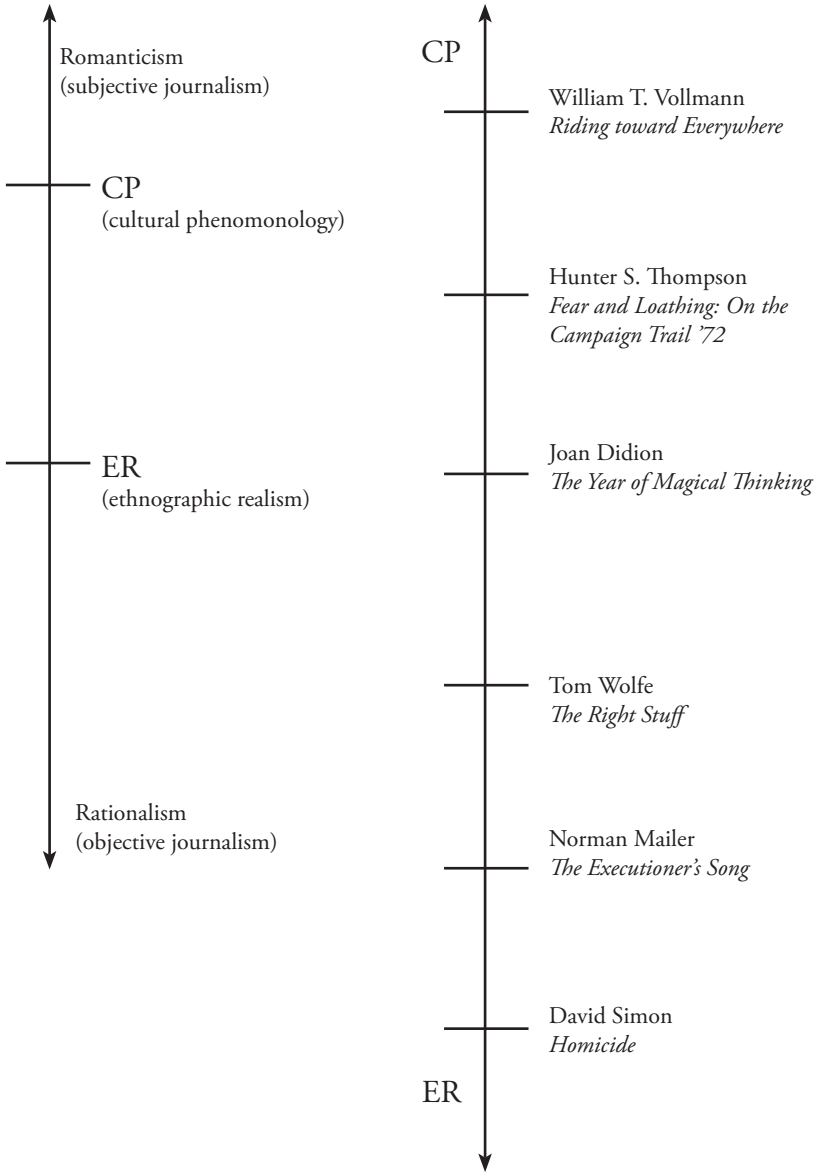


Eason-Webb Continuum



Mapping Nonfiction Narrative: A New Theoretical Approach to Analyzing Literary Journalism

William Roberts
Independent scholar, Australia

Fiona Giles
University of Sydney, Australia

Abstract: The aim of this research paper is to put forward an inclusive and flexible means to explore literary journalism's rich interior by creating a broad theoretical framework and approach that is suitable for defining and analyzing any given text in this genre, using David L. Eason's typology of Ethnographic Realism and Cultural Phenomenology (1984). ER and CP are two "modes" of responding to and organizing the experience of reporting, which is typically a personalized, interpretive, and evocative account of reality. Due to the diverse aesthetic styles and approaches found in this genre, these categories have been refined and supplemented using Joseph M. Webb's theory of rationalism and romanticism in journalism (1974). By combining Eason and Webb's theories it is possible to create a spectrum—from "objective" to "subjective"—along which to situate individual works of literary journalism. This paper includes two examples that are representative of the two modes of literary journalism: namely, David Simons's *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* (1991) and William T. Vollmann's *Riding toward Everywhere* (2008). We will also illustrate how a variety of other texts can be situated along the Eason-Webb spectrum.

