

In Their Own Voices

Celebrating *Brothers: Black and Poor— A True Story of Courage and Survival*, 25 Years Later

Including an interview with author Sylvester Monroe

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The following paper examines Brothers: Black and Poor—A True Story of Courage and Survival (1988), the extended version of a cover story published in the March 23, 1987, issue of Newsweek, 25 years after its publication. This piece of collaborative journalism was innovative at the time because the stories were firsthand accounts by poor African Americans from the Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago, collected by a team of black reporters and woven together by former editor Peter Goldman. The reportage is first contextualized and evaluated in terms of its literary and narrative qualities; its potential for communicative action and performative effects is then explored and appraised. The linguistic authenticity and polyvocality of Brothers make it a good example of literary journalism, while its immediacy and sense of agency reinforce the reader's understanding of the life-world of black residents living in dire conditions. As a former resident of the housing project and as one of the few who made it out of the ghetto, Monroe posits himself as a "conduit" that helped reporters get insider stories. With regard to his career as an African American journalist, Monroe shows that self-definitional counternarratives constitute discursive and social actions aimed at connecting subjects, reporters, and readers in and out of the black public spheres. The text is followed by an interview with Sylvester Monroe.

In August 2012, established journalist Sylvester Monroe published a moving story on *Marketplace*,¹ an account of his visit to a now-defunct housing project on the south side of Chicago, the Robert Taylor Homes,² where he spent most of his childhood and adolescence. The multimedia piece narrated by Monroe and enhanced with the voices and pictures of residents of the area, some of whom shared the author's hardship, is a nostalgic and painful reminder of what the place used to be, back in the 1960s: nostalgic because the place was his home in Chicago, but also painful, because today's residents have not yet found a way out of poverty; some are even worse off than their parents had been. Monroe singles out two main reasons for this degradation: the lack of job opportunities, and a deteriorated public educational system. He recalls having had excellent teachers in the 1960s who held their students to high standards and strongly believed in their ability to improve their circumstances.³

Yet the 2012 visit was not Monroe's first return to his home place. Back in 1987, while working as a correspondent for *Newsweek*, he went back to the tenements to write "Brothers," an unusual piece of collaborative journalism. Nicknamed "Brainiac" and later "Big-Time Vest Monroe,"⁴ he was one of the very few who "made it" out of the ghetto by getting a solid K-12 education and then continuing his education at no less than Harvard University. But Monroe still had a deep connection to his brothers who had stayed at "Trey-nine."⁵ Most of them had either blown their chances or never gotten any. The changes of the 1960s heralded a brighter future for African Americans, but "the doors" that had opened eventually "slammed."⁶ Inadequate urban planning turned the deceptively romanticized Taylor project into a black ghetto where fathers were conspicuous by their absence. Drugs and crime became the residents' daily fare.

As a primary source and a journalist for *Newsweek*, Monroe was accompanied by four reporters and a photographer to carry out his assignment. Those who recorded the interviews and collected the stories with Monroe were Vern E. Smith, chief of the magazine's Atlanta bureau; Terry E. Johnson, a national affairs specialist from New York; Monroe Anderson, a correspondent from the Chicago bureau; and photographer Jacques Chenet. The reporters were all African American, except Peter Goldman, coauthor of the series and the book, former senior editor, and team leader of special projects. The only white on the team, Goldman was charged with weaving their stories together into a coherent piece of narrative journalism.

"Brothers" first came out as a cover story in the March 23, 1987, issue of *Newsweek* and garnered great critical attention. The book is its extended version, which is three to four times longer than the original piece.⁷ The twenty-fifth anniversary of its publication is a timely opportunity to reexamine the

background to the story, to discuss its literariness and narrative process, and to evaluate its potential for “communicative action” and possible performative effects,⁸ to use Jürgen Habermas’s terminology. The most probing question that underpins *Brothers* is to what extent a counterpublic discourse can be subversive when exposed in mainstream media. Put another way, the question inevitably arises whether the discourse of marginalized groups disseminated in the dominant public sphere is conducive to unintentional collusion between those relegated to the sidelines and a major media corporation.

BACKGROUND TO THE STORY

Monroe’s family was part of what is called the Great Migration. His Mother took the Illinois Central train line from the Mississippi delta all the way to Chicago after World War II. Chicago was a huge urban city with “one of the largest concentrations of high-rise apartment buildings. Twenty-seven thousand people were living there.” The Robert Taylor Homes was one of them, and although the idea behind the project was fair, Monroe concedes, there was “a sinister side to it,” as all the poor blacks were “circumscribed by race, economic poverty, and geographical isolation.”⁹ Houston Baker contends that in the aftermath of Jim Crow, the newly gained “creative agency” of blacks gave them access to public housing. But inadequate urban planning turned the Taylor project into a ghetto with the attendant negatives that term suggests, including a lack of fathers and father-figures. The Civil Rights movement had paved the way for “the active working of the imagination of a subaltern, black American counterpublic.” As a result, Baker finds that King’s efforts to develop a “black imagination” failed to create the “dignified labor” so dear to W. E. B. Du Bois.¹⁰

