train platform: "You come remember us. You send to us picture. You come back to Karachi, you stay with me. I love you. . . . You, you are AMERICA. You are my best friend" (39). In a sardonic moment, Vollmann writes, in a passage titled "HIS POWERS REVEALED," "'It is right that they speak sweetly to you,' an Iranian told him. 'They want your help; you are American; you can do anything for them'" (71). In these passages, the individual self stands in for the whole (nation), intimately linked to power and the possibility of material gain. Vollmann points out that this faith in nation is undeserved: "Only the desperate Afghans that he met in the streets had any illusions that

the Young Man could accomplish anything" (79). Indeed, Vollmann informs the reader that his slide show was ultimately unsuccessful and likely ill-conceived.

In a series of passages titled "An Afghanistan Picture Show," Vollmann describes the images that will become part of the "picture show" through which he attempts to raise public consciousness. The picture show passages become a commentary on his own inability (as the Young Man) to escape from the visual and representative practices he critiques. Vollmann's description of the images he retains give the reader an insight into the mode of representation the Young Man is attempting: "his Afghanistan Picture show, with which he would galvanize the world, was staring at him like the two little girls who stared at him between tents. One's hair was combed, and she wore a clean white dress. The other was unkempt, with a dirty face and a faded wrinkled dress; she scratched an insect bite on her knee. Both were beautiful; both were shy" (133). Here we see the Young Man's attempt to spur action by circulating images of beautiful poverty. Vollmann here draws on the same aesthetic categories as turn-of-the-century witnesses, here. Yet, rather than positioning himself as accessing the aesthetic of the "real" (as London and Riis do with the grotesque), he aligns his own vision with same aesthetic earlier citizen-witnesses scorned as participating in the blindness of the comfortable middle-classes: the beautiful. As in earlier works, the beautiful becomes a way to assimilate the suffering of others into a familiar narrative. If for Riis the "fair side" the city shows allows the well-to-do to ignore the predicament of the suffering poor, for the Young Man, the beautiful allows him to feel good about recognizing others' poverty. His images generalize suffering in much the same way that *Time* or *Newsweek* do.

Similarly, a footnote buried within the book notes both that his attempt to educate Americans and to singlehandedly transform the situation within Afghanistan are equally ineffective:

‘Your gift of help to Afghans is very appreciated,’ wrote the General in 1984, ‘but this amount cannot be given to anyone. You could donate the amount to an education institute- if you so desire.’ – ‘SORRY,’ said the rather surprising signs put up by the Berkeley Spartacists in 1983, who vowed to defend bureaucratically deformed workers’ states by any means necessary. ‘AFGHAN SLIDE SHOW CANCELED – will be rescheduled.’ – ‘Your show was well received, and, as I believe you would have wished, provoked a goodly amount of reflection afterward,’ wrote Mr. Scott Swanson in 1985. ‘Unfortunately a snowstorm kept all but the most hearty away.’ (51, note)

Unlike Herr, who imagines a reciprocal hospitality, Vollmann claims more bluntly: “He never did anything for the Afghan” (78).

Here, we see the inefficacy of the altruistic project as well as the difference between discursive and material hospitality. All three authors, however, most directly undermine altruism by exposing their own unwillingness to completely substitute themselves for their others. Directly after he proclaims that the dead ask him to “Put yourself in my place,” Herr recounts a story that ironically and blatantly emphasizes his inability and unwillingness to do so. He writes: “One afternoon I mistook a bloody nose for a headwound, and I didn’t have to wonder anymore how I’d behave if I ever got hit” (31). He writes about walking with a soldier (“the kid”) near the Cambodian border when

a mortar round comes in. They both fall to the ground, and the soldier's boot hits Herr's face, giving him a bloody nose. When the soldier sees him bleeding, he starts apologizing "something insane right away." Herr thinks "[s]ome hot stinking metal had been put into my mouth, I thought I tasted brains there sizzling on the end of my tongue, and the kid was fumbling for his canteen and looking really scared, pale, near tears, his voice shaking" (31). Thinking he has been shot and is dying, "I made a sound that I can remember now, a shrill blubbering pitched to carry more terror than I'd ever known existed, like the sounds they've recorded off of plants being burned, like an old woman going under for the last time." During this panicked reaction, Herr distinctly worries about his eyes being damaged. Here, we finally get the sense that Herr's position as privileged witness outweighs his posturing willingness to die in glorious sacrifice, as he thinks frantically, "my eyes, my eyes!" (32). Later in the book Herr concludes: "I realized that the only corpse I couldn't bear to look at would be the one I would never have to see" (77). When finally, Herr realizes he just has a bloody nose, "not even broken," he borrows the soldier's canteen to wash off his face. When he turns back, the kid "had stopped apologizing, and there was no pity in his face anymore. When I handed his canteen back to him, he was laughing at me" (32).

Here, Herr's panicked reaction first aligns him with the soldier, and then alienates him. His inability to control himself frightens the kid and reminds him of death's proximity. In particular, his "shrill blubbering [. . .] like an old woman" serves as a reminder of the "feminization" death enacts on men who are supposed to be brave and "masculine." This scene in some ways counters the ultra-masculine discourse Herr uses throughout the book, and shows a vulnerable moment in which he recognizes the danger

he is in and realizes his unwillingness (or inability) to follow the plot of his “movie” and die heroically, like a “man.”

Vollmann’s limit case is imagined, not performed. When he is with the mujahideen, he writes:

He imagined being caught with the Mujahideen in some sandy gulley by a patrol of [Russians]. They must surrender; they were disarmed. Then, one by one, the prisoners ahead of him were machine-gunned. Did he say, ‘Ameriki!’ – at first softly, out of shame, then in a shout so that everyone heard, and the Muhahideen, the doomed ones turned their backs on him contemptuously, the guards understanding him at last, pulling him away, offering him water before his first beating, primping him for his television appearance as a spy, as meanwhile the Mujahideen, muttering earnestly, ‘Allah, Allah,’ were shot behind him? – Or did he loudly insist, ‘Yah – Afghan!’ as the guards led him up for execution . . . ? Which, oh which would have been worse? (233)

Vollmann aligns solidarity and ethical substitution with suicide; he suggests that self-preservation relies on social privilege and injustice. Instead of offering a solution to this problem, he leaves the reader with a question.

If Joe Sacco feels Levinasian responsibility for the other person, as a writer he questions his ability to be fully ethical, to leave “selfishness” behind for the sake of the other. While Sacco as writer generally speaking recedes into the background, two particular moments expose Joe as character as an imperfect, at times unethical, witness – one who grapples with his privileged status. The first moment appears 200 pages into the

book, when Sacco explores the ramifications of being not just a witness but an American witness. In this scene, Sacco is out with a group that includes his friend Edin and another journalist named Whit. A character Sacco only names as “F” corners him in the restaurant and verbally attacks him. “F” says (in capital letters): “America man thinks Bosnia man primitive. Journalist... Why you come? Money?” The panels progressively move closer and closer to “F’s” grimacing face and shaking fist. “I think – Srebrenica. I become angry. Very angry. Six thousand killed Srebrenica. What you think, mister? Mister? You don’t write for Srebrenica.” Joe shrinks back against the wall and stares away. His thought boxes read “I wanted Edin to intervene, Whit to notice... I wanted out, out of there... I wanted to put a hundred thousand miles between me and Bosnia, between me and these horrible, disgusting people and their fucking wars and pathetic prospects.” As Edin, Whit, and Joe walk off into darkness, we see only Joe’s hunched, shadowy back. The final text box on the page reads: “when we got back to Edin’s I threw up and felt much better, thank you” (192).

This scene is strikingly different from most of the other scenes involving Joe as witness. For one thing, it is the only scene in which someone is directly antagonistic to Joe. It is also the only scene where a Bosnian questions Joe’s motives as a journalist and an American. This scene exposes the fact that Sacco has yet not told the story of Srebrenica, a town in a U.N. ‘safe area’ where thousands of Bosnian Muslims were massacred by Serb forces in 1995. Graham Spencer describes the lack of international response to this massacre: “As the worst war crime in Europe since the Second World War, Srebrenica [. . .] overwhelmingly provided irrefutable evidence of Western indifference” (89-90). According to Spencer, the “humanitarian” assistance the U.N.

provided in the aftermath of the massacre merely covered over military inaction. “F,” in a sense, calls Joe’s bluff. His inability to respond to the man’s questions, and his defensive vitriol, no matter that it is unspoken, reveal Joe in a moment of unethical witnessing, a moment when he refuses to understand the other person let alone substitute himself for that person. Here, against his will, Joe shows himself claiming the rights of U.S. citizenship, but not the duties.

