Teaching Journalism & Mass Communication | A journal published by the AEJMC Small Programs Interest Group

Vol. 5 #1 (2015), pp. 100-110 https://community.aejmc.org/smallprogramsinterestgroup/publications/journals

Cracking a Closed Culture as an Immersion Journalist

Patrick Walters, Kutztown University

Abstract:

This paper assesses the challenges faced by literary journalists doing research on subcultures that are typically opposed to opening up to outsiders. It utilizes author interviews, the research of noted literary journalists, and doses of the author's first-hand research experience, in looking at the creative ways people in this genre approach this challenge of getting inside a closed culture. It consults the work of Ted Conover, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, Jon Krakauer, Patsy Sims and others as it looks at the different creative approaches authors take when they attempt to deal with the challenge of cracking a closed culture in order to write about it in the truest way. The analysis looks at some of the most common and important elements in these types of research approaches, including a literary journalist's basic presentation and the explaining of the purpose to the subject, the challenge of maintaining objectivity, the nuances of interviewing tactics and the importance of the writer maintaining compassion without compromising the story. The paper makes conclusions about the importance of immersion journalists being as straightforward as possible about their purposes, and it argues that while an immersion journalist must work to get as deep into the culture as they can, he or she must remember that they are still an outsider, whose distanced perspective is key to the success of the piece.

One of the greatest challenges in writing memoirs is finding ways to get outside our own personal experiences, searching for a perch where writers can view some of their closest friends, relatives and loved ones as if they were strangers. In order to make someone care about those experiences, Mom, Dad and Grandma must be introduced and recreated from scratch. But when telling stories of a culture or a world that is more unknown and outside the breadth of personal experience, the challenge is reversed. Our own lives are the worlds that are spread open to us, the landscapes in which we walk around freely every day, often missing all of the intricacies and details an outsider would notice. But when writers step into a world that is by nature closed to them, a society they are not a part of, a group that looks at them with a skeptical eye or won't even give them a word, the greatest challenge becomes how to possibly find a way inside.

Intrepid journalists or academics could read dozens of books and articles about the culture of 21st Century whale hunters, scour page upon page of doctors' and therapists' reports on recovering alcoholics in New Orleans or conduct scores of one-on-one interviews with lion tamers and still know very little about the essential truths of their subjects' lives. They would be qualified, perhaps, to write a research paper. But they would have almost none of the information needed to unveil the intimate details of what it feels like to be out on a skiff in the Arctic Ocean, to feel the pain of walking past a bar on Bourbon Street or know the terror of staring straight into the eyes of a pacing, hungry lion. No, the only way to write about these

people is by stepping into their lives as fully as possible and writing from the inside—while still using the eyes of an outsider as the viewing lens. Therein lies the most critical challenge for a literary journalist writing about "the other." Over the course of the history of literary journalism, the concept of "immersion" has evolved from the earliest pieces of immersion-style or saturation journalism by Stephen Crane, Abraham Cahan, Hutchins Hapgood and others, including Jack London in *The People of the Abyss.* Over the past century, the perspective of the immersion journalist has developed and matured to the point where the writer's academic and journalistic distance from the subject—even while immersed in that subject—is now one of the most important traits in terms of assessing a piece's value as true literary journalism. This is true especially in a 21st Century world where opinion pieces, commentary and memoir are easy to come by in the onslaught of information—making a truly analytical and distanced piece of immersion even more valuable. Also, as mainstream media have become more omnipresent and readers more skeptical in the 21st Century, it has become more important that an immersion journalist be as transparent and open as possible about his purpose—and the literature produced must be evaluated with that in mind.

In my professional research, I have used the tactics of immersion journalism in a variety of ways, facing a variety of challenges. As a reporter for The Associated Press, I covered a beat for years where I dealt with law enforcement in Philadelphia, the fifth-largest city in the United States. Police officers and detectives are famously closed cultures, with their own language, codes and rules—and they distrust outsiders. Covering those issues meant spending lengthy amounts of time with officers, on the beat, in the courtroom and off the job, to learn their world. It meant keeping my grounding as a journalist whose primary interest was in the story, but also making sure that I delved deeper into their lives, their worlds and their mind-sets to find out what made them tick, to find out how things really worked. The challenge here, though, was that this wasn't full-time immersion but bits and pieces over days, weeks and months. The principles, however, remained the same.