The *Newsweek* reporters spent four months at the Robert Taylor Homes—“a city within a city, poor, black, insular, dependent, and dangerous”¹¹—to offer readers a “slice of life,”¹² that is, an idea of what it meant to be living in highly segregated Chicago, in isolated and fatherless tenements surrounded by drug dealers, outlaws, hustlers, and pimps, where gang-driven violence and poverty were rampant. Admittedly, it must have taken a lot of determination, self-confidence, and resistance to adversity to emerge from the ghetto unscathed, and with tenacity. Although in dire straits, these men had dreams, Monroe insists, but circumstances “checkmated” their hopes, and they were faced with the “inescapable fact of [their] blackness.”¹³ The imagined black public sphere was a fertile terrain for mobilization and organization, not for labor.

Mainstream US newspapers and sociological studies in the 1960s pointed to facts and figures, but they regularly failed to represent African Americans as they really were. Although it may be argued that the media sketch

“imagined communities,”¹⁴ sociology leads to abstraction. This point raised by Roberta S. Maguire in her discussion of Albert Murray’s “anti-journalism” is the exact starting point of “Brothers.” Murray denounced the overreliance of journalists on survey data in his polemical *Omni-Americans* (1970), arguing that it led to representations of African Americans as “overly generalized and overwhelmingly negative, rendering blacks as culturally deprived ghetto inhabitants with abnormal family structures.”¹⁵

This view is shared by Monroe, who does not deny the important role of sociology, but who sees narrative journalism as the missing link to fully grasp the subjects under examination. The University of Chicago boasted a sociology department¹⁶ that carried out in-the-field research and interviews, but sociology studies ran the risk of either romanticizing or pathologizing the ghetto. Likewise, Carlo Rotella notes that “[t]he field observers at the Chicago School practiced a kind of theoretically informed anecdotal reportage making for a markedly journalistic and even novelistic brand of social science.”¹⁷ Therefore, we may be misled to believe that sociologists who spread gloom and doom about public housing were right to posit a “permanent” black underclass for whom geography was destiny. In the final analysis, *Honk or Half-Man*, some of the characters in *Brothers*, certainly approximate what it means to grow up as men-children in inner cities, but behind the façade there exist subtle personalities that challenge sociological generalizations.

Maguire recalls that *Newsweek* “pioneered social science methodology with their cover story ‘The Negro in America,’”¹⁸ released two decades before “Brothers.” Then-editor Osborn Elliott was behind the twenty-three-page reportage and twelve-point program for the advancement of blacks.¹⁹ This special issue was a continuation of another cover story published in 1963, researched by forty reporters who conducted 1,250 interviews.²⁰ The 1967 story was also Peter Goldman’s breakthrough, Monroe explains. The magazine was a trailblazer in its poignant advocacy of black people’s rights²¹ and in its hiring of African American journalists. “Brothers,” as published in the March 23, 1987, issue, participated in that effort to address racial injustices, twenty years later. It was innovative in inviting black people from the ghetto to tell their stories in their own voices, instead of alienating them as third persons. The report was poised for a voyage beyond figures: it aimed at making readers “see [the subjects] whole, as men, not statistics, with all the strengths, weaknesses, hopes and vanities that are part of the human condition.”²² The choice of a direct approach to subjects was predicated upon a willingness to collect insiders’ accounts of specific urban realities.

Hence this quite remarkable collection of personal narratives. By refraining from any abusive authorial intrusion in the text, Monroe—and Gold-

man, for that matter—took their cue from Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, the following quotation from which served as the epigraph to *Brothers*: "When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me."²³ In giving voice and substance to real-life subjects, the authors granted them more than a presence and a visibility: they engaged in communicative action. Ideally, speech acts should lead to transformative politics, a point I shall come back to later. "The Black public sphere puts engagement, competition and exchange in the place of resistance, and uses performativity to capture audiences, Black and White, for things fashioned through Black experience," write Arjun Appadurai et al.²⁴ In this instance, *Newsweek* offered a powerful forum. Albeit a part of the mainstream media with massively white audiences, the now-defunct print magazine had a long history of black advocacy and worked hard to promote change.

LITERARINESS AND NARRATIVE PROCESS

As Barbara Foley, in her discussion of the "centrality of the documentary mode" to black literature, stipulates, "One significant tradition . . . predates the contemporary nonfiction novel, but it has not yet been duly acknowledged as a legitimate forebear—namely, that body of literature which focuses on Afro-American experience."²⁵ Foley accordingly asserts that the lack of consideration of these texts is a glaring omission; they are essential in fuelling theoretical debates in the discipline of literary journalism and should therefore be designated as seminal texts. Nonfiction, Foley further argues, has always been a staple in black literature, precisely because historical veracity has constantly been challenged and questioned. *Brothers* not only fits in this long tradition of nonfiction and the documentary mode; it is also a remarkable breakthrough to inform primarily white audiences not just about black realities but, more importantly, about social realities from a black perspective. In other words, the text offers a self-definitional counternarrative to discourses on the ghetto and attempts to define the Chicago projects "from the inside out," in a manner reminiscent of Gwendolyn Brooks's *In the Mecca* (1968), although in a journalistic fashion.²⁶ *Brothers* continues a tradition that fosters "investigation into the language of social identity and citizenship"²⁷ and thereby contributes to historicizing black experiences through reportage.