Since the emergence of the New Journalism in the 1960s, numerous theorists and academics have attempted to define literary journalism as a wide-ranging form of factual narrative encompassing both the New Journalism and other more traditional approaches. Despite these efforts, this genre currently lacks a fixed working definition and normative terminology, partly because it

is an innovative genre that is still developing and resisting narrow definitions.¹ While scholars may have formulated generic definitions of literary journalism, no theory will ever be complete or methodologically adequate until finer distinctions are made between several subcategories of texts. As Barbara Foley says, this genre will continue to elude theorists until they have set up “guideposts for venturing into this terrain and have proposed charts to delineate the broad configurations of important zones of inquiry; but . . . thus far, the rich interior is still unexplored.”²

David L. Eason’s typology provides a basic model for dividing the genre into two subcategories of texts. Ethnographic Realism (ER) includes texts that have an omniscient narrator and utilize literary techniques associated with social realism, while Cultural Phenomenology (CP) is associated with reflective, exploratory, and essentially personal forms of literary journalism.³ Together, he argues, they account for the two main forms of writing found in this genre. Eason is by no means the first theorist to identify two kinds of writing within the larger category of literary journalism—with Ronald Weber, for instance, differentiating between an existential form (akin to CP) and a rational form (ER) in *The Literature of Fact* (1980), which was published two years earlier than Eason’s theory. However, Eason is one of the few theorists to have incorporated these two types of writing within a single theory, thereby offering an alternative to the more limited generic definitions.

Tom Barone argues that the degree to which nonfiction narratives tolerate “ambiguity, imagination or creativity—indeed subjectivity of any sort—they may be diminished in terms of reliability, validity and objectivity.”⁴ We argue that ambiguity, imagination, and creativity are an essential and unavoidable part of the narrative process, and do not necessarily diminish the reliability, validity, and objectivity of the story. Instead, by actively drawing attention to these subjective processes, literary journalism reveals that narrative is always a matter of rhetoric and always subjective because the writer is required to select and interpret in order to tell the story, irrespective of how “objective” it appears. Writers of ER, for instance, are aware that their reports are an interpretation of past events, and—despite Eason’s claims—very rarely reflect “faith in the capability of traditional models of interpretation and expression, particularly the story form, to reveal the real.”⁵ While Eason’s theory provides these two categories within which to begin distinguishing types, it does not, in our view, adequately account for the gradations of difference, sometimes subtle, and sometimes occurring simultaneously in a single text. Nor does Eason adequately acknowledge that the subjective approach may be used within a realist narrative, and is, indeed, an inevitable component of all narrative. For this reason, our proposal is to combine the Eason ER/CP

model with Joseph M. Webb's Rational/Romantic model to create a spectrum ranging from "objective" to "subjective," since this provides a way of acknowledging ER's neutral, objective presentation style together with its subjective processes.⁶ Accordingly, this paper attempts to reconcile ER with the subjective ideal of literary journalism, alongside CP.

Ultimately, a generation of theorists and scholars has tried and failed to identify and define the essential characteristics of a "bastard form"⁷ that crosses the boundaries of journalism and literature, with some assuming that "it is impossible to define literary journalism by its intrinsic attributes alone."⁸ We claim that by reference to this new theoretical approach, literary journalism can indeed be defined by its intrinsic attributes, and that there is no reason why it should remain the "great unexplored territory" of contemporary criticism.⁹

A Typology Of Literary Journalism

The major benefit of Eason's typology is that it does not base its definition and typology of literary journalism on literary or textual features alone. As a factual form of writing, the genre is contingent upon truth and reality, and the writers are required to construct narratives that accurately depict the circumstances being reported. Apart from this ethical obligation, however, there are no hard and fast rules dictating what a literary journalist can or cannot do in representing reality.¹⁰ As Michael J. Steinberg explains, "A particular piece might by turns be lyrical, expository, meditative, informational, reflective, self-interrogative, exploratory, analytical, and/or whimsical."¹¹ Viewed from a literary critical perspective, the genre appears heterogeneous, lacking in any distinctive or common traits other than its signification of actual events, making it "difficult, if not impossible, to pin down."¹²