In my academic research, I used the same distanced perspective when writing about old-school jazz musicians struggling to survive. As a music lover but not a musician, my two years of research on players at a dying jazz club required all the tactics of immersion journalism. Bebop players are not a trusting lot, but they have amazing stories that need to be told—stories that are part of the fabric of American culture. Their culture is closed out of pride in their craft, fears connected to their substance addictions and problematic pasts, worries about protecting their music from those looking to make an unfair dollar, and a general skepticism of journalists. My use of immersion in this project focused on intense, one-on-one discussions with the musicians over months and focused observation at the club and at the musicians' homes. It meant listening to the music, live and recorded, nonstop and making it a part of my daily life. It meant staying up until well past midnight several days a week when I had to be at my day job early the next day—a challenge also faced by many of the musicians themselves. But it also meant remaining grounded in my role as an observer who, while immersed in this musical landscape, was not truly a part of it. It is this type of distanced narrative perspective that the best immersion journalism has grown into today. Its roots, however, trace to the far more subjective (and much less distanced) techniques of more than a century ago. This paper will analyze that evolution, the various ways writers assess and navigate the challenge of getting inside closed cultures, and the different ways in which writers handle the ethical dilemmas that come with immersion.

Journalists and academics have long embraced the importance of true immersion as one of the most essential tactics in many types of literary journalism, the best way for a writer to really get a feel for that "other" world. In *A History of American Literary Journalism,* John Hartsock points out that writers from both the journalistic side and the academic side of literary journalism have noted the importance of immersion as a key element in the form, citing both Norman Sims' inclusion of it as a defining characteristic in The Literary Journalists and Tom Wolfe's earlier identification of it as "saturation" reporting (Hartsock, 2000, p. 95). In his preface for The Right Stuff, Wolfe (2008) himself notes the importance of such literary journalism being written by outsiders—those who have cracked inside a closed culture and brought that fresh perspective. He writes,

> Since this book was first published in 1979 I have enjoyed corresponding with many pilots and with many widows of pilots. Not all have written to pat me on the back but almost all seemed grateful that someone had tried—and

> it had to be an outsider—to put into words certain matters that the very code of pilots rules off-limits in conversation. (Wolfe, 2008, p. xii)

The key word is "outsider." The derivation of immersion reporting, however, goes back much further than New Journalism.

Around the turn of the 20th century, many writers found themselves trying to explore the worlds of the lower classes—to understand a culture that was not theirs. Stephen Crane showed signs of this approach in "Experiment in Misery" when he spent time with several homeless men, going to shelters and soup kitchens and trying to understand that world. Although for a short period of time, he immersed himself in this world—sleeping on cots, eating at soup kitchens—all while trying to maintain his outside viewpoint enough that he could observe the young man he was with watching others walking nearby in good clothes who "expressed to the young man his infinite distance from all that he valued" (Kerrane, 1997, p. 70). Around the same time, Abraham Cahan was immersing himself in the world of recent immigrants to New York, a world he had recently been a part of himself. He immersed himself in this world and told profound stories, but his connection to the world was strong already—it was a world that was practically his own, since he had emigrated from Lithuania in 1882 (Kerrane, 1997, p. 76). So, while he did immerse himself in the work, it was not complete immersion—it was a world to which he already had strong connections. This was primitive immersion.

The technique saw development just a few years later when Jack London published *The People of the Abyss.* As Kevin Kerrane noted in *The Art of Fact,* London's work in this piece was very much the foundation of more modern immersion journalists such as George Orwell and then Ted Conover (Kerrane, 1997, p. 84). The shift here was that Jack London was not of the downtrodden world of the slums of the East End of London; and he lived the life nearly full-time for seven weeks, representing much truer immersion—changing his dress, lifestyle and manners completely as part of the project as he observed from an immersed by detached perspective (Kerrane, 1997, pp. 86-88). While there was not a terminology given to the tactic of immersion in the developing genre of literary journalism at the time, writers began referring to the elements that would define the technique in the decades to come.

In "A New Form of Literature," Hutchins Hapgood (1905) seems to be clearly referring to the techniques of immersion when he writes of authors trying to delve so deeply in their interviews that they could know their subjects as well as novelists and playwrights know theirs:

> Why should not, I said to myself, these talented men go directly to the lives of the people? … The novelty in my idea consists in taking one real person and discovering in him both the individual and the type; thus getting, perhaps, a piquancy, a freshness and a raciness not so easily obtained from a more comprehensive method. My idea would involve a method intensive rather than extensive—from within out, instead of from without, in. (pp. 424-425)

Here, Hapgood is starting to give a name and acknowledgement to immersion without actually saying it. He goes on to speak of the goals of immersion journalism in words that were unique at the time, but speak to the value of the technique when he writes, "No, let us go to life as we find it lived about us; then give a full rich picture of it, not forgetting the background, which will correct and render harmonious the figures in the foreground, no matter how ugly they may be" (p. 427). Decades later, Joseph Mitchell would expand on this concept of a different type of reporting when he said, "My whole idea of reporting—particularly reporting on conversation—is to talk to a man or a woman long enough under different circumstances, like old Mr. Hunter down on Staten Island, until, in effect, they reveal their inner selves" (Sims, 2008, p. 92). Here, too, he begins to embrace the distance, that key element prized in today's immersion journalism.