With *Brothers*, Monroe, Goldman, and their reporting team innovated by producing a collaborative work of narrative journalism that conferred a sense of agency and immediacy to their subjects. "The form of the book is ours; the content, and the language, are theirs,"²⁸ the authors explained. Their outlook entailed an enormous challenge: their subjects would have to trust them, and in return, they would have to "honor that trust."²⁹ The overall re-

porting, which mingled observation and participation, spanned four months, with repeated visits and calls. Each reporter was assigned various tasks and worked on a number of files. They repeatedly asked the men how they felt about some issues, or what they did in given circumstances. Jacques Chenet, the photographer, spent considerable time with the brothers before taking pictures, the “product of patient photojournalism.”³⁰

The subjects agreed to take part in the story mainly because nobody had ever cared about what they thought, or even bothered to ask. Confidence progressively built up, resulting in their telling stories rather than answering questions.³¹ Therein lay the key to this subtle weaving of yarns into a coherent narrative: by asking them how they felt in particular situations, the journalists insured that the project would become a powerful story in which the authenticity of the language was kept intact. “Because so much of what they are saying is conveyed in the language,” Monroe adds, the *Newsweek* team was concerned “not to lose the lyricism of that language.”³² The same goes for the subjects’ sense of humor and self-mockery, in spite of the dark circumstances.

The *Newsweek* team eschewed the pitfall of overreliance on sources, thanks to Monroe’s presence. As an insider he was able to approach his brothers, to spell out the conditions and the framework of the reportage by making clear that interviews would eventually constitute the raw material of the final text. What did not exist in the interviews would not be part of the story, Monroe explained. He called himself “the conduit,” the “thread” that led to the subjects, the “benchmark” from which the main protagonists “started to build up and down, sideways,” to reveal the stories.³³

Monroe confesses that he chose not to write the story of one man, Roy Johnson, because he knew him too well. Concerned about the necessity to keep some distance in such an undertaking, he focused on other subjects, other brothers, with whom he had not been so close.³⁴ Subjectivity was a dilemma for Monroe, who questioned his own involvement in these accounts. But the paradox was that without the foregrounded presence of Monroe—Vest, in the story—the reportage could not have materialized. At the same time, some of the staff at *Newsweek* believed that African American reporters could not be regarded as objective agents if they covered black people. As Monroe recalls it, “[T]he catch-22 was that it [was] because we were black that we could go,”³⁵ a contradiction that reinforces the argument that subjectivity—in this case, Monroe’s personal commitment to his subject—brings the reader closer to the truth of inner-city black reality.

My contention is that *Brothers* is a significant example of African American literary journalism.³⁶ Multiple points of view, unfiltered voices, social status details, scene-by-scene constructions, and vernacular dialogue mark it as

literary journalism. In addition, the photos add visual and humanistic value to the story. “Literary journalists recognize the need for a consciousness on the page through which the objects in view are filtered,”³⁷ Norman Sims has observed. That is exactly what *Brothers* purported to do: to have readers get a sense of what it was like to live in the Robert Taylor Homes.

As David Lionel Smith observed, the text “offer[ed] a corrective to negative accounts about black men” at the time and also provide[d] personal accounts and evaluations of their living conditions. However, he lamented the fact that too many intermediaries encumbered the writing process and jeopardized this alleged “first-person testimony.”³⁸ Admittedly, the collective agency of the book rested on *Newsweek’s* authority, but inferring that the story rested on a diluted false objectivity deprives *Brothers* of due recognition. On the contrary, the juxtaposition of points of view and the combination of voices—including that of *Newsweek’s* reporters and editor—nullified the argument that the African American population was a sociological problem best kept at bay. Limiting such subjects to the black press then would have meant missing an opportunity to join the national, or even global, conversation—as such limiting would today.

COMMUNICATIVE ACTION AND PERFORMATIVE EFFECT

*B*rothers thus pioneered a new type of collaborative journalism that would not only raise people’s awareness, but also provide the wherewithal to conflate intimate and public spheres, and hence to promote social action. Presenting readers with a corrective to the negative representation of blacks and sensitizing readers to the irrational segregation and overcrowding of individuals denied opportunity because of race is one thing. Galvanizing them into action is another matter. By “giving a voice” to the main protagonists, by taking the readers “inside” the story, the text becomes an antidote to indifference. Monroe emphasizes the “transformative” power of *Brothers*, not only for the readers, but also for the journalists who spent four months embedded at the Robert Taylor Homes. Prejudice and biases dissolve as soon as one becomes part of the story, be it as a subject, as a reporter, or as a reader.