Eason solves this issue of heterogeneity by conceiving literary journalism as a combined literary and cultural act in which particular attention is paid to the "relationship of literary style to the experience that it embodies."¹³ According to Eason, the story form is utilized in literary journalism to both communicate and comprehend, with narrative techniques constituting "formal methods used in making sense of all kinds of situations."¹⁴ That is, literary journalists make sense of their experiences through the imposition of a narrative line, "which connects and interrelates diverse strands of experience into a meaningful paradigm."¹⁵ The resulting product (the report) "is not a 'natural' statement of 'the way things are' but an interpretation mediated by the 'multiple choices' which culture provides for interpreting experience."¹⁶ These choices are dependent on the perspective, or "frame," used by the journalist to see and know the world,¹⁷ whether it is a conventional inverted pyramid article structure or a

plot-driven narrative construction. However, with the latter, the literary act of shaping experience into “a meaningful paradigm” is also a cultural act because it produces “a symbolic structure in which facts function to disclose a larger meaning,”¹⁸ the significance of which emerges from the enactment of cultural paradigms that “contributes to our cultural meaning-making.”¹⁹

ER and CP are two alternative ways of “responding to reality”²⁰ and organizing the experience of reporting. Eason argues that ER involves “naturalizing discrepant views of reality within its own narrative conventions”; no matter how strange or bizarre these views may be, they pose “no threat to established ways of knowing and communicating . . . and the reporter is still able to state, ‘That’s the way it is.’” In ER, reality is made comprehensible to the audience by a process that involves more than merely describing the scene and the actors’ experiences: it must be explained “by relating it to a social, cultural, or historical framework.” In order to achieve this, realist reporters must be simultaneously both near and far from their subjects, vicariously penetrating their experiences “while holding an aesthetic distance that allows the transformation of the experience within a set of narrative conventions into a story.” Eason suggests that ER attempts to reify a “commonplace cultural distinction” between lived and observed experience. Style is presented “as a communicational technique whose function is to reveal a story that exists ‘out there’ in reality,” with the reporter confronting “narrative construction as a problem of mediating between the experience of the subject and the reader.”²¹

In contrast, CP “describes what it feels like to live in a world in which there is no reliable frame of reference to explain ‘what it all means.’” According to Eason, this mode conducts a “multi-layered interrogation of communication, including that between writer and reader, as a way of constructing reality, and by the hesitancy to foreclose the question ‘Is this real?’ by invoking conventional ways of understanding.” CP deems traditional ways of making sense to be either inappropriate or ineffective for the empirical understanding of contemporary reality, and accordingly represents “the image-world as a realm that blurs traditional distinctions between fantasy and reality.” Its aesthetic “arises out of an inability to state ‘the way things are.’” CP chronicles the interaction between consciousness and events; the story that is told “is not one discovered out there in the world but the story of the writer’s efforts to impose order on those events.” Instead of maintaining a cultural distinction between lived and observed experience, CP makes observation—grounded in an epistemology and an ethics—a vital part of the story. CP reporters therefore explore “the reality that actor and spectator create in their interaction, the dynamics through which each is created in the reporting process.”²²

The Relationship Between ER And CP

Although ER and CP represent different ways of interpreting and representing reality, they should not be regarded as entirely distinct categories of literary journalism. For over 100 years, scholars and critics have defined literary journalism as a consummately personal and subjective form of factual writing. In 1904, for instance, H.W. Boynton remarked that “many writers of power whose permanent and absorbing task is journalism [produced works that are] unmistakably informed with personality.”²³ Seven decades later, James E. Murphy described literary journalism as “an artistic, creative, literary reporting form with three basic traits: dramatic techniques; intensive reporting; and reporting of generally acknowledged subjectivity.”²⁴ Three years prior to these comments, in 1971, Michael L. Johnson claimed that the “principle distinguishing mark of New Journalistic style is the writer’s attempt to be personalistic, involved, and creative in relation to the events he reports and comments upon.”²⁵

Lee Wilkins explains that in the twentieth century, literary journalists began “to rely on an internally defined reality to help explain the objective facts to which traditional journalists were welded.”²⁶ Creating reports anchored in both an internal and external reality put literary journalism at odds with conventional newswriting practices due to the latter’s firmly entrenched principles concerning the “separation of facts and opinions [and] the journalist functioning as the impartial relayer of those facts.”²⁷ Steven Maras notes that although journalistic objectivity is multifaceted and diverse in its application and interpretation,²⁸ one feature that is almost universally regarded as a key aspect is journalism’s detachment, which involves “recounting events in a disinterested or impersonal way, aligned with precepts of neutrality and balance.”²⁹ Literary journalism precludes detachment because, as John C. Hartsock explains, in its most basic sense it tries to narrow the gulf between subject and object, and this “subjective ambition could not bode well for the form in the face of the rising critical hegemony posed by ‘objective’ journalism.”³⁰