The word “Srebrenica” displays not only the failure of the U.N. to protect the people living in their “safe areas”; it concurrently marks the convenient “forgetting” of human suffering and mass murder. His forgetting of Srebrenica and the intense resentment that bubbles up against “these horrible, disgusting people” reads as a reflection not on Bosnia, but on his own unwillingness to deal with his positionality as an American journalist. This scene suggests that when it is convenient for Joe (when he can move freely), he takes advantage of his American citizenship. When it isn’t (when he is asked to “represent” American power), he attempts to distance himself from the U.S. This failing is “fixed” by his attention to the Srebrenica massacre two chapters later, but this chapter remains as an uncomfortable reminder of Joe’s own struggles with what it means to be a journalistic witness

The Productivity of the Limit

When Vollmann describes the image of the two girls in his Afghanistan Picture Show, he turns the gaze on himself: “They stared and stared at him: they would never have enough of him. How strange he was! What did he want? Why had he come to them? Why was he so thin and pale and sweating? Something must be wrong with him”

(133). Throughout the book, Vollmann highlights his physical weakness and susceptibility to humiliating illness (dysentery). “Something” is “wrong” the citizen-witness. What happens when we are allowed to see the witness in these texts? As a graphic novel, *Safe Area Goražde* is the only one of the three books where the citizen-witness is visually depicted. As opposed to those he interviews, whom he draws realistically, Sacco as journalist shows up as a cartoony, almost repulsive figure whose mouth hangs slightly ajar and often has a blob of spit flying from his face. When *Mother Jones* asked Sacco about the choice to portray himself in such a fashion, Sacco replied “When I started *Palestine* it was a bit rubbery and cartoony at the beginning, because that’s the only way I knew how to draw. It became clear to me that I had to push it toward a more representational way of drawing. I tried to draw people more realistically, but the figure I neglected to update was myself.” If, as Scott McCloud argues in *Understanding Comics*, less realistic characters produce readerly identification, Sacco entices us to identify with him. I would like to suggest that readerly identification in these texts encourages us to identify ourselves – to “see” ourselves aligned not with physical repulsiveness, but rather with moral ambivalence and civic weakness. The fragility of the body in these texts speaks to the fragility of the individual altruistic project. We are asked to see the figure of the citizen-witness – often positioned as heroic and strong – as endangered, weak and morally suspect.

I do not point this out in order to critique these writers or their projects; in fact, I would argue that these writers are highlighting an aspect of ethical representation that is often ignored or suppressed in favor of a naïve democratic idealism. We should read the moments in each text where ethics fail as indicating, perhaps ironically, the larger

political-ethical platforms of each text. Such moments indicate not just the inherent interplay between self and other enacted within discursive hospitality, but the influence of the self and self-preservation within the everyday, contextualized performance of altruism. In a wide variety of tactical maneuvers, these texts destabilize commonly held preconceptions about the foundations and effects of altruism, pointing to the larger political relations and conditions which undermine individual ethics. Unlike Agee, who transforms his critique (shame) into the impetus for an imaginary utopian community, Herr, Sacco and Vollmann leave the ethical problem unsolved. In so doing, they refashion an ethics that is about exposing the limits of the ethical.

If each of these writers parodies his attempts to engage in a practice of ethical representation, each publishes their book. Each maintains hope, therefore, that their representation might, as Vollmann writes in his “Advertisement for the Revision” “somehow in its negative way help somebody.” In their reformulation of ethical representation, Sacco, Vollmann and Herr attempt to produce honest stories. Part of this honesty is to represent the limits of solidarity: their own refusals to substitute themselves for others and the unavoidable insertion of the political (the third party) into the ethical. As Zelizer and Allan point out about war journalism:

Being there suggests that the violence, devastation, suffering, and death that inevitably constitute war’s underside will somehow be rendered different – more amenable to response and perhaps less likely to recur – just because journalists are somewhere nearby. And yet the experience of a reporter’s being there, so important for distant publics eager for news of the events of a war-torn region, is shaped quite systematically by a weave of limitations – political, military,

economic, and technological, among others – that together may curtail the experience in drastic ways. (5)

What Herr, Sacco, and Vollmann highlight in these moments are the structures of privilege that counter the ethical that Levinas imagines. Sacco and Vollmann emphasize the privileges granted by U.S. citizenship, and Herr critiques his unwillingness to give up the privilege of the undrafted professional middle-class. In this way, their works are failed ethical representations. Yet the marking of the failure is in itself a kind of practical ethics that opens up into the political. If these works expose the limits of solidarity they also ask the reader to identify with their unethical moments. In these particular texts, directed as they are at Western English speakers and perhaps Americans in particular, the ethics of unethical identification force readers to question their own stakes in American global hegemony, political forgetting, and the justification of violence.

Chapter Five

Negative Testimony and the Potential Citizen in Joan Didion's *Salvador*

"[P]olitics . . . has failed to confront the transformations that gradually have emptied out its categories and concepts." –Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*, ix

Three-quarters of the way into her 1983 book *Salvador*, a collection of essays about violence and discourse in El Salvador, Joan Didion describes what she claims is "an authentic piece of political art" and "the only unambiguous political statement in El Salvador": its Metropolitan Cathedral. I start here because Didion's description of the cathedral illuminates the contours of book's goals, concerns and limitations – a project that substantially intervenes in the practice of citizen-witnessing.

The straightforwardness of the cathedral, Didion implies, is located in the way it continually exposes the reverberating effects of political violence. It is the place in which, in 1980, the Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero was assassinated while saying mass. It is "unfinished," she writes, because Romero had chosen not to finish it "on the premise that the work of the Church took precedence over its display" (77-78).

Therefore, "the high walls of raw concrete bristle with structural rods, rusting now, staining the concrete, sticking out at wrenched and violent angles. The wiring is exposed. Fluorescent tubes hang askew. The great high altar is backed by warped plyboard. The cross on the altar is of bare incandescent bulbs, but the bulbs, that afternoon, were unlit" (79). The church becomes a memorial and an ongoing statement, constantly exposing the violence of the past in the present, just as the guts of the church poke through its walls.

Yet the cathedral is not just a memorial; it is an active “political statement.” As indicated by the “unlit bulbs” of the cross, the cathedral is marked excessively by what it is not. Didion writes in a repetitive list that “there was in fact no light at all on the main altar, no light on the cross, no light on the globe of the world that showed the north American continent in gray and the south in white; no light on the dove above the globe, *Salvador del Mundo*” (79). She extends her list of things the cathedral lacks to “sentimental relief,” “decorative or architectural references to familiar parables,” and “traces of normal parish activity” (79). Didion claims that the physical characteristics of the church reference a more general existential state: “In this vast brutalist space that was the cathedral, the unlit altar seemed to offer a single ineluctable message: at this time and in this place the light of the world could be construed as out, off, extinguished” (79). By performing its refusal to conform to a preordained idea of “a cathedral,” the building exposes the conditions – specific to a “time” and “place” – that prevent normative signification.

The cathedral is an authentic piece of political art, Didion argues, because it performs its difference from a prototypical cathedral. By parading its negativity, the cathedral points to the political violence which has marked it – specifically the assassination of the Archbishop, but also the general violence in the country itself. Didion visited El Salvador at a time when, as Sandra Braman concisely describes it, “There was international concern about abuses of human rights by governmental forces and U.S. interest in unsolved murders of four North American religious workers. Recent land reforms seemed to be slowing despite continued widespread poverty and starvation” (81). The right-wing had recently regained control of the country with the election of the

ARENA party of Roberto D'Aubuisson, who had ordered the Archbishop's assassination. The Reagan administration was backing El Salvador's military government, whose death squads were to kill thousands of left-wing rebels and civilians over the course of the 1980s. The unfinished brutality of the cathedral alludes to such a political context.

I would like to use the image of the cathedral's negativity to open up an exploration of a core practice of Didion's book: what I will call "negative testimony." Negative testimony has been theorized in both legal studies and trauma theory. In legal studies, the term refers to testimony that suggests a particular act did not occur. According to *Judicial and Statutory Definitions of Words and Phrases*, negative testimony "is not as to the immediate fact or occurrence, but facts from which you might infer that the act could not possibly have happened" (550). In some ways, Didion's negative testimony points to those acts which are not acknowledged to have happened: namely, the political violence enacted on Salvadoran citizens by their own government. The official terminology of such violence – that of "disappearance" – speaks to such erasure.

I will also use "negative testimony" in a related, but different sense: as a kind of testimony that speaks to its own inadequacy. What is "negative" in this formulation is not that to which testimony attests, but the testimony itself. Testimony as testimony inherently fails – but, as in the works of Michael Herr, William Vollmann, and Joe Sacco – that failure is part of its work. Such an approach resonates with and diverges from the theorization of testimony in the study of traumatic witnessing. In such studies, it is the traumatic nature of what is witnessed that "haunts" future testimony. In her work on traumatic narrative, *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth writes that "What returns to

haunt the victim, these stories tell us, is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known" (6). She argues that traumatic testimony marks "the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience" (58). From another perspective, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub write that testimony about the Holocaust performs its own limitations and in so doing exposes the way the mass brutality of "contemporary history" operates horrifically outside of conventional ways of knowing:

[W]e underscore the question of the witness, and of witnessing, as nonhabitual, estranged *conceptual prisms* through which we attempt to apprehend – and to make tangible to the imagination – the ways in which our cultural frames of reference and our preexisting categories which delimit and determine our perception of reality have failed, essentially, both to contain, and to account for, the scale of what has happened in contemporary history. (xv, original italics)

While I am similarly interested in the way the circumstances of witnessing disrupt its testimony, I wish to examine not the effects of trauma on the narration of a psychological subject or subjects, but rather the ways that national and global political structures, and the positioning of the witness within them, might influence the methods by which the witness both observes and testifies. Such an approach positions witnessing within a nontraumatic framework, looking at how such testimony might operate according to a different logic.

In this chapter, I want to explore the way that structures of state power delegitimize the testimony of the voluntary citizen-witness. The twentieth century's

crisis in representation, I will argue, is one produced not just by the psychological disruptions of the traumatic witnessing of incomprehensible violence, but also by the rise of massive state power that, in Giorgio Agamben's words, "empties out" the socio-political ideal of witnessing.¹⁰⁶ In Chapter Four I discussed the founding of institutions and discourses of universal human rights and global citizenship that occurred after WWII. Such institutions and discourses link together the ethical and the political in an ideal vision of human community. I discussed as well how citizen-witnesses Michael Herr, William Vollmann, and Joe Sacco seek both to perform global citizenship through solidarity with the other outside of the United States and to contextualize such practices as politically impossible. If Herr, Vollmann, and Sacco interrogate the self-interested roots of altruism, the philosophical limits of ethical substitution, and the limitations state citizenship places on claims to global civic equality, Didion takes another approach. By emphasizing the impossibility of witnessing and testimony from its inception she suggests not just that ethical relations are impossible but that witnessing itself has been purged of meaning.