Immersion journalism begins simply with a key question, which must be taken literally and figuratively: How do I get inside? The question has become even more pressing today, in an era where time and money for extensive immersion projects can be scarce. London wrote eloquently of this challenge just after the turn of the 20th Century when describing the effect that wearing disheveled clothing affected the way he could enter the world of a slum in the East End of London: "I had become one of them. My frayed and out-at-elbows jacket was the badge and advertisement of my class, which was their class … I know shared with them a comradeship" (Kerrane, 1997, p. 88).

Then, however, the writer must find a way inside the hearts and minds of the people who make those places what they are. What makes the prisoner who is feared by everyone on the cell block really go soft?

What does the long-faced drummer, whose guidance is sought by musicians young and old, really think of the club owner who signs his checks? What does the Klan leader, the one most revered and feared, have for breakfast each day before he preaches his hatred? These answers can only be found by someone who has not just gotten a foot in the door, but has worked his whole body and mind inside.

But the dilemma that comes after the person has gotten inside can be just as great, if not greater: the struggle to maintain some level of objectivity, to be able to assess the "other" from a distance—even while "inside." In these instances, while it may seem contradictory, "objectivity" is a distance that still allows the immersed writer to see the situation from afar, through the eyes of an outsider. Here is an area where immersion has advanced the most from the time of Cahan, in the sense that the best immersion journalists today never forget their ultimate distance from the subject. Once the writer does get inside this closed world, author Ted Conover cautions that he cannot let himself "go native" and lose the value of objective observation. Conover has written about hoboes, prison guards and illegal immigrants, all groups closed to him by nature. Once entrenched in those worlds, though, he constantly reminded himself not to ditch his outside viewpoint entirely. "If you immerse yourself completely, you lose all critical distance; you 'go native,'" Conover says, citing his experience writing about immigrants crossing illegally into the United States from Mexico for the book, *Coyotes.* "The fact that I am not Mexican (and don't look like one) nor a native Spanish speaker pretty much ensure that there will always be some distance between them and me. And that's a good thing" (Conover, personal communication, March 30, 2008). Here, Conover shows that modern appreciation for the distance and its value to telling the story. To truly become what the journalist is writing about, to permanently take to heart all the ideals of the people being written about, would take away the value of immersion reporting. The "critical distance" Conover refers to is essential to modern immersion—and it represents how the tactic has evolved since Cahan and others. But it also presents ethical challenges that are far more complex.

In Conover's book, *Newjack,* the problem of getting access became the genesis for the whole project. When the New York Department of Correctional Services denied his request to follow a guard through training at the academy, his effort to break into the closed culture of prison guards was denied long before the door. He resolved it by hiding his identity as a journalist and actually going through the months of training to be a guard at Sing Sing prison. He had to deal with the literary and moral calculus involved, balancing the necessary deception with the value of the truth he would gain through his immersive experience. He chose to give some basic details of himself, but never revealed his goal as a journalist, leaving himself open to accusations of deception. In The Hot House, however, Pete Earley was able to go through official channels and get enough physical access to the federal prison in Leavenworth, Kan., to immerse himself in life there. Very quickly, he felt he had some sense of what it was like to be a convict:

> As I stepped into the rotunda and heard the gate shut behind me, I felt that awful sensation everyone describes the first time he is actually locked inside a prison. I later learned that most convicts felt that same initial dread when they first entered the Hot House. (Earley, 1993, pp. 39-40)

No matter how the access is gained, the writer must have a situation in which he can move as freely as possible, watch people act as close to normal as possible and still be able to somehow document what is going on around him.

But in each instance, the writer must remember that he ultimately will be judged—by his readers, his subjects and other outside observers—by how he gained the access in the first place, and whether the ends justified the means. In Conover's case, it becomes a moral dilemma. As a daily journalist, he would have been breaking all the rules with this deception—certainly this would have put him out for consideration for a Pulitzer Prize in that genre, for example. But as a piece of literary journalism, it's more important that we simply ask the question of whether the ends (the story produced, the effect it has on society—essentially how important this story is to know) can be justified by the means. In this case, we can conclude that there would be no other way to tell the true story of what it's like to be a corrections officer at Sing Sing except the way he did it. His approach can largely be justified by the fact that the important story of the life of a guard would have otherwise gone untold. He, however, did have to pay a price for his tactics, changing a huge laundry list of the names of people involved to avoid legal action. So, we see the benefit and the cost of his approach—his story wasn't as true

as it could have been (with real names) if he had been able to be more open. In that sense, we also see how Earley, in his story, could be seen as being more successful because of his openness.