Despite claims of a shift toward acceptance of literary journalism by the daily newspaper industry in the United States,³¹ its general perception remains one of an overtly personal and subjective form that “flies in the face of accepted notions of ‘objectivity.’”³² This may have acted as a barrier to the genre’s acceptance because, by being neither hard news nor fiction, it has fallen between two historically powerful norms. Also, as Jesse Swigger observes, there was a belief—which had its origins in the New Journalism—that “objective writing was not only untenable, but undesirable.”³³ Certain literary journalism theorists continue to censure any perceived objectivity they detect

within the genre, including objectified narration and other techniques associated with the social realist tradition, because this is believed to be “hampered by the same positivist attitude that permeates the fiction of objectivity.”³⁴

Insofar as the “realist” reporter can be seen to share the same neutral and measured communicational style as the “hard news” journalist, proponents of the subjective model of literary journalism, such as Kathy Smith, Phyllis Frus, and John Hellmann, have attacked objectified narration on the grounds that it has the same ideological underpinnings as conventional journalism. Another common concern about realism in literary journalism is that “the narrator as ‘almighty author’ can shape or frame the voices of problematic characters within the story by means of rhetorical devices, which enables him or her to gain authentication and persuasive power while refraining from explicit evaluations.”³⁵

Kathy Smith’s critical analysis of John McPhee’s narratorial strategy in *A Sense of Where You Are: Bill Bradley at Princeton*, exemplifies the distrust that some critics have for realism in literary journalism. Smith argues that McPhee disguises himself as the “recorder” of events so that he can “temper the mediation between fact and story to promote the ‘real illusion’ that structure itself provides a natural and absolute system of identification rather than a true replica that is produced in the midst of narrative adventure.”³⁶ Smith criticizes McPhee for manipulating voice and perspective and altering the exact chronology of events so that he can distance himself from the events he is reporting and preserve the story’s objectivity. However, as Hayden White has noted, it is because “real events do not offer themselves as stories that their narrativization is so difficult.”³⁷ This means that all nonfiction narratives can be dismissed as fiction “due to the fundamentally specular nature of language.”³⁸ As William Howarth explains, in McPhee’s work structural order is the main ingredient used to attract his readership because “order establishes where the writer and reader are going and when they will arrive at a final destination.”³⁹

However, Smith suggests that by transforming his experiences into story form using the narrative conventions of logic, order, and meaning to structure reality, McPhee has chosen to represent reality in a manner that “always depends on artifice”⁴⁰ and has created a structure that is “the ground for the ideology of objectivity in journalism.”⁴¹ Smith’s analysis of McPhee’s work shows how realist techniques are considered to be a violation of the subjective ideal of literary journalism, a view based on the misconception that omniscient narration entails detachment. This fails to recognize that literary journalism has “made use of objectivity as it saw fit, variously adopting, adapting, and rejecting its rules,”⁴² and therefore does not offer an absolute ideological alternative to conventional reporting.

Smith is not alone in her critique of objectivity in realist literary journalism. Matthew Ricketson argues that a number of leading practitioners, heeding the controversy surrounding Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, have moved "away from writing in an omniscient authorial voice because they appreciate it conveys a sense of knowingness that is out of place when you are trying to convey events and issues that in all likelihood are contested, contingent and still unfolding."⁴³ Eason, who contends that ER displays a "faith in the capability of traditional models of interpretation and expression, particularly the story form, to reveal the real,"⁴⁴ shares this view. However, Eason does not take into account that narrative always has a point of view.⁴⁵ As Weber observes, despite the omniscient narration in *In Cold Blood*, "the writer was distinctly felt in the re-creation of events and in the selection and arrangement of the material."⁴⁶ This view is supported by John Hollowell, who asserts that "Capote must have realized that the final narrative presents only *one version* of the facts"⁴⁷ because no matter how neutral the presentation, "there is no mistaking the author's point of view; characters, actions, revealing details are all saturated with values that the author can count on readers to recognize—and, ideally, share."⁴⁸ Weber's and Hollowell's analyses of *In Cold Blood* indicate that omniscient narration does not erase the writer's subjective presence. Rather, it is perceived in every detail used to construct the narrative world, which debunks the claim that the writer is detached from his or her material.