In contrast to theories of universal human rights and global citizenship, states in *Salvador* collude across national borders to suppress recognition of their antidemocratic violence. State control of military, communicative, and economic institutions produces a wide-ranging net of discourses and practices that ensure the continuation of such power. The distinction between the democratic and the dictatorial loses substance, becoming

¹⁰⁶ The term "emptying out" appears in Agamben's *Means Without End*. It indicates the processes by which a term is utilized or paraded at the same time as the act, practice, or figure which it signifies is systematically repressed.

mere rhetoric. In this context, the citizen – both national and global – is alienated from the workings of the state. While Herr, Sacco and Vollmann disrupt ethics on the basis of the privilege offered by class position and national citizenship, Didion picks apart citizenship itself. The distinction between bare life and political life emphasized in Chapter Four becomes exposed as fragile and unstable. By emphasizing and performing the general inability to draw certain kinds of meaning from the significant scene, and by pointing to the political structures and discourses that produce such conditions, *Salvador* memorializes the emptying out of not only citizen-witnessing, but also that ideal so closely linked to the practices of the good citizen: democracy itself.

State Power and the Inability to Witness

[General José Guillermo García] understood the importance of symbolic action: the importance of letting the Americans have their land reform program, the importance of letting the American pretend that while ‘democracy in El Salvador’ may remain ‘a slender reed’ . . . the situation is one in which ‘progress’ is measurable (‘the minister of defense has ordered that all violations of citizens’ rights be stopped immediately,’ the State Department noted on the occasion of the July 1982 certification, a happy ending.) (65)

Salvador critiques Didion’s inability to access the traumatic scene or (to use another, perhaps more appropriate, logic) the scene of the crime. Conventionally, the evidence that the legal witness and the citizen-witness provide can secure justice by shining a light on a crime, and in some way pointing to the perpetrator of that crime

(either an individual or a system).¹⁰⁷ For example, key turn-of-the-century works of citizen witnessing, Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), Nellie Bly's *Ten Days in a Mad-House* (1887), and Jack London's *People of the Abyss* (1904) expose, respectively, the unhealthy living conditions of New York City's tenements, abuse in New York's Blackwell Island asylum, and the plight of low-wage workers and the unemployed in London's East End (see Chapter One). If legal witnesses point to crimes against person or property, citizen-witnesses indict social conditions that violate democratic ideals.

A series of acts – what John Henry Wigmore dubs “observation,” “recollection,” and “communication or narration” – is typically associated with evidentiary procedure. In his influential legal document, *A Treatise on The System of Evidence in Trials at Common Law Including the Statutes and Judicial Decisions of All Jurisdictions of the United States* (1904), Wigmore narrates these acts as follows: “the fact that a witness A, being of sound mind and sufficient experience, having had opportunity to see what B did, and well recollecting the circumstances, is willing to assert that B forged the note, is a fact which we shall readily listen to as evidence” (582). Each of these acts, Wigmore claims, must be present in order for the act of testimony to produce reliable evidence. Such a system relies on a complex but straightforward understanding of indexical signification: legal testimony points to and thereby produces the larger significance of

¹⁰⁷ Indeed, citizen-witness testimony often has been used in court cases, and some citizen-witnessing is specifically designed to gather testimony for the courtroom. See, for example, recent articles such as “Journalist Recalls Siege of Sarajevo” (Jungvirth), about a former war correspondent who testified in a war crimes trial against Serbian leader Ratko Mladic, or the transcription of photojournalist and human rights specialist Corinne Dufka’s testimony at the trial of Liberia’s former president Charles Taylor (Witte).

both a situation and the players in such a situation.¹⁰⁸ Journalistic practice similarly assumes the presence of a competent spectator who can witness, remember and testify to a scene.

For Wigmore, reliable testimony can be disrupted by an “incapacitated” witness. Wigmore locates incapacity at the stage of testimony and suggests that such incapacity is tied to the inability of the individual witness to transfer observation or recollection into narration; his formulation, like the work done in trauma studies, locates difficulty in

¹⁰⁸ In the use of the term “indexical” (and later, “iconic” and “symbolic,”) I draw on semiotic theory by Charles Peirce, in which he distinguishes between three kinds of signs: icons, indices, and symbols. In his guide to Peirce’s thinking, James Jakób Liszka states that an icon “correlates with its object because the sign’s qualities are similar to the object’s characteristics” (37). Liszka gives as visual examples a photograph of a person’s face, which shares the characteristics of that face, and a diagram, which shares spatial relations with the object. Verbal icons include metaphors. The index “represent[s] its object not only by means of similarity but also by contiguity with its object. . . . An index does not really assert anything about the object it represents, so much as it shows or exhibits that object” (38). Examples are a pointing finger or a demonstrative pronoun. I would argue that legal evidence relies upon indexical signification when, for example, the bloody fingerprint points to guilt. The last type of sign is the symbol, which “may represent an object by means of some conventional, habitual, dispositional, or lawlike relation” (39). The wagging tail of a dog, Liszka writes, is a symbol of friendliness because there is no necessarily relation between the motion and the meaning. Words are generally considered symbols. Such terms allow for an examination of the way meaning is produced in various kinds of texts, especially ones that – like *Salvador* – theorize the relation between the visual or written signifier and the “reality” of the signified. This will be particularly apparent in the way Didion treats photographs and the way she employs certain phrases.

witnessing and testifying in the individual subject.¹⁰⁹ In *Salvador*, however, Didion's inability to testify properly is not located in her psychologized encounter with trauma. In fact, Didion wants to access the traumatic scene; as a good global citizen, she wants to observe, to point, and to indict. Her positioning in relation to the structures of state power, however, prevents her not only from gathering and reporting meaningful information, but also from producing from such information legal and/or social transformation.

Didion emphasizes her inability to access and gather meaningful information from scenes of violence. She writes, for example, about a visit to Gotera, a garrison town near Morazán, where "a major offensive was taking place," claiming that because "actual information, on this as on all subjects in San Salvador, was hard to come by," she tries to find out from a colonel firsthand what is going on (39). She is, however, unable to access the kind of information she seeks: "In the end no patrol went up and the colonel never came back (The reason the colonel never came back is that he was killed that afternoon, in a helicopter crash near the Honduran border, but we did not learn this in Gotera) and nothing came of the day but overheard rumors, indefinite observations, fragments of information that might or might not fit into a pattern we did not perceive" (44-45).

¹⁰⁹ Incapacity for Wigmore can take three forms: organic, experiential, and emotional. Organic incapacity refers to the mental capacity of the witness, who may for various physiological reasons (insanity, infancy, etc.), be unable to testify. Experiential incapacity means that the witness lacks training in a particular situation or field, and therefore cannot testify as an expert. The final form of incapacity – emotional – occurs when a witness is so emotionally involved in a situation that they cannot give reliable testimony (586). This last kind of incapacity might be aligned with the work done in trauma studies, which explores the way the traumatic effects of witnessing violence emerge in testimony.

“Actual information” about the offensive, the type of information the citizen-witness posits as legally, politically, and socially meaningful, is frustratingly elusive.

In such scenarios, however, Didion does access a certain kind of information: the kind produced after the fact, by the physicality of the dead body. In Gotera, for example, the “least equivocal fact of the day” is a corpse she and her companions encounter on the side of the road. The kind of information Didion gathers from the body, however, is not the kind she seeks: “He could have been stripped by whoever killed him or . . . by somebody who happened past: there was no way of telling. In any case his genitals had been covered with a leafy branch, presumably by the *campesinos* who were even then digging a grave. A *subversivo*, the driver thought, because there was no family in evidence” (45-46). In this passage, “information” cannot indict. Certain kinds of facts remain in the realm of the possible (“he could have,” “presumably,” “the driver thought”). The only information she can gain is that the body, in its physicality, is present: “all anyone in Gotera seemed to know was that there had been another body at precisely that place the morning before, and five others before that. . . . It was agreed that someone was trying to make a point. The point was unclear” (45-46). The meaning of such a sign is limited to its presence, and stretches no further. The body is just that: a body, in a certain place at a certain time.

Signification functions in a similar way in another passage in which Didion encounters “human rights photographs” of locations where the military state deposited the bodies of those it killed, both rebel and civilian.¹¹⁰ Refusing to incorporate actual

¹¹⁰ By narrating photographs, rather than providing them for the reader, Didion disallows the assumption that the text is a transparent representation of reality. This practice emphasizes the author’s role in

photographic images into the book's text, Didion acknowledges by-then commonplace criticisms of photographic indexicality.¹¹¹ She recognizes that photographs – even documentary photographs – are constructed (and often in support of dominant power). Such a link between the image and state power is clear in the killers' choice to leave the

signification and, importantly, highlights the limitations of her narration in relation to its generic position. If Didion simply left out photographs, she would not necessarily seem to be engaging with the generic qualities of the citizen-witnessing tradition. (After all, not all citizen-witnessing texts feature photographs, or visual images of any kind.) Yet *Salvador* both includes and excludes the photograph. The simultaneous presence and absence of the photograph in the text speaks to Didion's coterminous undermining and performance of the practice of citizen-witnessing. Many of the most famous turn of the century works of citizen-witnessing – including *How the Other Half Lives* and *People of the Abyss* – rely on photographic images to provide visual reinforcement of their written narratives (see Chapter One), as do classic works of 1930s documentation, such as Dorothea Lange's and Paul Schuster Taylor's *An American Exodus* and Erskine Caldwell's and Margaret Bourke White's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (see Chapter Two). The iconic and indexical associations of the photographs in these works are meant to point to the real world conditions that are indicted in the essays.