In terms of the process of actually gaining access as an immersion journalist, one big initial challenge is simply making contact with the people who can grant physical access to the closed world itself. Conover's case is illustrative of this dilemma, the extreme scenario of dealing with being denied access. In an era of email, instant-messaging, Twitter and Facebook, writers often overlook the art of making that first contact and laying the foundation for what needs to become trust. When dealing with older jazz musicians, I found many hardly even trusted the telephone. They would speak with me for extended periods of time in person, but never respond to telephone messages or open up over the wires. But it depends on the age of the subjects and how comfortable they are with technology, whether they respond best to an initial telephone message, an email or a letter. A 25-year-old saxophonist felt far more comfortable setting up meeting times via email than in a letter, while a sax player who was well into his 60s didn't respond to nearly a dozen messages on his telephone, repeated emails, messages sent through intermediaries and, finally, a written letter. Even after the letter, he was reticent, but agreed to talk when I showed up at one of the few performances he was able to do despite his ailing health.

Once past that stage, modern immersion journalists use a variety of strategies when it comes to explaining to the subjects in layman's terms what the project is about, using language they can relate to. Again, we see the challenge of balancing that prized distance and the idea of becoming completely immersed and trusted enough to get the real story. In a published collection of interviews with nonfiction writers, Robert S. Boynton asked Adrian Nicole LeBlanc what she did first when reporting a story: In other words, how did she, a middle-class white woman, convince people in a poor section of the Bronx to tell her their stories for the book *Random Family:*

> I draw the parallel with making a movie: 'Imagine I'm making a movie about your life. Show me the places that are most important to you: your room, the schoolyard, anywhere you like to be. …' They sometimes can't believe that this mundane stuff is what I want to see, so it takes a while to convince them that I'm not a failure as a reporter, or a fool. (Boynton, 2005, p. 237)

In a sense, LeBlanc starts her effort to get inside by focusing on the fact that she is an outsider and needs their help to enter their world. She makes a great point to emphasize, rather than minimize, her distance. In fact, some critics said she used too much distance, in terms of her nearly complete lack of judgment of her subjects. But I would argue that she used what would seem to be her greatest weakness—not actually being an insider—and turned it into a strength. The evidence is in the story that she told. It's free of any sort of advocacy or moral judgment on her part, but tells the story of a world to which the reader would otherwise have had no access and would not have been able to know at all.

In most cases, journalistic ethics require writers to let subjects know up front that they are writing about them, although these ethics get tested in undercover projects like Newjack. But the next question becomes more challenging, especially when a writer is trying to blend in and gain trust, and it's an area where literary journalists have more divergent views: How much should they share with subjects and what can they promise? The writer is seeking the truth, trying to find out what it feels like to live in this foreign world, be it a jazz club, a prison or a crime-riddled neighborhood. But on a personal level, especially as the writer gets further inside, journalists have long found the use of commonalities can be a huge tool. While working on a book about religious revivalists in the South, Patsy Sims was rebuffed by televangelist Ernest Ainsley again and again. When his office finally granted her a 15-minute interview, she made sure to mention that her father had been a Baptist deacon and it helped get him to open up. "I got more out of him than I think other people did," Sims said (P. Sims, personal interview, March 11, 2008).

Many literary journalists also agree it is important to explain that a project will focus on conflicts in the world that is being entered, the forces that typically drive a piece: musicians versus club owners, prisoners versus guards, poor people versus drugs and pregnancy. Adrian Nicole LeBlanc said she tries to avoid talking about too many of the specifics of her project early on: "I explain the topic of my piece and share my preliminary ideas, which are usually pretty vague," she said. "The bittersweet thing is how uninterested most people are in elaborate detail" (Boynton, 2005, p. 238). Writers, of course, have found that making promises to subjects can be a huge pitfall in the process of immersion. "I tell the person I'm interviewing that he'll

have no control over the process, that I won't show the article to him before publication, and that he will tell me things he'll regret … and none of that ever deters anyone!" Jon Krakauer says (Boynton, 2005, p. 167). But this still leaves open the grand ethical question of Conover's case in *Newjack,* where he simply didn't tell his subjects he was writing about them, so promised them nothing—but then had to change names for legal reasons and, therefore, lost some of the truth of his story as a consequence. Still, the calculus of whether he was successful has to include the question of whether the story would have otherwise gone untold if he hadn't made those decisions. The story probably would have otherwise gone untold, arguably a greater loss in this case.