The assumption that literary journalists use omniscient narration and other realist devices to create the illusion of the text's autonomy or to instill their narratives with a certain factual authority⁴⁹ stems from ER's aesthetic association with social realism. As Robert Anchor explains, "A century ago Realism was in its prime; today it is under attack."⁵⁰ Superficially, ER can be seen to operate in a typically mimetic manner, faithfully mirroring everyday reality⁵¹ and exploiting a style that is generally acknowledged as direct, transparent, literal, and "characterised primarily by confidence in the representational function of language."⁵² Yet, unlike realism, ER is not based on an "assumption of a familiar, ordered, intelligible world to which literature refers."⁵³ While it may represent a continuation of realism's aesthetic, ER is nonetheless an entirely independent, contemporary form of writing that "affirms that reality is socially and culturally constructed."⁵⁴ It does this by producing texts that faithfully mirror everyday reality while also acknowledging its "own status as a constructed, aesthetic artefact"⁵⁵—or, to use Barthes's idiom: "Its task is to put the mask in place and at the same time to point it out."⁵⁶

In this regard, ER may be seen to draw from modernism as well as social realist fiction, in that its writers "use and abuse, install and then destabilize convention . . . self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent

paradoxes and provisionality,⁵⁷ both inscribing and subverting their mimetic engagement with the world.⁵⁸ Most importantly, though, by working within this particular type of discourse yet simultaneously contesting it, ER demonstrates a knowingness about how reality is ideologically constructed⁵⁹ and does not, as Eason claims, “suggest ‘This is reality.’”⁶⁰

Two Case Studies: Riding Toward Everywhere And Homicide

In what might be called the postrealist character of both ER and CP, the major difference between them is that CP makes explicit acknowledgment of ontological uncertainty, and achieves this by questioning its own status as nonfiction and foregrounding the epistemological foundation of its writing strategies,⁶¹ exposing the shaping presence of the reporter “and the pressure of his personality and consciousness on what was finally written.”⁶² In this sense they can be seen to coexist on an ER-CP spectrum rather than belonging to mutually exclusive categories (as we shall elaborate in relation to Webb, below). This can be seen in *Riding toward Everywhere*, where William T. Vollmann’s self-reflexive and pervasive authorial presence is so visible and disharmonious with the rest of the narrative that there is an obvious tension within the narrator’s discourse. This tension can be seen in the following passage, in which the narrator abandons the past tense—previously used to narrate the events involving Vollmann’s former self—and begins informing the reader in the present tense about where he is and what he is doing during the act of narration, as shown here: “[I]ndeed, at this moment I am sitting on a bullet train between Tokyo and Shin-Osaka, rushing toward Everywhere on my laptop with a beer beside me.”⁶³ The most challenging aspect of this use of voice is that it situates Vollmann the writer “out there” in reality (on the bullet train, in this case). This is problematic because, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson explain, this “I” (of Vollmann “out there” in reality) is unknown and unknowable by readers and is not the “I” that readers use to gain access to the narrative.⁶⁴ Equally, it is difficult to associate this voice with the narrator because events can only be narrated after they have happened⁶⁵ and this voice is clearly reporting facts in the present tense.

Riding toward Everywhere not only raises questions about the indeterminacy of the narrating subject but also about the limits of referentiality. Vollmann refuses to relate this story within a traditional social, cultural, or historical framework and, like Raab, he chooses to depict “the image-world as a realm that blurs traditional distinctions between fantasy and reality.”⁶⁶ For example, Vollmann’s narrating self repeatedly uses the phrase “Once upon a time” when retelling stories heard from others or describing his personal experiences from a long time ago, thereby obscuring the actual time frame and

undermining the reader's faith in the veracity of his accounts. The fairy-tale motif is not limited to this single phrase but is reinforced through the narrator's repeated use of words such as "ogres" and "trolls" to refer to particularly unlikable hobos. On one occasion, the narrator retells a story about a hobo who had threatened to kill a man he believed to have been responsible for his dog's death. The narrator explains that the man managed to mollify the hobo by agreeing to bury the dog in his own backyard. The hobo is described as returning "like a troll beneath his fairytale bridge," at which point the narrator says: "I use the word 'fairytale' advisedly, because mere nasty actuality might have become mythic eeriness in the telling. To be sure, the warning core of that tale contained truth."⁶⁷ These comments reveal that the fairy-tale motif has a journalistic function. The reader is warned that the stories being recounted may not be entirely accurate or reliable because the events—so bizarre and improbable in the first place—have inevitably been distorted in their retelling. This narratological strategy is a characteristic CP response to reality and displays Vollmann's unwillingness to foreclose the question: "Is this real?" by invoking conventional ways of understanding."⁶⁸