¹¹¹ Photographs are often considered both icons (that resemble what they represent) and indices (that point to a particular reality). As Peirce writes: "photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that in certain respects they are exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the . . . class of signs . . . by physical connection [the indexical class]" (qtd. in Chandler 43). Nevertheless, many critics have emphasized the degree to which photographs are constructed by both photographer and viewer. Susan Sontag's *On Photography*, which claims that photographs offer "a grammar and [. . .] an ethics of seeing" (3) and muses on the constructed nature of photographs, appeared in 1978, just a few years before *Salvador*. Roland Barthes's *Image/Music/Text*, which emphasizes the connotative message of photography (especially press photography), first appeared in English translation in 1977.

body of the worker in plain view. Similarly, the attempt to cover the genitals of the corpse is a display of power that operates on a visual level. The visual, Didion recognizes, is not neutral. Instead of supporting claims to photographic truth, therefore, she describes and interprets photographs for the reader.

Witnessing a photograph is to move yet further from the scene she seeks to witness, and the evidence she describes is similarly distant, abstract, and even disinterested. If photographs are conventionally considered both icons and indices, like the body by the side of the road their indexicality is limited. Rather than being able to indict state-sponsored killers in legally-productive meaning, they are restricted to brute bodily facts.¹¹² In a description of these photographs, Didion writes, "These bodies he [the human rights photographer] photographs are often broken into unnatural positions, and the faces to which the bodies are attached (when they are attached) are equally unnatural, sometimes unrecognizable as human faces, obliterated by acid or beaten to a mash of misplaced ears and teeth or slashed ear to ear and invaded by insects" (16-17). She notes that their captions are "laconic," reading only: "Found in Soyapango May 21 1982. Found in Mejicanos June 11 1982. Found at El Playón May 30 1982, white shirt, purple pants, black shoes" (17). If the body in Gotera signifies only its presence, a meditation on the human rights photographs exposes what happens to the physical body after some time has passed: "In El Salvador one learns that vultures go first for the soft tissue, for the eyes, the exposed genitalia, the open mouth," and "One learns that hair deteriorates less rapidly than flesh, and that a skull surrounded by a perfect corona of hair

¹¹² As Chandler has written, "In many contexts photographs are indeed regarded as evidence, not least in legal contexts" (43).

is a not uncommon sight in the body dumps.” Such information is scientific, similarly restricted to the physical processes attendant to a dead body. Unlike so many legal and crime dramas, however, in which the details of the dead body offers clues that might point to and help to indict a perpetrator, here, no such conclusions might be drawn. Rather, Didion notes, the witness learns more about the general signficatory processes of political violence: “One learns that an open mouth can be used to make a specific point, can be stuffed with something emblematic; stuffed, say, with a penis, or, if the point has to do with land title, stuffed with some of the dirt in question” (17).

The information gained from the dead bodies and the human rights photographs corresponds to the basics of journalistic recording: what, where, when, how. Yet it lacks the remaining terms which might contextualize and add significance to the murders: the “why” and, more importantly for an indictment, the “who” of both perpetrator and victim. Didion’s evidence is incomplete. If the photographs “are not, technically, ‘forensic’ photographs, since the evidence they document will never be presented in a court of law,” in Didion’s narrative they are similarly prevented from translating into the kinds of meaning that would produce social justice, disrupting the conventional trajectory of the citizen-witnessing narrative (17). Meaning in these passages is located in the heightened physicality of the decomposing body. The emphasis in these passages on “the point” would seem to suggest the indexical signification on which legal witnessing relies. In both passages, however, such a “point” cannot be stabilized: it is either “unclear” or abstract, suggestive and representative. In conventional citizen-witnessing, the photograph buttresses and contributes to the indexicality of the narration, increasing the text’s claim to authoritative representation. Here, on the other hand, the inability of the

photograph to offer legally-productive meaning highlights the text's (and the citizen's) lack of authority.

The political system Didion imagines relies not just on the limitation of indexical meaning, but also on the international circulation of the empty symbol. She writes, for example, that in September 1982, the new U.S. ambassador Deane Hinton "was even then working on getting new arrests in the Sheraton murders [in which two Americans and one Salvadoran were killed]. He was even then working on getting trials in the murders of the four American women, a trial being another step that did not, in El Salvador, necessarily follow an arrest. There had been progress. There had been the election, a potent symbol for many Americans and perhaps even for some Salvadorans" (89). While Didion notes that "the symbolic content of the event [the election] showed up rather better in translation than on the scene," the U.S. trumpeted the election's presence as a sign of "nascent democratic institutions" (90). Here the empty symbol trumps the search for legal justice. The presence of "progress" and "the election" usurps the second half of the passage, showing how Hinton moves seamlessly from a seeming recognition of violence to a reliance on emptied-out democratic concepts and symbols, covering over the former with the latter.

Didion emphasizes the dominance of the empty symbol in her physical depiction of a state plunged into chaotic signification. She describes her entry into El Salvador as follows: "In the general absence of tourists these hotels have since been abandoned, ghost resorts on the empty Pacific beaches, and to land at this airport built to service them is to plunge directly into a state in which no ground is solid, no depth of field reliable, no perception so definite that it might not dissolve into its reverse. The only logic is that of

acquiescence” (13). In the airport: “Eye contact is avoided. Documents are scrutinized upside down” (14). Here, buildings have literally been emptied. The photographic metaphor emerges to describe a general *zeitgeist* in which such vision is inoperable (“no depth of field [is] reliable”). The system – shifting, unreliable, indefinite, empty – does not allow for a particular kind of witnessing. Like Didion’s El Salvador, peppered with empty structures, the language and structure of democracy remains, but in practice it is emptied of political and legal meaning. It is not that human rights violations are not seen, then: it is that evidence of such violations is not recognized as evidence. While concepts and practices of democracy circulate, violence done against the human body signifies only such violence, and nothing more.

In John Tagg’s works on the instrumentalization of photography in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he argues that “the function of photography as a means of surveillance, record, and evidence was the result of a more or less violent struggle . . . to hold in place certain discursive conditions. It depended upon a machinery of capture that sought to curtail the productivity of photographic meanings, exhaust their legibility, and make the camera its own, as an instrument of a new disciplinary power” (*The Disciplinary Frame* xxviii). In contrast to Tagg’s dystopia, Didion constructs a landscape in which photography and institutions (here, the law and, relatedly, civic journalism) are delinked. Rather than being subjected to surveillance, here the problem is that the citizen cannot mobilize the photograph towards a democratic aim.¹¹³

¹¹³ The ideological difference underpinning the distinction between Tagg’s and Didion’s imagined dystopias is illuminated by Tagg’s explanation of his argument’s yield:

In this context, it becomes clear that even if Didion could access perpetrator and victim, it would be of no use, because structures of power circulating between states disallow the transformation of such knowledge into legal action. Indeed, throughout the book, Didion points to the Salvadoran government's implication in mass murder. She writes, for example, that newspaper reports of body counts in El Salvador: "[fail] to obscure what is taken for granted in El Salvador, that government forces do most of the killing" (15). It is not, then, that Didion cannot access the right kind of information, but that such information circulates within a system (political, legal, or otherwise) in which it is neither acknowledged nor translated into social justice. Her failure to access meaningful information is due not to her own inability to witness scenes of traumatic violence, but rather to the distorted and inoperable structures of a political system in which the notion of human rights violations is just an empty symbol and the suffering of the body only a general sign of uncontrolled state power. The system itself disallows her from pursuing the kind of meaning conventionally associated with the citizen-witness.

In this context, the ideal of good citizenship is emptied out. Didion can witness – in fact, she can see direct physical evidence of violence – but the act of witnessing cannot be translated into civic meaning. Like the human rights photographs, the evidence she

The effect of this argument, of course, is to disrupt the liberal, reformist story of documentation, documentary, and the benevolent progress of the truth. . . . if there is a link between documentation and 'documentary,' it comes not via the pristine camera and its transparency to good intentions but via the institutions, discourses, and systems of power that invest it and sully it, and via the discursive regimen that constitutes the document and holds it in place. (xxxii)

Unlike Tagg, Didion retains a liberal faith in the "good intentions" of the documentarian.

marks “will never be presented in a court of law” (17). Didion is allowed to continue witnessing – she is allowed to perform the acts of the citizen witness – because her witnessing will lead nowhere.

Didion’s book negatively testifies: it testifies to its own inability to properly testify. In so doing, it speaks to the emptying out of ideals of citizenship, democracy, and the law. It posits a world in which human rights violations are symbolically condemned, but are in practice neither acknowledged nor recognized. The book, however, does not stop at marking the inadequacy of testimony and the undermining of democratic ideals. It mobilizes its testimonial failure to point to the processes and structures by which the ideals of the citizen-witness are emptied, the effects of such emptying on the human psyche and human relationships, and the broader socio-political implications of such processes.

Negative Testimony

Didion’s depiction of the cathedral does not stop with noting the structure’s divergence from its architectural ideal. Rather, she points out that the cathedral performs its own failure, in so doing indicting the political conditions that produce that failure. The steps of the church, for example, allude to both the assassination of Oscar Romero and more general political violence with “a spill of red paint, lest anyone forget the blood shed there” (79). Didion writes, too, that “Here and there on the cheap linoleum inside the cathedral there was what seemed to be actual blood, dried in spots, the kind of spots dropped by a slow hemorrhage, or by a woman who does not know or does not care that

she is menstruating" (79).¹¹⁴ Here there remains a doubt about the "blood": it only "seems" to be "actual." The text leaves unclear how, and how intentionally, either spot of "blood" has been produced. The blood spots, by marking only their presence ("there is") seem to be aligned with the limited signification of the dead bodies elsewhere paraded.