By presenting a collective account that was the result of collaborative work between journalists and subjects, *Brothers* broke through some of the barriers that separated the observers from the participants, not just poor blacks from mainstream reporters, but also readers. Such a joint venture among a major publication with a mainstream white audience, a team of primarily black reporters, and urban black dwellers of housing projects provides a plurality of views of African American existence and experiences from within the black public sphere. *Brothers* is testimony from a community that took the brunt

of Reaganism.³⁹ The significance of these polyvocal micro-stories resides in their everyday quality and the venue in which they appeared. As such, these stories rarely made the headlines of mainstream newspapers. The black press extensively documented racial injustices and the trials and tribulations of ordinary folks.⁴⁰ In this particular instance *Newsweek* also devoted its columns to minor characters striving to survive in their hostile environments.

Monroe's role was instrumental in getting the stories from Trey-nine. He benefited from a twofold agency: as a *Newsweek* reporter and a former resident of the Robert Taylor Homes, he acted as a linchpin between two worlds and thereby endowed the project with a double legitimacy. The access to the projects that Monroe provided to a major magazine allowed for a rare insider view. The story was thus mediated by a former resident who eventually made his way out of the ghetto. Monroe's dual identity indicates that understanding the ghetto's lifeworld is only possible as an insider. Similarly, it suggests that participation in the discursive activities of the public sphere at large, that is, via *Newsweek*, is essential to produce creative ideas and engage in provocative debates.

What Monroe is effectively saying when he refers to his role as a "conduit" recalls Catherine R. Squires's discussion of the difficulties shaping a black public sphere, that is, a "marginal," "historically oppressed" group of African Americans, which she equates with Nancy Fraser's "subaltern counterpublics."⁴¹ The mediated voices from the Taylor projects made an interesting foray into the dominant media sphere: vernacular voices were not totally substituted for established journalese; rather, they coexisted with this corporate language. The success of such a writing project, albeit relative, is measured by the "ties . . . to political actors in the state and dominant sphere, and the ability to construct effective vehicles of publicity."⁴² The fashioning of the ghetto residents' experiences into an intelligible text personifying their ordeals was a worthwhile endeavor.

The reception of *Brothers* was excellent, according to Monroe. Sadly enough, this collective journalism that *Newsweek* initiated in the 1960s is hardly possible today. The magazine gave Monroe and his fellow reporters time to investigate their topic and know their subjects. Very few magazines and papers can still afford to dispatch reporters for fairly long periods of time. Monroe cites a few venues hospitable to long pieces of journalism in the African American press: the *Root* (<http://www.theroot.com>), the *Amsterdam News*, the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, the regrettably defunct *Emerge* and *Chicago Defender*. *Black Scholar* and *Black Enterprise* are also relevant sources, as well as *Ebony*, *Heart and Soul*, and *Essence*, which mainly target women.⁴³

Monroe was asked to provide a sequel to *Brothers*. He does have such a project in the pipeline, but it is not about his childhood. His forthcoming book, *The Class of 73: The Price of Success*, deals with his experience as a Harvard student, and with “this constant dull pain” of “isolation” inherent in blackness. Monroe explains that in the wake of Martin Luther King’s assassination, the doors were opened to black students in colleges and universities across the country. When he joined Harvard in 1969, “127 students out of 1,500 were black,” the highest number ever (compared to seventy the year before). This watershed moment marked “the beginning expansion of the black educated middle class outside of black campuses.” Monroe’s *Class of 73* will reveal the obstacles he and his black classmates had to overcome on their path to a successful career.⁴⁴

Although Monroe laments that “[t]oo much melanin always seemed to spoil the stew”⁴⁵ in the American melting pot, he also recognizes that his blackness granted him his big breaks in his journalism career. He followed Jesse Jackson when he was a little-known civil rights activist. When Jackson started campaigning in the 1983 presidential primaries and, hence, became a magnet for the media, Monroe instantly became a national political reporter. He does not support the proprietary idea of a “black press” solely for African Americans, but he is positive that a black perspective on current events is necessary.

Monroe is adamant that (literary) journalism can bring about change, to wit, some of the positive repercussions of the Rodney King story. This terrible incident led to substantial reforms in the Los Angeles police and improved relationships with the local communities. Telling people stories can thus bring catharsis and get people to act for the well-being of society. The purpose of *Brothers*, however, was to bring into contact individuals from two different public spheres for a fruitful collaboration. Such a communicative act likely yielded some new discursive practices. But the concrete effects on the black spatial sphere, which should have derived from the performative nature of the Taylor projects’ residents’ testimonies, were almost nonexistent. Monroe’s reluctance to write a follow-up to *Brothers*, and his 2012 article in the *Root*—“Economic Mobility in Chicago’s Projects,” which is a testament that poverty and violence are still rampant—bespeak the ineffectiveness of political reforms and even the continued absence of opportunities. On the other hand, Monroe contributed “Vital Signs: The Black Male” to another volume combining words and images, *Songs of My People* (1992). In displaying extremely positive—textual and photographic—representations of members of the black community, the aim of this volume was to protest the continued unfair treatment of African Americans.⁴⁶

