

## *Special Issue*

# African American Literary Journalism: Extensions and Elaborations

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Albert Lee Murray

This special issue of *Literary Journalism Studies* is dedicated to Albert Lee Murray, who died on August 18, 2013, at the age of ninety-seven and whose ideas animate the selections in this issue. A formidable twentieth-century public intellectual who championed jazz and promoted a literary aesthetic and life philosophy tied to the blues—that quintessential American music—Murray published twelve books that celebrated the hybridization of American culture. Another major achievement in his later years was helping to found Jazz at Lincoln Center, whose executive director today is Wynton Marsalis. While Murray was once described as “the mind of the mind of Wynton Marsalis,” his influence has in fact been widespread—evident in the work of collage artist Romare Bearden, playwright August Wilson, newspaper columnist and Charlie Parker biographer Stanley Crouch, plus countless scholars and students, me among them.

It was Murray’s second book, *South to a Very Old Place*, that provided my own way into the study of literary journalism and prompted my particular interest in African American contributions to the genre. In that book, which had defied categorization, Murray created a kind of “anti-journalism,” to borrow Ronald Weber’s term for much of Ernest Hemingway’s writing, through which Murray critiqued the procedures and conclusions not only of mainstream journalism, but also and especially of the Tom Wolfe-Norman Mailer brand of New Journalism. Both, he found, presented distorted images of African Americans while denying the black community agency and black writing authority, which he sought to restore through the dynamic blues-based counternarrative of his book. So it is only fitting that this issue, with its mix of sustained analyses and interviews—the first publication to offer the

Photo of Albert Lee Murray  
by Miles Maguire

opportunity to begin considering both the scope of the work that African American literary journalists have produced and the markers that their texts share—should be dedicated to Albert Murray.

That African American literary journalism has not up to this point received extensive attention is not surprising, given both the relative newness of literary journalism as a recognized scholarly field and the different histories of what we might call “conventional” journalism in the dominant culture versus African American communities. While more or less mainstream journalism began in what would become the United States in the late seventeenth century, it was not until the nineteenth century—1827—that the African American community had its first newspaper. And while both mainstream and African American early journalism were undeniably partisan in that they were aligned with particular political positions, the mainstream press, as the twentieth century unfolded, increasingly prized objectivity, whereas the African American press, which began as an enterprise in advocacy, did not. The earliest black papers, up through the Civil War, were primarily focused on the abolition of slavery; a related secondary mission was general racial uplift. And if the mainstream press took sides in political arguments so that papers challenged each other, the black press was much more concerned with presenting a united front against slavery, a common foe imposed from without.

Since slavery was replaced not with equality but rather segregation and discrimination, the black press’s advocacy on behalf of African Americans continued unabated into the twentieth century. But with the end of slavery, as African Americans embraced freedom despite the barriers of segregation and prejudice, and black communities grew and often thrived, the role of the black press as the vehicle by which African Americans could learn about what was happening in their own neighborhoods—who was marrying, giving birth, winning scholarships, establishing businesses, et cetera—solidified, since the mainstream press saw no reason to include such news in its pages. But unlike the mainstream press, black newspapers rarely published daily. Most came out weekly; many appeared monthly. This meant the papers were not geared to reporting breaking news.

That publication cycle, combined with the advocacy role of the press, I think helps account for some stylistic differences between mainstream journalism and the black press, which became pronounced in the twentieth century as the mainstream press embraced objectivity. African American journalistic prose historically has been emotion-filled, expressing outrage, indignation, anger, urgency—appropriate to its activist role in protesting slavery, then segregation, then lynching and other racial violence, on through a host of discriminatory practices. But with a weekly or even monthly, rather

than daily, publication schedule, the mix of material in a black newspaper has often paralleled that of magazines more than mainstream dailies, with fiction and first-person accounts, historical reflections and opinion pieces sharing pages—often the front page—with news stories. In other words, black newspapers long accommodated a range of writing styles, with a common feature of that writing being subjectivity.

And because the black press attended to the African American community—from highlighting the impact of world, national, or state news on black lives to offering news about African Americans that the mainstream press eschewed—it regularly covered what would become the province of mainstream literary journalism: the overlooked, “forgotten” stories of ordinary people. But whereas such stories as literary journalism in the mainstream may function to help explain what John Hartsock has described as the “social or cultural Other” (22) to a publication’s readership, the black press has itself occupied a position as an “other” in relation to the mainstream, seeking to engage the very community of “others” of which it was a part.

Hence the challenge to delineate what distinguishes African American writing as literary journalism, for the very subjectivity and emphasis on the ordinary or marginalized of the dominant culture, which have been recognized as important markers of mainstream literary journalism in the United States largely because they signal a departure from conventional reporting, have longstandingly characterized the “conventional” US black press. And it is, I think, a wonderful challenge, for my own ongoing research indicates that African Americans have since the late nineteenth century up to the contemporary moment produced a great deal of literary journalism—which, defined very broadly here, is factual writing of contemporary relevance that employs a range of literary techniques—but whose function differs from that produced by mainstream US writers. Investigating that function and its shifting over time I expect will allow us to expand and complicate in profound ways our understanding of the tradition and trajectory of literary journalism in the United States over the genre’s nearly 150-year history.

This issue is a first step in the effort to explore the nature and function of selected examples of African American literary journalism. The five pieces appearing here were selected from those that were submitted in response to a call for papers advertising the special issue. Each takes as a primary focus a single writer. Three are analyses of that writer’s work, one is a combined analysis and interview with the writer, and one is entirely an interview. What is especially useful, I think, is the range of historical moments the articles cover in terms of when the literary journalism discussed was published: We begin with Langton Hughes in the 1930s and go all the way up to Isabel Wilkerson

in the 2010s, a range that points to the abiding engagement of black writers with literary journalism.