Yet if Didion cannot find reliable markers of "reality," and if the presence of the remnants of violence seems to correspond to the way violence marks only the ability to produce it, she asks us to read the cathedral in a different way, as "an authentic piece of political art." Here, we are asked to see signification as marking in a different way the violence that is otherwise either cynically paraded or erased ("disappeared"). In this place signification is doubled, becoming thickened, heavy, and unavoidable. If it is unreliable, it is yet referential and indexical. Here "there was" marks explicitly that violence which the state covers over. Blood – even when only tentatively "actual" – testifies to the lost presence of dead bodies, and presence is offered in direct opposition to a state discourse that erases violence. The reader (here, Didion) must construct the spots'

¹¹⁴ Critics have differently analyzed the symbolic charge of the figure of the imaginary menstruating woman in Didion's text. Pratt views the woman as a symbol of the nation, writing that "Imaginary women have always served as national icons. This one, carelessly, tastelessly, unconsciously shedding her own blood, seems to be Didion's icon of El Salvador, brought into being by a metropolitan perspective of masculinist dominance" (226). Jane Harred posits that the blood is an ironic symbol of the effects of political violence on the domestic sphere, claiming that "Didion's observations about the effects of the war on families and women indicate that the private dimensions of people's lives are ineluctably affected by and part of the public, the social, and the moral . . . She clarifies some of these effects by associating them with the abused and suffering body: the fertile body of the menstruating woman whose fertility seems absurdly and cruelly out of place because it may simply produce more victims" (6-7).

significance, inductively producing the meaning which is still fragile in the mark. If the cathedral cannot be what is expected of a cathedral, it marshals the signification of violence (the paint and the seeming blood) in protest.

The mobilization of an inadequately signifying presence speaks to Didion's description of the relatives who "sit every day in this cramped office on the grounds of the archdiocese" and search through the human rights photographs. Even while they are often unable to locate evidence of their "disappeared" loved ones, Didion suggests that both the photographs and the act of looking through the photographs signify against state power. In the face of a rhetoric of disappearance that both parades and erases violence, the physicality of the bodies in the photographs partnered with the "presence" of the relatives performs an implicit counterpoint to such discourses.¹¹⁵ *Salvador* similarly enlists the unstable, inadequate, and crude mark of "presence" to produce an indexical critique of the structures, processes, effects, and implications of the state's attack on democratic ideals and practices. How does it happen, she seems to ask, that such ideals can be emptied, what comes of it, and what can be done?

The dead bodies, and the images of dead bodies, seem to mark only the fact of their physicality. They are bodies in a particular place at a particular time, seeming to trouble or even deny indexical meaning (or "the point.") Yet Didion reads in the bodies a kind of indexical meaning both produced and disavowed by the state. By marking such meaning, she produces her own. Didion draws from the dead bodies the deliberate and

¹¹⁵ I associate this seemingly passive presence with the activism of Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, who silently gather in the Plaza de Mayo of Buenos Aires to draw attention to the continuing absence of their children, who were "disappeared" during Argentina's Dirty War. Their continuing presence disallows public forgetting.

literal mark of power, produced by the structures and persons responsible for the deaths. Such a mode of bodily signification exposes the importance of the production and extermination of what Giorgio Agamben calls “bare life” to the perpetuation of state power.

In *Means Without End* and *Homo Sacer*, Agamben describes the difference between the Greek terms *zoē* (“the simple fact of living,” “naked life,” or “bare life” (*MWE* 3,6; *HS* 4) and *bios* (“form-of-life” or “the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” (*MWE* 3, *HS* 1)). These two kinds of “life” are deeply intertwined with the promise of democratic politics: “when Aristotle defined the end of the perfect community in a passage that was to become canonical for the political tradition of the West . . . he did so precisely by opposing the simple fact of living (*to zēn*) to politically qualified life (*to eu zēn*) . . . ‘born with regard to life, but existing essentially with regard to the good life’” (*HS* 2). The production of bare life or “a biopolitical body,” Agamben claims, is at the foundation of sovereign power (*HS* 6); sovereign power locates itself in the ability to produce and exterminate bare life. Agamben claims that bare life is necessary to the state, and indeed ingrained within it.¹¹⁶ In a Hobbesian formulation, political life is characterized by the necessary production of bare life, the move of the

¹¹⁶ Agamben argues, *contra* Foucault, that this simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of bare life is not necessarily unique to modernity. In fact, he claims, Aristotle’s seeming opposition of *zoē* and *bios* “is, in fact, at the same time an implication of the first in the second, of bare life in politically qualified life” (*HS* 7). He writes: “The peculiar phrase ‘born with regard to life, but existing essentially with regard to the good life’ can be read . . . as an inclusive exclusion (an *exceptio*) of *zoē* in the *polis*, almost as if politics were the place in which life had to transform itself into good life and in which what had to be politicized were always already bare life” (*HS* 7).

death threat from “everybody” to the sovereign (*MWE* 5). For Agamben, bare life is both the figure through which state power becomes performed and, at the same time, the location of resistance to it. He writes: “When its borders begin to be blurred, the bare life that dwelt there frees itself in the city and becomes both subject and object of the conflicts of the political order, the one place for both the organization of State power and emancipation from it” (*HS* 9).

Sovereignty is displayed in the ability to produce the distinction between bare life and political life. The dead body’s capability to signify state power – and the state’s marshalling of such signifying power – is evidenced in Didion’s description of two well-known body dumps, Puerta del Diablo and El Playón. She notes that if these sites are locations where the state disposes of evidence of its murders, tourism to the body dumps is officially encouraged. One of these sites displays the collusion between the state and industry, as well as a situation in which visual representation has lost political meaning, when it is described as “a national *Turicentro* ‘offering excellent subjects for color photography’” in “the April-July 1982 issue of *Aboard TACA*, the magazine provided passengers on the national airline of El Salvador” (19). Similarly, “Body dumps are seen in El Salvador as a kind of visitors’ must-do, difficult but worth the detour. ‘Of course you have seen El Playón,’ an aide to President Alvaro Magaña said to me one day, and proceeded to discuss the site geologically, as evidence of the country’s geothermal resources” (20). The state in this formulation colludes with the tourist industry and scientific discourses to simultaneously point to and refuse to acknowledge its crimes. This kind of mutual performance and erasure reads as parallel to the state’s rhetoric of disappearance, which works by a similar logic.

Another example of the double movement of state discourse in the book highlights the way official discourse both emphasizes and erases the mark of the production and extermination of bare life. In this passage, Didion describes attending a state-sponsored festival celebrating indigenous culture in Nahuizalco. "Since public policy in El Salvador has veered unerringly toward the elimination of the indigenous population," she writes, "this official celebration of its culture seemed an undertaking of some ambiguity, particularly in Nahuizalco," where an uprising in 1932 led to the massacre of most of the population. In response to the massacre, "Indian dress was abandoned by the survivors. Nahuatl, the Indian language, was no longer spoken in public" (74). In the place of the significations specific to what Didion calls "'actual' indigenous cultures" is performed a semblance of culture produced under "official imposition" (75). Didion writes that the dances performed at the festival "were Indian, but they were less remembered than recreated, and as such derived not from local culture but from a learned idea of local culture, an official imposition made particularly ugly by the cultural impotence of the participants" (75). The women participants perform a "listless and unpracticed dance with baskets" and men are dressed in foil and cardboard parodies of warrior costumes (75, 76). Omnipresent amidst all this are the "G-3 assault rifles with which the *guardia* played while they drank beer with the Queen of the Fair" (76). The fair is meant to perform the effects of genocide, becoming a blatant display of state power.

The collusion between the military state and the discourses of tourism is made clear in the above passages. The mobilization of such discourses positions the production and extermination of bare life as the target of a transitory, consumptive gaze designed to

produce “intense pleasure” for the spectator (Urry 3). In so doing, it empties the category of bare life of its significance. Didion claims that the U.S. is complicit in such discourses: indeed, that the discourses are produced by both states together. She writes, for example: “Language as it is now used in El Salvador is the language of advertising, of persuasion, the product being one or another of the *soluciones* crafted in Washington or Panama or Mexico, which is part of the place’s pervasive obscenity. This language is shared by Salvadorans and Americans, as if a linguistic deal had been cut.” (65). As touristic discourse signals a global and transnational network, here political discourse circulates across national boundaries.

If the fair implies, after the fact, the state’s sovereign power to produce and exterminate bare life, the dead body is the most simple and straightforward evidence of such power. If the specific “point” made by the arrangement of dead bodies is inaccessible, the larger point is clear: their display exposes the bodies as bare life, and affirms massive state power. By exposing the way the state first produces and exterminates bare life, and then simultaneously emphasizes and erases such production and extermination, Didion critiques the larger structures which allow for this mutual relationship between violence and disavowed signification.