As Squires astutely remarks, one should bear in mind that two types of action—discursive and political—traverse the public sphere. *Brothers* caused a stir in 1987, but this participant journalism did not yield a true revolutionary racial advancement on the social and economic fronts. Nevertheless, talking about a failure of the US black public sphere at large would be erroneous, as there are many subgroups and fields in which huge progress has been made, such as in politics with the election of President Barack Obama. Besides, Squires is right to point to the diversity and complexity of the black public sphere, which should not be considered a homogeneous entity, hence her proposal to refer to “multiple Black publics.”⁴⁷

The very last line of *Brothers*, though, ironically points to the sentiment of failure and abandonment: “But he [Monroe] lived in a larger world. Trey-nine was not so much where he belonged as where he was from.”⁴⁸ This final sentence conflates a strong connection to his brothers and a distance from his former community. But more importantly, Monroe himself, a spokesman for one of these many “Black publics,” is still an active journalist totally committed to his cause. As such, he was and still is an agent of change, pointing to the difficult existence of those who made headway, sometimes fell off the social ladder, revised their aspirations downward, or relativized their American dreams. The very existence of *Brothers*, first as a story in *Newsweek* and later in book format, shows that Monroe may indeed be living in “a larger world” than the one he initially belonged to. More significantly, though, it is evidence that the African American journalist has adopted a trajectory aimed at blurring the boundaries between different public spheres. Monroe’s “strategic essentialism,”⁴⁹ to borrow Spivak’s household term, that is, his taking on various subaltern positions—as an African American journalist working for the black and the mainstream press, as a child in a Chicago ghetto and as a student at Harvard University—is a powerful incentive to renegotiate the limits of our public spheres and evaluate the space available for empowering the black community.

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An Interview with Sylvester Monroe

by Isabelle Meuret

Award-winning journalist Sylvester Monroe is a senior editor for *Marketplace*, a US Public Media radio show. He also contributes to a great number of papers and magazines including the *Root* (the-root.com) and *Ebony*, where he became a senior editor in 2006. His career began at *Newsweek* in 1973, as a correspondent in Boston, then Chicago, where he was deputy bureau chief. In Washington, Monroe was a national and White House correspondent. He joined *Time* magazine in 1989 as a Los Angeles correspondent. He graduated from Harvard University in 1973 and was on a professional journalism fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities at Stanford University in 1979–80. His career highlights in journalism are



Brothers: Black and Poor—A True Story of Courage and Survival, coauthored with Peter Goldman (1988), which is the extended version of a story published in 1987 in *Newsweek*, as well as reporting on Jesse Jackson, Rodney King, the LA riots, Louis Farrakhan, and President Barack Obama. Among other things, he is currently working on a sequel to *Brothers*, entitled *The Class of 73: The Price of Success*.

The interview that follows was conducted by Isabelle Meuret with Sylvester Monroe while he was in Atlanta and she was in Brussels. He agreed to have the conversation following their email exchanges on October 3, 2012.

THE CASE OF *BROTHERS*: AN INTERVIEW

Isabelle Meuret: I tremendously enjoyed your moving multimedia story for *Marketplace* (August 17, 2012), in which you provide an account of your visit to your childhood home in Chicago, the now-defunct housing project called the Robert Taylor Homes, which was central to *Brothers*. This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of its publication, first in *Newsweek*, and then in book format. You must have had mixed feelings when getting back there: the joy of returning to a place called home, the sadness to see that the “high hopes of a new urban generation” never materialized.

Sylvester Monroe: Indeed, I returned with mixed emotions. In fact, I have been asked many times to update the story of the “Brothers.” But, increasingly it is not a happy story. But it remains an important one that still resonates today in how so little has changed for the better among so many people who live in public housing.

Meuret: This web documentary is a good opportunity to reexamine the genesis of your project and evaluate the reception of *Brothers*. The story was written in 1987: How was it received by *Newsweek* readers at the time? Was it an eye-opener?

Monroe: In 1987, *Brothers* offered a rare, unfiltered glimpse into the lives of a microcosmic group of young black Americans *Newsweek* readers almost never got to see or hear from firsthand. It was extremely well received, one of the best-selling issues of that year, which was recognized by many other media outlets, including the *Today Show*, Oprah Winfrey, Phil Donahue, and National Public Radio, to name just a few.

Meuret: *Brothers* is a *collaborative* piece of *documentary* work. How did you come up with that idea of producing a collective reportage? Apart from the fact that you wanted to give a voice to those who were silenced and invisible, was the choice of this format—that is, a collective account mediated by a former resident of the Robert Taylor Homes and *Newsweek* journalist—particularly innovative in 1987? What were the main obstacles in the creative process?

Monroe: It was cutting edge at the time, particularly for mainstream journalism. Collaborative, or “group,” journalism was the very definition of what we practiced back in the 1980s. The idea was to bring a lot of resources from around the country to focus—sometimes as in *Brothers*—on a particular place, event, or issue as a way of telling a larger story that resonated beyond the particular focus of the story. What was innovative was trying to tell the guys’ stories in their own voices without filtering them through a sociological or spokesperson’s prism. The biggest obstacle was convincing the top editors of *Newsweek* that it would sell. But our best argument for it was past history, and the fact that our editor and chief scribe was *Newsweek*’s principal cover writer, Peter Goldman.