With the goal of immersion reporting being some sense of truth, authors have made a range of decisions when it comes to the question of evaluating of deception. In the best world, most literary journalists would agree there shouldn't be any deception, which undermines the credibility of the author and can also create a shaky foundation for a book and harm the reputation of literary journalism as a whole. But issues arise when authors find that there truly is no other way. Conover opted to go undercover in *Newjack* after his attempt to go through official channels was rebuffed; he made the determination that the cost of deception was worth the enlightenment a reader would get from seeing how prison guards interact with inmates (and vice versa) in what was essentially an unaltered, natural setting. In *Self-Made Man,* however, Norah Vincent (2006) spends nearly a year intermittently disguised as a man named "Ned" in an attempt to get a new view of maleness. And while her insights are at times intriguing, the deception can come across as if it is a game for her as she dabbles in male bowling culture, a monastery, the business world and a dating life in which she ends up having quite a bit of fun. She had that prized quality of distance—she was not a man—but the combination of her deception and the fact that it was on-again off-again immersion (unlike Conover's nearly total immersion) takes away from the value.

When attempting to break into a closed culture, authors also find themselves considering tough questions involving physical appearance. Some things cannot be altered, including race, gender and physical size. LeBlanc was often one of the only white girls walking around in the Bronx just as Conover was often the mid-sized white man walking among very large black men at Sing Sing. But on other factors, the author has to decide whether to try to change his appearance to blend in with the culture. When Jack London entered the slums of the East End of London in *The People of the Abyss,* one of the first things he did was acquire some ragged clothes and he immediately noted the change in how he was received. He wrote:

> Presto! In the twinkling of an eye, so to say, I had become one of them. My frayed and out-at-elbows jacket was the badge and advertisement of my class, which was their class. It made me of like kind, and in place of the fawning and too-respectful attention I had hitherto received, I now shared with them a comradeship. The man in corduroy and dirty neckerchief no longer addressed me as "sir" or "governor." It was "mate" now—and a fine and hearty word, with a tingle to it, and a warmth and gladness, which the other term does not possess. (Kerrane, 2005, p. 88)

Here, again, we see where immersion has come to emphasize distance more in the modern era. London was trying to blend in, but Tom Wolfe and Gay Talese both have prized their ability to emphasize their distance in their dress. They describe their methods almost as trying to stand out in their carefully pressed and very dapper suits—no matter who their subject was. "You've got to dress up for the story," Talese says (lecture, Goucher College, August 6, 2007). Talese carries himself with a regal elegance, sharply assembled from his shiny shoes and expensive suits to his carefully placed hair. He does not try to play the role of the common man. Likewise, Tom Wolfe says he found that trying to blend in didn't really work; he stuck with his expensive suits and didn't try to pretend that he was on the inside; he felt that it worked better if he didn't try to adapt and just used his role as an outsider to his advantage:

> When I first started at *Esquire,* I made the mistake of trying to fit in. And given the kinds of things I was sent to cover—stock car racing, the Peppermint Lounge, topless restaurants in San Francisco—not only did I not fit in no matter how hard I tried, but I would deprive myself of the opportunity to ask very basic questions that the outsider would ask. (Scura, 1990, p. 165)

And that was how he settled on his sleek suits, something that can seem counterintuitive for some-

one trying to immerse himself. This can certainly be included with the style of Truman Capote, whose distinctive voice and often outlandish appearance had never been seen by the small-town Kansans he interviewed for In Cold Blood. He was his own man. Here, again, we see the emphasis of that modern emphasis of distance—a certain separateness—in the modern immersion journalist. The writers are pushing themselves inside the "other" world, but also emphasizing their distance, in some cases even in terms of apparel—not always trying to blend in, but to still be separate even while immersed. Likewise, LeBlanc shows her distance in her interviewing style. When asked about her reportorial persona, she answered: "Tentative, shy, perplexed by what I'm seeing. I often feel directionless, and as a reporter, I'm asking, 'Who are you? Help me figure this out.'" (Boynton, 2005, pp. 238-239). This type of persona can be very effective in immersion reporting because it can turn the weakness of naiveté into strength. This, again, shows the changes from the time of Cahan, London and even Crane—literary journalists today emphasizing their distance, rather than minimizing it.