In her narration of situations of bare life, Didion uses the language of limited indexicality to point to the effects of the production of bare life on the human psyche. In particular, her use of expletive constructions like “there is” and “there is not,” while seeming to indicate nothing more than general presence or absence, signify on a different level. In her recounting of her abortive visit to Gotera, Didion seems to suggest the inability to gather meaningful information. Yet in her encounters with priests and nuns in

the town, she finds an alternative kind of information, one which speaks to the effects of state power's production of bare life. The use of expletive constructions points this out:

These were not people much given to solutions, to abstracts: their lives were grounded in the specific. There had been the funeral that morning of a parishioner who had died in the night of cerebral hemorrhage. There had been the two children who died that week, of diarrhea, dehydration, in the squatter camps outside town where some 12,000 refugees were then gathered, many of them ill. There was no medicine in the camps. There was no water anywhere. (47)

Didion's description of the fair, too, is marked by expletive construction: "There had been Indian dances that morning. There had been music. There had been the 'blessing of the market'" (75); "There was no pleasure in this day. There was a great deal of joyless milling. There was some shade in the plaza, from trees plastered with ARENA posters, but nowhere to sit" (76). Expletive construction can be read marking a lack of energy or political will as an effect of and response to violence. It may indicate an exhausted, traumatized response to the production of bare life (the refugees and dying children). In its lack of indignation, "there is" conserves energy. Expletive construction can also be read as a way to mark violence while ensuring survival. "There was" suggests that those who maintain such an approach to politics can avoid indicting a particular subject for producing death and suffering while recognizing such violence. In this way of thinking, expletive construction can passively mark death, a tired but enduring resistance to discourses which erase violence.

Along with those whose states of mind she represents, Didion as journalist is marked by such an approach to violence; indeed, she is the one who wields the phrasing. She, therefore, can also preserve herself while still pointing to the effects of violence.¹¹⁷ Her usage of “there is” suggests that the effects of bare life transmit to the citizen as well. And indeed, Didion portrays a situation in which the privilege of citizenship (in implicit opposition to bare life) becomes yet another empty symbol. Didion uses a number of passages to point out the ways in which what she calls the “mechanism of terror” exposes the fragility of citizenship itself in an era of massive state power.

In the most famous of these passages (one which is often cited and sometimes criticized)¹¹⁸ Didion is eating at the restaurant in San Salvador, when “I became abruptly aware, in the light cast by a passing car, of two human shadows, silhouettes illuminated by the headlights and then invisible again. One shadow sat behind the smoked glass windows of a Cherokee Chief parked at the curb in front of the restaurant; the other crouched between the pumps at the Esso station next door, carrying a rifle” (26). She describes her response to seeing the Cherokee Chief as characterized by an instinct to blow out the candle illuminating the table where she and her husband sit. She writes: “We continued talking, carefully. Nothing came of this, but I did not forget the sensation of having been in a single instant demoralized, undone, humiliated by fear, which is what

¹¹⁷ Expletive construction is featured not just in response to violence on the part of the potential victims but also in Didion’s portrayal of the passive and ineffective response of the U.S. to the violence in El Salvador as represented in the Deane Hinton passage earlier listed (“there had been progress”). This usage contrasts ironically “progress” and “the election” with the things that elsewhere are marked as present: the dead children, the funeral, and “joyless milling.”

¹¹⁸ See Michael Massing’s critique of “snap books.”

I meant when I said that I came to understand in El Salvador the mechanism of terror” (26).

The second passage occurs at Puerta del Diablo, the body dump, where she sees a man and woman having a driving lesson: “This was one of a number of occasions, during the two weeks my husband and I spent in El Salvador, on which I came to understand, in a way I had not understood before, the exact mechanism of terror” (21). Finally, toward the end of the book, she describes how she, her husband and another reporter tried to leave the parking lot of the San Salvador morgue. She writes, “it was not until we walked back around the building to the reporter’s rented car that each of us began to sense the potentially remarkable” (103). Their car, she writes, was blocked in by “three uniformed men” who refused to move their motorcycles. “This was a kind of impasse,” she writes: “It also seemed clear that if we did not try to leave the situation would deteriorate” (104). Finally, the reporter drives onto the curb and backs out around the motorcycles. As with the Cherokee Chief incident, “nothing more happened . . . but I have heard of no *solución* that precisely addresses this local vocation for terror” (104).

In these passages, Didion performs the embodiment of what Agamben calls the “zone of indistinction,” in which bare life (which the state constantly and deliberately maintains on the verge of death) and political life (which holds certain privileges, as well as the explicit protection of the state) become indistinguishable. Agamben writes that in the modern world the citizen (political life or form-of-life) and the refugee (bare life) have become potentially indistinguishable (*MWE* 24-26) and bare life has become not temporary and fleeting, but rather permanently inscribed in political space. The mechanism of terror is that which exposes in a moment this ever-present zone of potential

indistinction between the citizen and the refugee, the proximity between the normal (inclusion) and the “potentially remarkable” (exclusion) (Didion 103).

These passages mark the potential for the immediate and violent disruption of everyday life (the driving lesson, the candlelit dinner, exiting the parking lot) by unlimited power. If the camp space in Agamben is that place in which “for all intents and purposes, the normal rule of law is suspended and in which the fact that atrocities may or may not be committed does not depend on the law but rather on the civility and ethical sense of the police that act temporarily as sovereign,” Didion’s portrayal of El Salvador imagines the space of the camp permeating everyday space. In them, Didion is made suddenly aware of the ease with which she can lose her privilege and become bare life, subject to the whims of the shadowy figures in and around the Cherokee Chief or the uniformed men outside the morgue. In the first passage in particular, the erasure of Didion’s “form-of-life” as a professional journalist is marked by the immediacy with which she abandons her position as witness and takes on the position of the endangered observed (who wishes desperately to blow out the candle by the light of which she is seen). In abandoning the “form-of-life” that marks her as both a citizen and a good citizen, Didion exposes the fragility of both such categories. Here, both citizenship and good citizenship are exposed as empty categories.

If Agamben locates bare life as a significant location from which to resist state power, it is unsurprising that Didion uses her bodily experience to critique the processes by which not only good citizenship, but citizenship itself, can be emptied. Evoking the signifying power of the female body enlisted by the cathedral steps, she draws meaning from her body. Her body, exposed as bare life by the potentiality of state power, is

retrieved as a text that might signify against such power. Like the blood spot, the trace of her experience within the text attests to the presence of the “mechanism of terror,” and becomes a potent critique of the structures (legal, political, and discursive) which produce such a mechanism.

As part of her negative testimony, Didion exposes not just the production and erasure of bare life, but also the way the citizen participates in such a process. As in so many citizen-witnessing books, Didion’s body and experience becomes the evidence for her critique. She becomes the prime example of the destructive way privilege works against the recognition of bare life.¹¹⁹ One passage in particular points out, in its abrupt disruption of seductive elite consumption, the role of such consumption in disabling the ability to perform the role of good citizen. If Didion at times sheds her “form-of-life” as a journalist to expose herself as bare life at other times she adopts another “form-of-life,” one which explicitly depends on and ignores bare life: the role of the ultimate consumer, the tourist.

One might read *Salvador*, as does Pratt, as a travel guide, or disparage its “touring” of the war zone, as does Michael Massing (“get some Lomotil, pack a Berlitz guide, and make sure your safari suit is well-pressed. The rest should be a snap” (in Felton 170)). Conversely, one might describe the book as a piece of “political reportage,” as does Harred, and elide its touristic aspects. Yet I would like to suggest that *Salvador* is neither solely travel guide nor solely journalism: instead it is an uncomfortable and self-conscious hybrid of the two. In fact, one of the more intriguing

¹¹⁹ As in earlier citizen-witnessing books, here Didion mobilizes her own body as a means of representing the failure of democracy.

aspects of *Salvador* is its performative and self-conscious criticism of the affinity between journalism and tourism.¹²⁰

The difference between an idea of El Salvador and its reality is materialized in the empty resorts, airport, and tourist hotels. Yet these empty structures of tourism in *Salvador* are not really empty. Rather, they are filled by the wrong figure: the journalist. While both journalists and tourists engage in the practice of spectatorship, they are intended to do so in very different ways. Journalism, like tourism, relies upon the vision of the outsider. Yet if touristic vision is tied to the relatively passive, diffuse and temporary practices of leisure, relaxation and entertainment, journalistic vision is active, professional and focused. As opposed to tourism, journalism sees observation as a means to uncover a sometimes unpleasant “story.” While touristic discourse disavows or consumes current violence, journalism seeks to expose and explain it.

Salvador depicts a situation in which professionalism, exposé, and critique give way to leisure, pleasure, and willful blindness. In a passage often commented upon, Didion describes wandering through an empty mall filled with luxury items like *foie gras*, vodka, and “big beach towels printed with maps of Manhattan.” This scene foreshadows one that comes later, in which she lunches with the U.S. Ambassador and a Salvadoran Colonel. As, during this later scene, she sips chilled wine and eats fish from porcelain, she writes that she experienced “a certain anesthetic effect, temporarily deadening that

¹²⁰ Indeed, the title of the book alludes to the book’s proximity to the discourses of tourism. Similarly, when Didion describes the act of witnessing the human rights photographs, she likens the journalist to the tourist, or “the visitor”: “There is a special kind of practical information that the visitor to El Salvador acquires immediately, the way visitors to other places acquire information about the currency rates, the hours for the museums” (17).

receptivity to the sinister that afflicts everyone in Salvador” (87). She writes that in such a moment, she “experienced for a moment the official American delusion, the illusion of plausibility, the sense that the American undertaking in El Salvador might turn out to be, from the right angle, in the right light, just another difficult but possible mission in another troubled but possible country” (87-88). Such pleasure in the consumption of luxury, characteristic of the tourist, translates into an unwillingness to recognize bare life. Didion writes that after leaving the mall, “As I waited to cross back over the Boulevard de los Heroes to the Camino Real I noticed soldiers herding a young civilian into a van, their guns at the boy’s back, and I walked straight ahead, not wanting to see anything at all” (36). The juxtaposition between an empty structure of elite and touristic consumption and Didion’s refusal to witness is striking. If Didion as character will not see, as narrator she points to the way pleasurable consumption by the elite of El Salvador and the United States allows for “delusions” and “illusions” that erase recognition of human rights violations by the state. Didion’s emphasis on the easy way she is seduced into the role of the elite tourist becomes part of her negative testimony. The citizen, traditionally a legal category, is exposed as a consumer.