Peter was head of the *Newsweek* special projects team, which had pioneered the groundbreaking approach of in-depth reporting that was so detailed it could produce fiction-like narrative journalism. The special projects team had done two other such projects before *Brothers*. One was called *Charlie Company: What Vietnam Did to Us*. The other was an in-depth retrospective look at a Middle American city in Ohio called Springfield. The cover story marked *Newsweek*’s fiftieth anniversary. Several major newspapers adopted this approach after the success of *Brothers* elevated it to a new level.

Meuret: What do you have to say to David L. Smith, who reviewed the book and objected to 1) the fact that the protagonists do not really express themselves, but rather were spoken for, and hence, remained representations; and 2) the fact that there were too many intermediaries, with *Brothers* then reflecting “the ‘authority’ of the corporation” (*Newsweek*), rather than the “integrity of a writer”?⁵¹

Monroe: *Brothers* was exactly the opposite of what he describes. In fact, *Brothers* was so groundbreaking in this regard that shortly after it was published, the new Washington bureau chief of *Newsweek*, a traditional news-magazine journalist who came from *Time*, remarked to me that he thought *Brothers* was a “good read” but that “it had no point.” He said if he had edited it, he would have opened the package with a six-column preface explaining “what those black guys were talking about.” I told him that *Brothers* was so successful precisely because we had not followed the normal news-magazine template and done that. *Brothers* is essentially long-form journalism that uses detailed, in-depth reporting to create a fiction-like, but completely factual narrative.

Meuret: It is my contention that the book is a good candidate for what

we call literary journalism, because it aims at bringing together the subjectivity of the readers closer to that of the “characters.” Also, it combines aesthetic and ethical qualities. Literary journalism has the advantage of making you “look” at facts, but also “feel” the facts. Is that the objective you hoped to reach?

Monroe: Exactly. We didn’t want to just *tell* readers what it was like to live in the Robert Taylor Homes. We wanted them to *hear, feel, see, touch, taste* and *smell* it firsthand from the people who lived there.

Meuret: How are facts and fiction intertwined in *Brothers*? Is fiction totally absent, or are there some imagined elements? For instance, are there composite characters, or did they all exist as such? Were colloquial language and pictures essential elements to make the stories “real”?

Monroe: *Brothers* is entirely a work of nonfiction. There are no fictional or composite characters. The voices are real. We did not edit them to make them any more or less “colloquial” than they are. And the photos taken by the late *Newsweek* staff photographer Jacques Chenet enhanced the realism.

Meuret: Would you say that multimedia is also going in that direction? Can literary or magazine journalism go online without running the risk of losing some of the “literariness,” or literary quality of texts? Does the combination of sound (interview, music), photography, and words bring an added value inasmuch as they bring a sense of immediacy unattainable via print only?

Monroe: I believe that digital media offer great opportunities for literary journalism. There is also the tremendous potential for producing shallow material with an eye more on quantity than quality.

Meuret: Do you believe in the power of (literary) journalism to bring about social change? The *Voices of Witness* series, which you may be familiar with, is very popular. But how can these documents galvanize people into action? It takes time to move from attention to action. Do you believe in the power of literature—or literary journalism—to change mentalities?

Monroe: I most definitely do. It’s why I became a journalist. People connect with people through the stories we tell about them. The more powerful and touching the stories, the better we are able to move and change. Through *Brothers*, people who had never been to the Taylor Homes, or never even

thought much about them, looked at the lives of the people who lived there much differently than they did before reading their stories. The fact that you are talking to me about this twenty-five years after the book was published is proof in itself of the power of literary journalism.

Meuret: Objectivity is a lure; journalism is inevitably subjective. Yet it is not what is being taught in journalism schools. The subjective voice and multiple points of view are characteristics of literary journalism, as are full dialogues and status details (features that are found in *Brothers*). Was it a dilemma for you to be an active participant in the story?

Monroe: Yes, I was torn about just how much I should be in the story. Peter Goldman convinced me that beyond my first-person introduction, I could and should be the binding thread connecting the individual “*Brothers*” to the central theme of the book. He was right, and it worked beautifully. He interviewed me for the italicized precedes in my voice at the beginning of each chapter.

SYLVESTER MONROE’S CAREER IN JOURNALISM

Meuret: You have an impressive career as a journalist, and have contributed to many different papers and magazines, including *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Ebony*, the *Root* and now *Marketplace*, a national public radio show (to name just a few). Was the move from *Time* and *Newsweek* to *Ebony* and the *Root* a way for you to reaffirm your black identity and give more visibility to African American journalism?

Monroe: As journalism continues to evolve, my movements have been more a means of reinventing myself as a journalist to meet the changing demands of the times than any affirmation or reaffirmation of black identity. I have never wanted to be the “black reporter” or tried to promote “African American journalism.” Rather, I have tried to bring an African American perspective to mainstream American journalism and have that perspective viewed as just as American as any other.

Meuret: You covered stories that were “historical,” like the LA riots, the trials of Rodney King, the portrait of Louis Farrakhan, and of course Obama’s election. Did you have to insist to be offered these opportunities, or are you “typecast” as the person who can talk about black issues and people?