However, this isn't always the case, even today. An immersion reporter trying to break into a closed culture still sometimes wants to draw as little attention as possible. While Conover was working undercover in *Newjack,* he quickly took note in his work that there was one thing he did not want to do, and that was to look different. That would not only draw attention to him and possibly alter the story, but also increase the risk of getting discovered. He sought, by necessity, to blend in as much as possible. On his first day of prison guard training, Conover watched a recruit in front of him get lashed out at for his long hair and earring and another get upbraided for a poorly knotted tie. "The officers were like sharks, sniffing for blood," he wrote. "This first lesson of the Academy was immediately clear: Don't stand out" (2000, p. 14).

Tom Wolfe and Gay Talese feel more comfortable dressed to the nines in suits and fancy shoes and not pretending to be someone else. Conover, on the other hand, acknowledges that in his school of thought there is some degree of acting involved in immersion. He describes the need to dress more casually while spending time with Mexican immigrants for *Coyotes* and traveling on trains with hoboes in *Rolling Nowhere,* which is reminiscent of London's approach in *The People of the Abyss.* Conover also made outward attempts to blend in with each culture, trying to alter his behavior around each group:

> I try to blend in, whether I'm with hoboes or Mexican immigrants or prison guards. I want to be spoken to in the same way they speak to each other. … I tailor my vocabulary and body language. There is a degree of acting involved. And yet, on a deeper level, I'm always myself. (Conover, 2005, p. 16)

Clearly, both tactics can be effective, and writers have typically settled what makes them feel most comfortable. But, overall, gaining some sense of distance from the subject has become a key element in much of the best immersion journalism today.

In other modern work, we see how important that distance is to the evaluation of a piece as immersion journalism. Michael Paterniti (2000) became very involved and part of the story when he wrote *Driving Mr. Albert,* traveling across the country in the company of Thomas Harvey and a jar containing Albert Einstein's brain. In this piece, Paterniti made himself a key part of the story. Then, in *The Telling Room,* he takes an immersive approach but decides also to focus on his own personal story as he delves into the world of cheese. In both cases, his involvement in the stories ultimately begins to take away from the effect of his immersion; the distance in his perspective begins to dissolve, weakening the effect of his writing about this closed world that he so effectively cracked open in his research. In letting himself affect and become part of the story so much, both pieces lose some of their value in the frame of immersion journalism. They stray into the realm of a personal story or memoir woven around the actual story. In *The Telling Room,* for example, he even tells how finding the story of this amazing cheese almost becomes about himself and his personal quest when he writes: "… I wasn't entirely playing a journalist here. I was playing myself for once" (Paterniti, 2013, Chapter 7, para. 14). The book itself goes on to be greatly about his quest, impacting the effect of the immersion. This can be contrasted with the work of Conover and LeBlanc, for example, each of whom did incorporate their lives and reporting process into the work, but still managed to keep the focus on the story itself—be it life at Sing Sing, life on the rails or the world of Coco, Jessica and Boy George in Random Family.

These cases also show that the idea of immersion does indeed come down to time—a lot of it. Part of why Crane's "Experiment in Misery" was only primitive immersion was because it only involved a matter

of hours—not the days, months and years spent immersed by Conover, LeBlanc, Patsy Sims and others. The modern approach to immersion involves taking extensive amounts of time to get at the heart of complex questions, difficult worlds, and closed subcultures. When Richard Ben Cramer wrote "How The World Turns in West Philadelphia," a detailed account of the daily life of one poor family, he spent three weeks virtually living out of their basement; from beginning to end, the story took more than three months (Harrington, 1997, pp. 222-223). LeBlanc spent nearly a decade on *Random Family,* months and months on end swimming around in the lives of her characters. Conover invested nearly a year of his life training to be a prison guard and then working at Sing Sing five days a week. Pete Earley immersed himself inside the Leavenworth Prison for nearly two years, spinning together the complicated lives of his nine main characters. For The Klan, Patsy Sims (1996) spent four months on the road interviewing Klan members and victims, and spent two years doing the major writing and research. The Telling Room took Paterniti more than a decade.