This contrasts with ER, which raises questions about its status as nonfiction only through an implicit critique of its own realist techniques. A typical example of this occurs in *Homicide*, when David Simon utilizes third-person perspective to take advantage of its capacity to focus the narrative in "close third person."⁶⁹ James Woods explains that close third person takes effect when the narrator appears to "take on the properties of the character, who now seems to 'own' the words."⁷⁰ Effectively, the narrator adopts the diction of the actor, copying his or her natural style of speech and making it hard to determine who is actually speaking—the narrator or the actor—as illustrated in this example:

Donald Waltemeyer is losing it. McLarney can tell because Waltemeyer's eyes have begun to roll up into his forehead the way they always do when he gets steamed. McLarney worked with a guy in the Central who used to do that. Nicest guy in the world. Pretty long fuse. But let some yo with an attitude ride him too far, those eyeballs would roll up like an Atlantic City slot. It was a sure sign to every other cop that negotiations had ended and nightsticks were in order. McLarney tries to shrug off the memory; he continues to press the point with Waltemeyer.⁷¹

This passage is clearly written from the perspective of Detective Sergeant Terrence McLarney. Even though the first sentence is a declarative statement and not attributed to anyone, the next sentence indicates that McLarney is the person responsible for suggesting that Waltemeyer is "losing it." The third sentence reveals that McLarney has previously experienced a similar situation with another police officer who was also on the brink of "losing

it,” which is why he can “tell” Waltemeyer’s current mental state. The final four sentences describe McLarney’s memory of the other officer in Central in greater detail, before the narrative returns to the present situation, where McLarney proceeds to shrug off the memory and “continues to press the point with Waltemeyer.”

The most noticeable feature of the middle section of this paragraph is that the narrative assumes the same gruff, muscular intonation and inflection as the language commonly used by officers in the Baltimore Police Department (BPD). For instance, “yo”—the term used for a lawless or antisocial black youth—is part of the local police vernacular, which is populated with other racially charged slurs, such as “yoette” (the female equivalent of a yo) and “billie,” which denotes a “white-trash redneck” from the southern suburbs of the city.⁷² Simon is quick to point out that the BPD is replete with every color and creed, which he believes proves that the discriminatory nature of officers’ jargon is not racism per se but more akin to class-consciousness and “contempt for the huddled masses.”⁷³

Returning to the middle four sentences of this passage, a combination of quick-fire, staccato statements (“Nicest guy in the world. Pretty long fuse”); ellipsis (“ride him too far, those eyeballs would roll”—a comma standing in for the conjunction “and”); and colloquial synecdoche (“negotiations had ended and nightsticks were in order”—a euphemism for assault on a suspect) are used to replicate the colloquial language of the BPD. It is clear from the lack of quotation marks or other grammatical indicators signalling speech that McLarney is not personally describing his own memory; rather it is the narrator describing it in McLarney’s idiom. This passage is an example of free indirect prose, an extremely useful tool for ER because the writer can benefit from “its potential for combining both distanced observation of a character and a sense of how he or she sees the world.”⁷⁴

A naive reading of this passage might suggest that Simon is deceiving the reader because he suppresses his “autolingua”⁷⁵ (the inner voice of the storyteller) and assumes the implied voice of one of his actors. Yet, it is evident from the tone and context that Simon does so ironically, colorfully flaunting the narratorial contrivance and making it easy for the reader to know the dancer from the dance, to use Yeats’s expression.⁷⁶ Simon’s playful elucidation of this artificial construction of reality means that the narrative is both self-reflexive *and* referential, revealing how ER performs a kind of knowing social realism in both its style and technique.