The first two articles show how the *Baltimore Afro-American*, a prominent black newsweekly, played a significant role in fostering a specific kind of literary journalism in the black community tied to war reporting. Joshua Roiland, in “‘Just People’ Are *Just* People: Langston Hughes and the Populist Power of African American Literary Journalism,” takes as his subject Hughes’s reporting from fall 1937 into early 1938 on Spain’s civil war, which US blacks understood as a war about race and racism, an understanding that Hughes’s reporting reinforced. An established poet and fiction writer by then, but in need of money due to the Great Depression and related collapse of the Harlem Renaissance, which had propelled him to fame among the black community’s Talented Tenth, Hughes welcomed the *Afro*’s offer to send him overseas to try his hand at war reporting. The thirteen stories he posted during his four-month assignment, Roiland shows, focused on ordinary people—black soldiers, Spanish Moors—in the extraordinary environment of the war. By telling the stories of ordinary people in such circumstances, using the same techniques that characterized his poetry and fiction—allegory, hyperbole, flashbacks—Hughes, Roiland argues, was able to connect American racism with international fascism, thereby heightening the relevance of the conflict for black readers at home. While adhering to the black press’s role as advocate on behalf of persons of color, Hughes’s dispatches from Spain should also be seen as an important transitional moment between W. E. B. Du Bois’s call for US blacks during World War I to put aside their grievances and fight for democracy overseas and the more militant *Pittsburgh Courier*’s Double V campaign during World War II that exhorted African Americans to extend that fight to the United States as well.

Picking up on the theme of the Double V campaign, Antero Pietila and Stacy Spaulding in “The *Afro-American*’s World War II Correspondents: Feuilletonism as Social Action”—which won the 2013 IALJS Greenberg Research Prize for Literary Journalism—look closely at the stories reporter Ollie Stewart sent home and find that classifying them as “feuilletonism” offers a way to understand the role they played in the weekly newspaper. Much like Hughes in his Spanish Civil War reporting, Stewart celebrated the achievements and heroism of black soldiers through a style that recalls the feuilleton, popular in European journalism since the early nineteenth century and which, Pietila and Spaulding explain, is a “chatty, opinionated, and impressionistic” genre. Appearing alongside more militant articles in the *Afro* that depicted and commented on racial and civil unrest in the United States, Stewart’s dispatches allowed the newspaper both to critique the racial situation at home

and to celebrate black achievement—and in this double move aligned with the Double V call for equal rights for African Americans.

William Dow, in “Unreading Modernism: Richard Wright’s Literary Journalism,” moves us into the 1950s while offering a sustained look at the work of one of many black writers who, disturbed and stifled by US racism and segregation, left the United States for Europe during the middle of the twentieth century to develop their talents in what they believed was a less racialized environment. Dow looks at Wright’s expatriate writing of the 1950s—*Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos*, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference*, and *Pagan Spain*—as an outgrowth of his 1940 book *12 Million Black Voices*, a photo-essay with strong resemblances to lyric poetry. Arguing that the expat books of the 1950s especially have been miscategorized as travel writing and rather are best read as literary journalism for their conjoining of literary and journalistic technique, Dow suggests further that in them Wright achieves a “transnational modernism.” This style, which Dow points out cannot be separated from Wright’s social activism, is a collage of genres and techniques—sermonizing, jeremiads, film, photojournalism, fiction—that create an alternative vision to the racialized and racist modern world.

While Wright fled the United States—and in particular Chicago—for Europe, Sylvester Monroe, the subject of Isabelle Meuret’s “In Their Own Voices: Celebrating *Brothers: Black and Poor—A True Story of Courage and Survival*,” has made his career in the United States, as a journalist and editor, working for *Newsweek*, *Time*, and more recently *Marketplace*, the *Root* and *Ebony*. *Brothers: Black and Poor*, Meuret tells us, when it first appeared in 1987 in *Newsweek* and then in book form, was highly innovative in terms of both methodology and style. It was a collaborative project—the work of five reporters, including Monroe, a photographer, and a senior editor, the only team member who was white—that emphasized the voices of the project’s subjects: black men, the “brothers,” who were living in the Robert Taylor Homes, public housing on Chicago’s south side. Monroe’s role was crucial: having grown up in the Taylor Homes, he provided access to the men and legitimized the interview process while playing a role himself in the story. Meuret proposes that by foregrounding the men’s voices and including Monroe as a subject the piece should be viewed as a kind of “communicative action,” following Jürgen Habermas. Her discussion is followed by an interview with Monroe, in which he speaks to his own belief that literary journalism has the power to effect social change.

The final selection, Kathy Roberts Forde’s interview with Isabel Wilkerson (“Writing Literary History: An Interview with Isabel Wilkerson”), whose

2012 book *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* has won numerous prizes, including the Pulitzer, brings us to the contemporary moment in African American literary journalism. The book traces the fortunes of three African Americans who participated in the Great Migration out of the American South to Chicago, New York, and California seeking lives less circumscribed by racial prejudice. A journalist by training, Wilkerson acknowledges being stretched by this project, which required not only extensive archival research, but a tremendous dedication of time simply living with her subjects and other sources. The interview reveals much about her creative process and primary goal—to bring her readers into the stories so that they would see as her subjects saw, feel as her subjects felt. By concentrating on the personal dimension of a fundamental era in African American history, Wilkerson's work recalls the historic role of black journalism: advocating for a full understanding of circumstances that have shaped the black community. It is also clearly literary journalism, employing a range of narrative techniques to allow readers, no matter their background, to identify with the quiet heroism and profound sorrows and joys of three African Americans as they rebuilt their lives far from where they had been born. And as Albert Murray, the consummate omni-American, would say, making possible that kind of identification should be the aim of all great writing.