Only over time was Earley able to earn the trust and respect of violent criminals and hardened convicts, all of whom were literally his captive audience. He needed extended periods of time to become as engrained in that life as he did; and he describes what happened as he became more and more accepted:

> At first I spoke to them without a tape recorder or notepad and pencil. They were suspicious of me and those tools would have made them even more so. Why had the bureau let me inside? Obviously, the fact that it had given me access made them suspect me. In the beginning, I did not ask too many questions; I simply listened. Some inmates tested me. They would commit a minor rule infraction, such as smuggling a sandwich back to their cell from the prison mess hall, knowing that I had seen them tuck it into their trousers. They wanted to see if I would snitch on them. I never did. After weeks of watching me, one by one these men began to open up. I found them to be amazingly frank, naively so at times. I am certain that some decided to speak to me out of boredom. (1993, pp. 46-47)

Earley used many of the tools available to the immersion journalist and carefully monitored his behavior. He started out just talking to them, trying to earn their trust to show that he wasn't a spy; he weeded out the people who desperately wanted to talk to him right away, but were not representative of the true story lines running through the prison. He did whatever he could to earn trust and eventually was able to get the complete stories, using notepad and recorder.

However, writers operating on a more limited time scale have accepted that reality and successfully focused on the moments, hours, days and weeks they have to heighten their senses and really delve in where and when they can. It can also involve looking at a range that is on a smaller scale, not years in a lifetime but perhaps a smaller, closed circuit. Cramer started out "How the World Turns in West Philadelphia" under orders from his newspaper editor to find out what life was like in a poor home during a hot summer. Working with this compressed time frame—a summer—and newspaper deadlines that wouldn't wait for years, he compensated by practically living in the family's home during those months (Harrington, 1997, pp. 222-223). But in doing so, he manages to get that perspective of both total immersion combined with the critical distance that makes this type of work effective.

When delving into the culture at a jazz club, it was impossible for me to actually live above the club for a year or two. While that would be the optimal situation, the way to view every happening there, every tiff, every success, it just was not feasible. So I tried to find the best way to compensate, spending as much time there as possible on a regular basis—once or twice a week for several hours, combined with interviews with people who are main characters and define the place itself. One risk of this approach is also a major criticism of Norah Vincent's (2006) immersion work in *Self-Made Man.* In that book, the reader could feel her dabbling in the world of men when she wanted to, then leaving when she felt like it was time to go. She still found a way to live her life, but she seemed less committed since she was essentially having it both ways. But where is the line? Conover, after all, went home to his family after working at Sing Sing each day. One of the best answers to the question about this line comes from Conover when he makes the important distinction between being a "tourist" and being a "traveler:"

> I suppose what I'm getting at is like the distinction between tourist and traveler. The tourist experience is superficial and glancing. The traveler develops a deeper connection with her

> surroundings. She is more invested in them—the traveler stays longer, makes her own plans, chooses her own destination, and usually travels alone: solo travel and solo participation, although the most difficult emotionally, seem the most likely to produce a good story. (Boynton, 2005, p. 8)

Conover draws from Lawrence Durell's recommendations in the essay "Spirit of Place," where he says, "Most travelers hurry too much …the great thing is to try and travel with the eyes of the spirit wide open, and not too much factual information" (Boynton, 2005, pp. 15-16). All travelers would like to stay longer. But immersion journalism comes down to how much a journalist soaked up while he was there: Did he talk to everyone he could? Did he smell every last room? Did he really take time to look at everything on the wall? It becomes more about zeroing in on the exact questions the writer wants to answer and focusing on anything that can help him find the answer. Erskine Caldwell made a similar point on literary journalism in 1935, in *Some American People,* when he also emphasized the importance of being a traveler and not a tourist, saying "In its true meaning, a traveler is a stranger who gains a sympathetic understanding with the people he encounters" (Hartsock, 2000, p. 160). That is, perhaps, the essence of immersion's role in literary journalism.

The ethics of how much to become involved and how much to disclose during an immersion journalism project is without a doubt one of the other great dilemmas of the form today. And, as discussed with Conover's *Newjack* experience, there is a wide array of approaches. Conover certainly hid his purpose entirely, and paid a price in terms of how the project was evaluated—facing criticism for the undercover aspect. To a much lesser degree, Gay Talese often takes notes on tiny scraps of paper in an effort to be discreet in his note-taking. But others, such as Alex Kotlowitz, feel it is important to constantly remind subjects that the writer is there, always with the notepad visible, so as not to deceive them. "I want to remind them why I'm there," he said (Boynton, 2005, p. 139). Conover said that when he was interviewing hoboes for *Rolling Nowhere,* he struck a middle ground; he would keep the notepad away a lot of the time and then bring it out, saying something like, "That was a great joke! Tell it to me again so I can write it down'" (Boynton, 2005, p. 21). Journalists have had tremendous success across the board, from playing the role of obvious chronicler to trying to blend in as much as possible. But again, integrity and using as much openness as possible must be common threads in any approach. In this area, while Conover can be justified in *Newjack* because the story couldn't have been told any other way, it is increasingly important that immersion journalists be transparent in their goals as much as possible—even if they do let themselves blend into the background in their reporting. And the question to be asked at the end must be twofold: Does the value of the story merit the tactics used in getting it? (Here is where Conover passes, but Vincent fails) And, using Kant's categorical imperative as a guide, was the subject treated as an end and not just as a means during the process? Both of these must be considered in evaluating the success of a piece of immersion.