Notwithstanding these differences, ER and CP both convey a highly subjective and personal reality (even though ER prefers not to draw attention to this fact). According to Steve M. Barkin, the “adoption of fictional

techniques signals an explicit return to the storyteller's emotional function."⁷⁷ The story form allows realist reporters to recount the past in a factual way but also embeds their factual accounts in a "deep cultural context—one which connects the objective facts of the event with the cultural facts of symbols and myths."⁷⁸ Despite the neutral, objective, and impersonal tone found in ER, such embedding of factual content in a deep cultural context means that these types of texts relate highly personalized, interpretative, and evocative accounts of reality that exemplify the storyteller's emotional function. It is therefore inappropriate to associate ER with conventional "objective" journalism since it shares some important characteristics with CP, such as focusing on "events as symbolic of some deeper cultural ideology or mythology, emphasis[ing] the world view of the individual or group under study, and show[ing] an absorption in the aesthetics of the reporting process in creating texts that read like novels or short stories."⁷⁹ CP and ER are therefore essentially two sides of the same coin because they focus on the deeper cultural significance of events and utilize the storyteller's emotional function so that the texts read like novels. That is, they both subscribe to the subjective ideal of literary journalism. It is therefore important to further refine Eason's typology so that ER is acknowledged as a subjective form of journalism, and is not associated with conventional notions of journalistic objectivity.

The Eason-Webb Continuum

In order to reconcile ER with the subjective ideal of literary journalism, it is helpful to consider Webb's interpretation of romantic and rationalist journalism in conjunction with Eason's typology. According to Webb, rationalism is based on the following assumptions: the key characteristic of man is his ability to think, reason, and have ideas; reality is an external phenomenon understood via the senses; human beings are fundamentally alike; society is basically static and unchanging; and reality must be "cut up into pieces, with each piece digested separately." The ideal of rationalism is, of course, exemplified in objective reporting. Romanticism, on the other hand, assumes the primacy of human diversity; society as dynamic and not static; and a "wholistic," rather than atomistic, view of reality, that is, "assuming that life cannot be understood when it is cut up in little pieces." It considers humans to be primarily feeling, emotional, and instinctual beings, and suggests that "those elements . . . must be described and reported if [we are] to be understood." Romanticism in literary journalism proceeds from the premise "that the Reality to be reported is primarily internal, inside human beings; and the methodological problem . . . is to find a way inside the human being written about."⁸⁰ According to Webb, there was a surge of romanticism in literary journalism in the wake of the New Journalism, which

was part of a “wider social upsurge of Romantic notions and ideas in numerous areas of intellectual work, cultural production and life style.”⁸¹ Similarly, Lee Wilkins argues that literary journalism “sank its intellectual roots in the romantic tradition,” such that emotion had “an important and sometimes crucial place in [its] work.”⁸²

Webb has constructed a definitional framework that places the concepts of rationalism and romanticism at opposing ends of a continuum, with texts situated along this continuum depending on how influenced they are by either ideal.⁸³ Combining Webb’s framework and Eason’s typology allows ER and CP to be conceived, not as distinct categories, but as different points on a sliding scale ranging from “objective” to “subjective” journalism. This reframing enables researchers to focus on literary journalism’s narrative techniques and to assess how these are used to communicate the internal, psychological reality of actors, convey an emotional or moral vision, and place emphasis not only on what is known “but on the process of knowing itself.”⁸⁴ Based on this information, literary journalism texts can be positioned on Webb’s continuum.

With its rationalist aesthetic but romantic intent, ER can be situated closer than objective journalism to the romantic ideal of journalism but not as close as CP. The diagram at the beginning of this essay (page 100) provides a rough approximation of where ER and CP might be situated on Webb’s continuum. In order to illustrate this point further, six well-known works of literary journalism, including *Homicide* and *Riding toward Everywhere*, have been placed on the ER/CP spectrum according to how influenced they are by either romanticism or rationalism.

Hartsock explains that literary journalism “exists on a narrative spectrum or continuum somewhere between an unattainable objectified world and an incomprehensible solipsistic subjectivity.”⁸⁵ Despite ER’s avoidance of the “I” in favor of the omniscient “eye” of the writer,⁸⁶ both ER and CP exploit the transformational resources of human perception and imagination.⁸⁷ Woven together into a complex interrelationship, neither proceeds independently of the other but rather they merge and overlap, with both working toward the same goal, albeit using different methods. So, although *Homicide* and *Riding toward Everywhere* are on opposite ends of the ER-CP spectrum, they are both situated within the subjective ideal of journalism.