The Role of the Reader

In her negative testimony, Didion marks the ways in which she both is and is not bare life. If she is positioned as a privileged and even elite citizen, and encouraged not to recognize bare life, she also draws attention to moments that suggest the superficiality of the category of “citizen.” In so doing, Didion deliberately undermines her own practice. The book becomes less about the specifics of El Salvador and more about the structures

and practices by which the categories of the citizen and the good citizen are emptied out. In this way, the reader – who traditionally takes on the role of the altruistic good citizen receiving evidence of specific antidemocratic injustice – is asked to play another role. The book enlists its American readers to think critically about – and to consider their own relation to – the way that democratic ideals are not merely challenged in a particular situation, but have been fundamentally undermined.¹²¹ Didion's book is characterized by her inability to locate legally-productive meaning. Yet she relies upon the role of the active reader, who can read the clues and produce the kind of meaning the book ostensibly lacks. Such reliance is displayed in her use of strategies like exposé quotation and inductive reasoning.

In *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, William Stott describes a practice he calls “as old as reporting”: exposé quotation. In exposé quotation, the journalist “quot[es] verbatim a public figure or authority to suggest something other than what the authority intended” (173). In so doing, the quotation “turns a subject’s most calculated utterance, his public statements, against him. It shows his ideals so compromised in practice as to be but scraps of paper” (175). If Stott cites Lincoln Steffens as one of the “masters” of such a technique, Didion is surely equal in stature (173).

At the beginning of the second chapter, Didion juxtaposes two quotes, one from a March 1981 document prepared by the U.S. embassy in El Salvador, and one from Ronald Reagan, given in a June 1982 address to the British Parliament. In the first quote,

¹²¹ Published in parts in *The New York Review of Books* in 1982, *Salvador* was initially directed at an American audience.

Roberto D'Aubuisson is characterized as "plotting to overthrow the government," and is pointed to as the man in charge of an attack against the U.S. embassy. The first quote ends with a quote from "Chargé d'Affaires Frederic Chapin," "Let me state to you that we opposed coups and we have no intention of being intimidated" (27). In the second quote, which refers to D'Aubuisson's March 1982 election to the presidency, Reagan dubs the election part of an ongoing historical "sacrifice[e] and struggl[e] for freedom," linking it to "the Exodus from Egypt . . . the stand at Thermopylae, the revolt of Spartacus, the storming of the Bastille, the Warsaw uprising in World War II" (28). Didion makes no explicit commentary on the specifics of the quotations, nor their juxtaposition. Rather, she leaves it to the reader to compare the different messages and consider the cause for, or the hypocrisy of, the drastic political about-face. Exposé quotation is yet another manifestation of the rhetoric of presence; the quotes are the "what," lacking any exposition on "why." It would seem that in this failure to directly indict, exposé quotation would accompany the breakdown of citizen-witnessing. Yet, "because it is based upon the logical contradictions in evidence made available to all inquirers," this seemingly passive maneuver is, as Stott puts it, "a highly persuasive technique" (175).

Didion uses exposé quotations throughout the book, most often to indict the way U.S. governmental discourse is complicit with the discursive erasure of the Salvadoran government. She, for example, juxtaposes a quote from the same U.S. Embassy document, which names a "6-day offensive sweep against guerrilla strongholds in Morazán" with two other quotes: 1) an extensive description of the rape and murder of civilians (men, women, and children) who "considered themselves neutral in the conflict

and friendly with the army” from a human rights document and 2) a reference to a Reagan speech which “certifi[ed] that sufficient progress was being made in specified areas (‘human rights,’ and ‘land reform,’ and ‘the initiation of a democratic political process’ . . .)” (37, 38). Indeed, she ends the book by noting that as she was writing the book the press offices in El Salvador were raided, “fifteen leaders of legally recognized political and labor groups opposing the government of El Salvador were disappeared,” the U.S. ambassador said these disappearances most likely had not been conducted by the government, the government admitted it had, and – the kicker – “the State Department announced that the Reagan administration believed that it had ‘turned the corner’ in its campaign for political stability in Central America” (107-108).

In other parts of the book, Didion relies on inductive logic to highlight state production and elimination of bare life. At the very beginning of the book, for example, she describes “vans and trucks and Cherokee Chiefs fitted with reinforced steel and bulletproof Plexiglass an inch thick” (14). Vehicles such as Cherokee Chiefs, she writes, “are a fixed feature of local life, and are popularly associated with disappearance and death. There was the Cherokee Chief seen following the Dutch television crew killed in Chalatenango province in March of 1982. There was the red Toyota three-quarter-ton pickup sighted near the van driven by the four American Catholic workers on the night they were killed in 1980” (14). Here the expletive construction reveals the use of associative or inductive logic. While “there is” no hard evidence to indict perpetrators, the repeated presence of the vehicles at the scene of various political crimes becomes local wisdom. Similarly, Didion never identifies whether or not these vehicles are governmental, but their ubiquity, combined with their expensive “reinforced steel and

bulletproof Plexiglass” fittings suggest as much. Didion relies upon this establishment of an implicit link between the Cherokee Chiefs and the production of bare life in the rest of the book. Rather than explicitly stating that she is afraid of becoming bare life, then, in the restaurant passage she relies on the reader’s associations to make this connection. The static but potent presence of the Cherokee Chief in the narrative ensures her critique.

By giving the American reader the tools to make meaning while positing her own inadequacy, Didion asks the reader to piece together the ways that the ideal of citizenship is emptied out. Didion speaks from –and toward – a position denied by her own narrative. Positing the absence of the citizen-witness, Didion constructs a new position for both herself and the reader: that of potential citizen. Such a figure might, by witnessing and pushing against the effective erasure of the position of citizen, produce such a positionality in its very absence. Didion therefore imagines – and asks the reader to imagine – a new kind of citizenship: one that operates in a community produced outside of and even in opposition to the state, through the circulation of narratives. By holding onto the ability of witnessing, representation and citizenship to produce social change, Didion rehabilitates the processes she marks as empty.

If *Salvador* can be read as productively rehabilitating the practices of the citizen in a political scenario in which the conventional practices of the figure have been rendered moot, Didion at times undermines her argument. The text often suggests that empty signification pairs with brute force and blind consumption to form the core of the modern state (even and perhaps especially the “democratic” one). Yet it simultaneously undercuts such an implication by locating these processes outside of or in opposition to the state. Here, we may return to the Metropolitan Cathedral. In her portrayal of the

cathedral's negativity, Didion writes that "In this vast brutalist space that was the cathedral, the unlit altar seemed to offer a single ineluctable message: at this time and in this place the light of the world could be construed as out, off, extinguished" (79). Her insistence on containing the damage she traces in a specific "time" and "place" speak to her reluctance to see the attack on the citizen as a systemic process attendant to state power. This reluctance can be seen in other parts of the book, where she seeks to locate a reliance on military force and the empty symbol as unique to the time and place of "Salvador."

We can see evidence of such containment emerge as well in the moment where Didion seems to be the most critical of state power: the Indian Festival. In this passage, Didion's concern is with the way the state both exposes and covers over genocide in a seeming profession of goodwill toward cultural diversity. She critiques the emptiness of signification attendant to the performances, suggesting that the dances and music signify the cultural and psychological effects of ongoing state violence. Yet her suggestion here that state violence destabilizes signification is undercut by her reification of an essentialist concept of culture. She begins the passage by describing El Salvador as a "frontier" culture and place:

In fact El Salvador had always been a frontier, even before the Spaniards arrived. The great Mesoamerican cultures penetrated this far south only shallowly. The great South American cultures thrust this far north only sporadically. There is a sense in which the place remains marked by the meanness and discontinuity of all frontier history, by a certain frontier

proximity to the cultural zero. Some aspects of the local culture were imposed. Others were borrowed. (72-73)

The image here constructs El Salvador as inherently “mean” and “discontinu[ous].” Part of no “great culture,” the region is overdetermined by history and geography as a “cultural zero.” This passage constructs an essentialist view of cultural purity. This formulation suggests that El Salvador has always been “empty.”

Other comments similarly unhinge her critique from the state and attach it to culture and location. When she describes her inability to access information, she writes, for example: “Actual information was hard to come by in El Salvador, perhaps because this is not a culture in which a high value is placed on the definite” (61). This linkage between terror/indefiniteness and place/culture is compounded by a reliance on a neocolonial discourse of cultural opacity and “untranslateability.” In her recounting of her visit to Gotera, she writes that the garrison’s Comandante thought the nuns and priests to which she spoke were French “because the word used to describe them was always ‘Franciscan.’” This mistake, she writes, “was one of those occasional windows that open onto the heart of El Salvador and then close, a glimpse of the impenetrable interior” (49). This image of the “impenetrable interior” mirrors Didion’s later claim that “the texture of life in such a situation is essentially untranslatable” (103). Similarly, she seeks to contain the misuse of state power within place: “Terror,” she writes, “is the given of the place” (14), and “I have heard of no *solución* that precisely addresses this local vocation for terror” (104).

In these passages, therefore, Didion repetitively – and in contrast to the rest of her text – asserts that the empty discourse she critiques is predetermined by its location in

place and culture. By locating empty signification and violence within historically and spatially vague notions of the “frontier,” “the impenetrable interior,” and “the place,” Didion radically undermines her critique of modern state sovereignty. I read these moments as representing both unwitting eruptions of the conventions of the citizen-witnessing tradition whose downfall Didion otherwise memorializes and a self-protective strategy. In a text that otherwise parades the failure of the citizen-witness’s claims to truth, they reassert anachronistically her centrality in crafting the civic narrative.