Much like in the scientific world, immersion journalists today must acknowledge that anything they study is essentially altered by that inspection: It creates waves. People who are not used to getting attention can behave differently when they know they are being watched. This is another area where only true immersion and carefully spent time can help solve the problem. The more time the writer spends in the setting, talking to the people and learning and watching their lives, the more he becomes part of the surrounding and less a curiosity to be gawked at, talked about and observed. Over time, he begins to blend in. Adrian Nicole LeBlanc had to spend hours just sitting around and watching Coco, Jessica and Cesar, making careful efforts not to outwardly intrude on their lives. Pete Earley had to linger around in all different settings often just listening and watching, knowing he could actually be breaking the law if he interfered with the prison operations. Alex Kotlowitz and LeBlanc both had to carefully straddle the issue of avoiding interfering in the lives of people who often made very obvious bad choices, or just needed a little bit of help. When writing about two troubled Chicago adolescents growing up in a public housing project in *There Are No Children Here,* Kotlowitz (1991) constantly faced questions about whether to interfere with their troubled lives. And he struggled with it, whether it was trying to help the family get back lost public aid, helping the children get into better schools or just giving advice. Ultimately, he decided to help the children into private schools and to set up trusts for them after the book was finished (Boynton, 2005, p. 138). Both authors constantly struggled with their need to balance empathy with interference,

a huge dilemma in much of immersion journalism. But each passes both of the litmus tests mentioned above—a compelling story justifies the tactics and the subjects were treated as ends in and of themselves, not just as means.

Immersion journalism began as a simple means of giving stories about "the other," such as in the cases of Jack London and Stephen Crane. But today it has evolved into a greater role, one where it isn't just telling about the "other" but giving us the stories that tell the greater truths and conflicts of our lives: survival, addiction, poverty, justice, the nature of violence, and many other things. The key is work focusing on those greater truths. One editor, Richard Todd, tells a story about when Tracy Kidder followed a fifth-grade class for a year for *Among Schoolchildren* and thought about an opening scene of the teacher exploding on the class out of frustration. But ultimately, he decided against it because it showed the exception, not the real struggles that the whole school year really revolved around. It became, Todd said, about "what to make small and what to make big" (R. Todd, lecture, Goucher College, August 2, 2007). This is demonstrative of the role of modern immersion journalism—it's not about "Gotcha Journalism," but about finding the meaning in stories that shows the greater truths that make us human.

Time constraints are everywhere in journalism today, but literary journalism is the place where American culture gets to invest in the big picture. The evolution of immersion journalism from the time of Cahan, London and Crane to work today by Conover, LeBlanc and others shows the importance of reportorial distance and, quite simply, the devotion of large quantities of time in painting that big picture. Journalists and academics must focus on those issues above all to tell these stories, and be able to provide deeper stories in an era where so many stories are simply 140 characters, or are overly subjective screeds published by people simply looking to promote a broader political agenda. Immersion journalists must follow Richard Todd's rule about focusing on "what to make small and what to make big." By following that rule as honestly as possible and never deceiving the subject about what is or is not being written, an immersion journalist can live by a code of integrity. It is a balance that is far greater than the trite and unrealistic concept of the "objective news story." Instead, the immersion journalist makes a stronger and more complicated promise, since he is indeed a traveler and not just a tourist. He promises to take the time to consider every possible viewpoint, every conceivable perspective and every nook and cranny of the world that has been laid out before him. But he also vows never to leave compassion behind. As Shelley Fisher Fishkin wrote of James Agee's work with tenant farmers for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* "Agee was himself profoundly moved—and changed—by the experience of becoming a part of the tenant farmers' lives. He lacked the detachment, condescension, and self-confidence necessary to produce a typical 'Life and Circumstances' article" (Sims, 2008, p. 147). In telling true stories, and telling them as truly as possible, an immersion journalist must maintain that sense of distance and not "go native"—but he also must never check his humanity and compassion at the door. Then, when he goes back home to tell his story, he can write with the authority of someone who traveled deep into an unknown world and took a good hard look around, but still didn't forget to take along his own personal moral compass to guide him.

Patrick Walters is an assistant professor at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania (correspondence: pwalters@kutztown.edu).

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