Monroe: Like many African American journalists of my era, much of the opportunity I have had has come from being in the right place at the right time and filling a need. And yes, part of it has been and continues to be that we are perceived as being able to go places and speak to people nonblack reporters cannot.

Meuret: With some hindsight on your career, would you say that African Americans are now, at long last, offered more visibility and positive representations? Were there key moments in that evolution? Or is the road ahead still very long? Knowing that by 2050, the so-called minorities will be the new majority, which changes do you expect to see happen?

Monroe: I would definitely say that we have come a long way from the days when the only place to read anything positive about African Americans in the news media was in the black press. But that said, it is still very much a work in progress. Stories about poor black people and poverty in general are not as prevalent in some media as they once were. The new “hot” minority is now Hispanics. That is reflected not just in story selection but also in the racial makeup of news organization staffs. There were about a half-dozen black correspondents at *Newsweek* when I started in 1973. Today, there are none. Same for *Time*. Black journalists are also leaving the business in alarming numbers. So, I am not at all certain what 2050 is likely to look like.

Meuret: Are the *Root* and *Ebony* read exclusively by African Americans? What can be done to sensitize other readers to the important issues presented in these venues?

Monroe: The *Root* and *Ebony* and most other African American publications still have predominantly black audiences. However, I have believed for a long time that in order to survive they must begin to position themselves as sources of stories and ideas from African American perspectives that are of interest to all Americans and people outside the US as well.

ON RACE AND THE NEW JIM CROW LAWS

Meuret: Your story published in the *Root*, about Los Angeles and the possibility that riots could still happen—maybe not in LA, but elsewhere—is supported by some sad evidence, such as the case of Trayvon Martin, a young victim of a racially charged assault. You conclude that “what has not changed in two decades is continued excessive force against black males (and females)

by law enforcement officers.” Could you elaborate on this? Will there be a backlash?

Monroe: I cannot predict how people will react to the verdict in the Trayvon Martin case. But I can say that there is great ongoing concern about the underlying issues of the case, including excessive use of police force against young black males.

Meuret: The election in 2008 of President Obama showed that America had come a long way. The whole world watched in awe and was really impressed to see the first African American president take his oath in Washington. Hope and change were in the air. Have things changed dramatically when it comes to racial prejudice?

Monroe: The short answer is yes and no. The election of the first African American president of the United States is a huge step forward for this country. But make no mistake. It should in no way be taken as evidence that we have entered a postracial era in this country. Race remains as much a part of the American psyche as it did in the days when Alex de Tocqueville predicted it would be the most intractable problem this country would ever face. It remains so. Just look at the 2012 presidential election. The choice is as much about race as political ideology and economics.

Meuret: Michelle Alexander’s book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010) highlights that discrimination is still rampant, to wit, the number of blacks in jails. She denounces the overrepresentation of African Americans under correctional control, a number that is higher than that of the slaves in 1850. In *Brothers*, the absence of fathers struck me as an ineffable void. Is the color line still very present in American society, or is it maybe even worse because it is now invisible and behind the closed doors of prisons?

Monroe: You are correct. Much of the “racism” African Americans experience today is now structural or embedded in the way we experience many of our basic institutions. In reality, it is not black people who hold on to race or racialism. We would be the first in line to let it go when it is no longer used against us.

NOTES

1. Sylvester Monroe, "Economic Mobility in Chicago's Projects," *Marketplace*, August 17, 2012. <http://www.marketplace.org/topics/wealth-poverty/economic-mobility-chicagos-projects>.

2. Nicholas Lemann has written about the Robert Taylor Homes and other housing projects in his book *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Vintage, 1991). On Lemann, see also Norman Sims, "Writing Literary History . . . *The Promised Land*, and *The Big Test*, an interview with author Nicholas Lemann," *Literary Journalism Studies* 3, no.1 (Spring 2011): 9–31.

3. Sylvester Monroe, Skype interview by Isabelle Meuret, October 3, 2012.

4. Sylvester Monroe and Peter Goldman, *Brothers: Black and Poor—A True Story of Courage and Survival*, 3rd ed. (1988; New York: Ballantine, 1990), 145. The material was first published as a series in the March 23, 1987, issue of *Newsweek* and then expanded for the book.

5. "Trey-nine was shorthand for 3919 South Federal Street, the northernmost in a two-mile Stonehenge of red-and-cream brick high rises called the Robert Taylor Homes in memory of the first black director of the Chicago Housing Authority." Monroe and Goldman, *Brothers*, 21.

6. *Ibid.*, 197.

7. Goldman, foreword, *Brothers*, xii.

8. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1985).

9. Monroe, Skype interview.

10. Houston Baker, "Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere," *Public Culture* 3 (1994): 13.

11. Monroe and Goldman, *Brothers*, 23.

12. Goldman, foreword, *Brothers*, xii. The "slice of life" expression was first used by Stephen Crane in *Stephen Crane, Letters*, eds. R. W. Stallman and Lillian B. Guilkes (New York: New York University Press, 1960), quoted in Thomas Connery, *A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism: Representative Writers in an Emerging Genre* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1992), 7.