John Hersey’s *Hiroshima* is a typical example of ER predating the New Journalism. The exploration of experiential reality through the internal mind of the reporter that is typical of CP, however, appears to have emerged in latter part of the twentieth century after poststructuralism. Typical examples include the works of Hunter S. Thompson, Joan Didion, and John Gregory

Dunne. *The Executioner's Song* is identified as ER because it is written from a third-person perspective, and Norman Mailer presents the story in a factual and objective manner. *The Right Stuff* is located more toward the middle of the spectrum because although it too is written from a third-person perspective, Tom Wolfe's authorial presence can be keenly felt in the narration. *The Year of Magical Thinking* is classed as CP because it is written in first-person perspective; but Didion's approach is unquestioning in its regard for the factual past, and does not question its own status as nonfiction, so it is situated near the middle. *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* is more ambiguous about factual reality, with Hunter S. Thompson interspersing his narrative account with scenes derived from his imagination. And as we have seen, Vollmann's text upends any easy notion of an obtainable factuality or stable subject to interpret it.

Conclusion

Over a generation ago, Weber said that literary journalism "is not well defined, and the many terms used to describe it . . . have done nothing to clarify matters."⁸⁸ More recently, Hartsock argued that uncertainty over what to call this genre is not just an identity problem: it is indicative of a "large critical void of which the problem of identity is symptomatic of a larger generic problem: how to contextualize a body of writing that, to provide a working definition, reads like a novel or short story except that it is true or makes a truth claim to reflecting phenomenal experience."⁸⁹ After a productive period of theoretical debate in the wake of Wolfe's essay on the New Journalism in the 1970s, the task of defining this genre has largely been abandoned.⁹⁰

The typology and spectrum outlined in this paper represent an attempt to reinvigorate the debate and stimulate a renewed effort in defining and analyzing this form. It is merely a starting point, however, and given the limitations of this study, there is scope for testing the framework on a broader range of texts. Such an exercise could provide an opportunity to further refine the typology and perhaps contribute additional categories along the ER-CP continuum, which we welcome. Further, the analysis of the omniscient narrator in *Homicide* and the radical indeterminacy of the writing subject in *Riding toward Everywhere* indicate a need for greater clarification with respect to narrative communication in literary journalism. Norman Sims states that literary journalism can be seen as a narrative impulse in journalism,⁹¹ indicating that narrative technique ought to be a prime focus of research. However, it is equally important that this type of writing represents actual events that are independent of any particular narrative perspective or presentation,⁹² no matter how elusive or complex they might be.

Fiona Giles is senior lecturer and chair of the Department of Media and Communications, University of Sydney, where she teaches creative nonfiction and feature writing. Her most recent publication is “The Magazine That Isn’t: The Future of Features Online,” *TEXT*, special issue 25, April 2014.



William Roberts wrote his doctorate on the subject of this essay, a version of which received the award for best research paper by a graduate at IALJS-9 in Paris. He currently works as media advisor to an Australian Federal Member of Parliament.

Notes

1. Norman Sims, “The Art of Literary Journalism,” in *Literary Journalism: A New Collection of the Best American Nonfiction*, eds. Norman Sims and Mark Kramer (New York: Ballantine, 1995), 9.
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Download Citation | Reading News as Narrative: A genre approach to journalism studies | Scholars who use textual approaches to study news often blend theoretical perspectives in their work, asking some combination of questions about | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate.Â In this volume, Doug Underwood asks whether much of what is now called literary journalism is, in fact, "literary," and whether it should rank with the great novels by such journalist-literary figures as Twain, Cather, and Hemingway, who believed that fiction was the better place for a realistic writer to express the important truths of life. Narrative journalism, also referred to as literary journalism, is defined as creative nonfiction that contains accurate, well-researched information. It is related to immersion journalism, where a writer follows a subject or theme for a long period of time (weeks or months) and details an individual's experiences from a deeply personal perspective. The first "non-fiction" novel was *Operaci3n Masacre*, completed in 1957 by the Argentinean Rodolfo Walsh. In *Cold Blood* by Truman Capote was the second, and Distant reading is an approach to literature based on processing large amounts of literary data to devise and construct general "models" of narratives to understand them as a class, in contrast to reading each work very closely (hence the term "dis-tant") to understand it. A model constructed through reduction and abstraction, the reasoning goes, would enable us to grasp the general underlying structures and patterns of a class of complex objects called narrative, as an X-ray machine would allow us to understand the general skeletal features of the human body.Â A model of a narrative, from this perspective, appears to be sensible and immediately understandable; in many instances when we recount a story, we focus prominently on the characters and their relationships.