Conclusion

Contextualizing Democracy

“To practice history is to practice a (documentary) discipline, here in the ‘liberal democracy’ of academe. And if we are going to think about the doleful conjunction of documentation, discipline, democracy, and the State, we shall have to consider what follows from the fact that we have not escaped their regime even, or least of all, here.”

– John Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame*, xxxiv

This dissertation has considered the ways that vision, representation and the state have been tied together in a knot of modern faith about good citizenship that – with the growth of the superstate, the rise of the corporation and the increasing sense that the image is subject to political manipulation – is alternately unraveled and rewoven. While I begin with writers who imagine an ideal relation between the ethical, the political and the individual, I end with writers who destabilize their own projects and thus the larger civic assumptions on which such projects rest. By positing their own subjective projects as contained and delimited by state and corporate power, they critique those institutions. The simultaneous publication of and critical self-reflexivity within the texts with which I end the dissertation offer a harsh but necessary approach to the evaluation of projects that link democracy and writing.

I began this dissertation by talking about present-day developments in citizen witnessing, and I wish to end by considering claims that the recent flourishing of citizen journalism (especially during the Iraq War) produced a radically democratic public space.

The last ten years have seen the foundation of numerous websites that seek to provide access to citizen journalism, a move that can be seen as a response by the political left to the increased perception that the media is controlled by political interests that do not represent the public. While right-wing commentators condemned the “liberal media,” critics on the left were shocked by the increasing popularity of Fox News¹²² and many criticized the collusion between the mainstream media, corporations and political interests in drumming up support for an illegal drive towards war.¹²³ As Patricia Aufderheide notes about media during the Iraq War, at the same time that “[e]lectronic big media were bigger than ever, . . . electronic little media flourished, a myriad grassroots attempt to fuel public opinion with information and attitude – often living, however briefly, in the virtual realm of the Internet” (333). Citizen journalism at this

¹²² As Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan write about Iraq War coverage “Much to the surprise of some observers, Fox News surpassed CNN as the top-rated news channel. . . . Explanations for its new-found popularity typically revolved around the stridently right-wing, pro-war stance informing its reporting and commentary, generally said to be more ‘in tune’ with public opinion than CNN’s more ‘neutral’ stance” (6).

¹²³ Patricia Aufderheide describes how corporations like Clear Channel, the “largest company owning local radio stations in the US,” publicized Glenn Beck’s conservative “Rally for America!” events while implicitly placing pressure on left-wing activists in the entertainment industry to remain silent. Television stations, based on polls suggesting that 70% of the population were in favor of the war, downplayed dissent. Aufderheide writes that “Big media’s downplaying of dissent within the US also generated a counter-effect. It rekindled the never-extinguished coals of customer suspicion and disgruntlement. The bigger big media get, the more easily their customers move from their default stance of cynicism and mistrust to anger and rejection” (336).

time became a way for individuals identifying with the left to contribute to public discourse in forums separate from those produced by mainstream news outlets.

The purposes of such sites varied. Aufderheide describes a study conducted by the Center for Social Media which compiled and categorized informal journalism websites. “Many of the informal sites – and they dotted the cyberlandscape – were the work of individuals, of ad hoc groups, or groups that sprung up as part of the antiwar mobilization that used the ‘viral networking’ of the Internet, sometimes to mobilize ‘smart mobs’” (337). Sites like Indymedia, OneWorld, and Open Democracy aggregated news, encouraged open publishing, and offered forums for discussion. Do-it-yourself citizen journalism websites like Voices in the Wilderness reported eye witness news. Blogs by Americans and Iraqis (most famously the blogger Salam Pax) both offered up journalism and linked to mainstream news networks. Many sites used video and sound to express antiwar sentiment.¹²⁴

As I noted briefly in the introduction, advocates of citizen journalism tie together witnessing and good citizenship in a way very much reminiscent of the late nineteenth century. Witnessing is often considered a palliative act that simultaneously rescues a

¹²⁴ As indicated above, citizen-journalism is dependent upon, and produced by, the emergence of the Internet. In her article about different modes of journalism during the Iraq War, Aufderheide notes that “The vast burgeoning of the World Wide Web over the previous decade had transformed the expectations of a generation about their ability both to express their opinions and to reach others. The 1999 anti-globalization demonstrations in Seattle, WA . . . which used the Internet to launch do-it-yourself news services and triggered the rise of ‘indymedia’ centers globally, made the possibilities vividly evident within the US” (333).

profession (journalism) and a political ideal (democracy) that have lost the public's trust, as in Lou Rutigliano's statement that citizen journalism's "ultimate mission" is to "revive democracy and, at the same time, revive the importance of the news in the daily life of citizens" (225). Using much the same structure of authentic vision vs. social blindness brought into play by turn-of-the-century writers, Aufderheide notes that many of the sites documented by the Center for Social Media "testif[ied] to a reality that they found obscured in mainstream media, . . . [and] challenged received wisdom or mainstream reporting" (338).¹²⁵ Citizen journalism is seen as producing a democratic public sphere otherwise suppressed, as evidenced in Stuart Allan's claim that online citizen journalism can "bring to bear alternative perspectives, contexts, and ideological diversity to war reporting" (361). The fact that anyone with access to the internet can write citizen journalism, and that anyone with access to the internet can read it, is considered to be radically democratic: a true model of self-representation. By returning to the authentic voice of the individual, it is implied, readers can access the "real news" that is suppressed by the media and the state. As in turn-of-the-century citizen witnessing, the unmediated experience of the witness's body in certain works of citizen journalism is considered to be as important as the unmediated voice.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ IndyMedia's mission statement, for example, states that the site "is a grassroots network committed to using media production and distribution as tools for promoting social and economic justice. It is dedicated to addressing issues that profit-driven media often neglect and hopes to empower people to 'become the media' by providing democratic access to available technologies and information."

¹²⁶ Voices in the Wilderness, for example, claimed that they might use their experience in Iraq to "tell the truth":

I think such projects are worthwhile, but I hesitate at the salvational overtones with which they sometimes imagine themselves. What those who support such projects often fail to display is the self-reflection that they need to see themselves within larger social, political, economic, and technological contexts. In response to this somewhat naïve civic optimism, critics have pointed to various limitations placed on blogging. Aufderheide, for example, recounts the political limitations Internet technology places on the democratic impulses of citizen journalism. In her comparison of MoveOn.org, a left-wing advocacy group that sought to mobilize people around an antiwar platform, and conservative talk show host Glenn Beck, she writes that while the Internet opens opportunities for dissent, its communicative structure makes it more useful for those already in the know: "What MoveOn could not do was to convince someone who was not in its address book or listserv or interested in Googling it in the first place that its viewpoint was interesting, reasonable, or worthy of attention. In his one-to-many environment, Glenn Beck was able to convince people that he warranted attention, regardless of agreement. . . . The clout of Glenn Beck reflected the power of gatekept journalistic venues for agenda-setting, even more than for information provision" (342). The excess of information available on the Internet, Aufderheide claims, can overwhelm users accustomed to the "big filter" of the mainstream mass media. Democracy can be

Voices in the Wilderness organized Iraq Peace Team delegations to live alongside ordinary Iraqis during the massive bombardment of Operation Shock and Awe.

Convinced that "where you stand determines what you see and how you live," VitW continues its efforts to educate people in the United States and abroad about the consequences of US militarism. Our current campaign focuses on the need to 'spotlight Iraq.' By telling the truth about this war, we hope to help prevent future wars.

facilitated or impeded as well by the structures of blogs themselves. In *Digital War Reporting*, Matheson and Allan point to the way in which blogging, rather than facilitating democratic discussion, can serve to entrench individuals in their political positions. They cite the work of Keen who “describes the powerful networks of bloggers, particularly in [the U.S.], as radicalizing and fragmenting society” and discuss how “A number of studies appear to show that the highly opinionated warblogs which emerged in the US and other Western countries in the wake of the September 11 attacks, for example, have operated to render communities of users more polarized and inward-looking, possibly leading to opinions becoming entrenched” (118-119).

Finally, the ideal of untainted democratic discussion forwarded by proponents of citizen journalism ignores the impact of corporate and state interests on such spaces. Matheson and Allan argue that “the rise of micro-media produced by individuals situated outside of more traditional media contexts has been quickly followed by initiatives by media organizations – as well as by political and military interests – to reconcile them to their own agendas” (128). They document the increasing influence of state and non-state players on the “democratic” spaces of blogs “not only in order to distribute propaganda, but also to colonize spaces such as blogs and discussion sites with a view to influencing public opinion” (120). They describe, for example, the way in 2006 the U.S. government’s Digital Outreach Team mobilized English- and Arabic-language bloggers to influence global public opinion about the U.S. by commenting on discussion boards and other websites. Bloggers have also been positioned to receive information from the U.S. military in much the same way as mainstream journalists (126). The Office of Strategic Influence proposed developing “a subtle mesh of inducements and

disincentives” to persuade “respected authorities such as journalists, clerics and artists” to discredit “extremist groups.” One of the means it recommended in order to do so was to “offer free or increased access to the increasingly high technology means of communication . . . to moderate voices” (Schulman in Matheson and Allan 127).

This dissertation asks: how can democracy exist in the context of larger political, economic and military structures that deny or disable citizen power? In what forms and involving which practices? How might citizenship reassert itself without the authorization or intervention of the state – or is this even a plausible goal? These questions can be asked not only in the context of citizen-witnessing and journalism, but in relation to other disciplinary arenas in which observation and representation take on ethical and political significance (not the least of which is academic inquiry). While I think it is important and indeed necessary to pursue democratic writing projects, it is equally important to locate, question, and challenge the limitations imposed upon them.

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