13. Monroe and Goldman, *Brothers*, x, 197.

14. I am here referring to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983; London: Verso, 2006), in which he argues that the press contributes to creating the idea of nationalism. People are led to believe that they belong to a community because they consume the same cultural products. The development of the press contributed to that process.

15. Roberta S. Maguire, "Riffing on Hemingway and Burke, Responding to Mailer and Wolfe: Albert Murray's 'Anti-Journalism,'" *Literary Journalism Studies* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 11.

16. Lemann mentions William Julius Wilson, a prominent sociologist working at the University of Chicago from 1972 to 1996. See Norman Sims, "Writing Literary History," 26.

17. Carlo Rotella, *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 51.
18. Maguire, "Riffing on Hemingway and Burke," 11. The *Newsweek* piece, published in 1967, had a subtitle: "The Negro in America: What Must Be Done."
19. Michael Kaufmann, "Osborn Elliott, Father of *Newsweek's* Rebirth, Dies at 83," *New York Times*, September 29, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/29/business/media/29elliott.html?pagewanted=print>.
20. Owen Matthews, "Who Killed *Newsweek*?" *The Spectator*, December 29, 2012. <http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/8802851/who-killed-newsweek/>.
21. Monroe, Skype interview.
22. Monroe and Goldman, *Brothers*, xii.
23. Peter Goldman, foreword, *Brothers*, ix.
24. Arjun Appadurai et al., "Editorial Comment: On Thinking the Black Public Sphere," *Public Culture* 7 (1997): xii.
25. Barbara Foley, "History, Fiction, and the Ground Between: The Uses of Documentary Mode in Black Literature," *PMLA* 95, no. 3 (May 1980): 390.
26. Carole K. Doreski, *Writing America Black: Race Rhetoric in the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), xxii. For a thorough discussion of Gwendolyn Brooks's *In the Mecca*, see chapter 5, "Reportage as Redemption," 119–44.
27. Doreski, *Writing America Black*, xiv.
28. Monroe and Goldman, *Brothers*, xi–xii.
29. *Ibid.*, xi.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Monroe, Skype interview.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*
36. Kerrane and Yagoda included Monroe in their anthology of literary journalism. See Kevin Kerrane and Ben Yagoda, eds., *The Art of Fact: A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism* (1997; New York: Touchstone, 1998), 204–11.
37. Norman Sims, *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism*, foreword Ted Conover (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 7.
38. David Lionel Smith, "Brothers: Black and Poor: A True Story of Courage and Survival by Sylvester Monroe; Peter Goldman; Vern E. Smith; Terry E. Johnson; Monroe Anderson; Jacques Chenet," review, *Journal of American Ethnic History* 10, no. 4 (Summer 1991), 125.
39. On poverty and racism under Ronald Reagan, see Manning Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945–1982* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), in particular chapter 7: "Reaction: The Demise of the Second Reconstruction: 1976–1942," 168–69.
40. See, for instance, *Reporting Civil Rights* (Library of America, 2003).
41. Catherine R. Squires, "Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres," *Communication Theory* 12, no. 4 (November 2002), 450.

42. Ibid., 457.

43. Monroe, Skype interview. For further reading on the black press in the Internet age, see Juan González and Joseph Torres, “Controlling the Means of Transmission: Old Media’s Fall and New Media’s Rise,” in *News for All the People: The Epic Story of Race and the American Media* (London: Verso, 2011), 343–78, and Anna Everett, “The Black Press in the Age of Digital Reproduction: Two Exemplars,” in *The Black Press: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Todd Vogel (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press: 2001), 244–57.

44. Lemann also mentions that back in the 1970s the Harvard admissions officer, David Evans, was black. On that subject, he refers to *Choosing Elites* (New York: Basic, 1985) by Robert Klitgaard, which tackles the soaring numbers of African American students in the late 1960s and early 1970s at prestigious US universities such as Harvard and Stanford. Monroe arrived at Harvard in fall 1969; Lemann was admitted in fall 1972. See Norman Sims, “Writing Literary History,” 15.

45. Sylvester Monroe, “Vest: An Introduction by Sylvester Monroe,” in *Brothers*, 9.

46. Sylvester Monroe, “Vital Signs: The Black Male,” in *Songs of My People: African Americans: A Self-Portrait*, eds. Eric Easter, D. Michael Cheers and Dudley M. Brooks (Boston: Little, Brown, 1992), 29–31.

47. Squires, “Rethinking the Black Public Sphere,” 453, 454.

48. Monroe and Goldman, *Brothers*, 270.

49. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988).

50. The author wishes to thank François Heinderyckx, professor in journalism studies at the Université libre de Bruxelles and president 2013–2014 of the International Communication Association, as well as Christine Larrazet, associate professor at Université Bordeaux 2, for bringing Sylvester Monroe’s *Brothers* to her attention.

51. David Lionel Smith, review of *Brothers: Black and Poor—A True Story of Courage and Survival*, by Sylvester Monroe and Peter Goldman, *Journal of American Ethnic History* 10, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 124–26.