



Marilynne Robinson speaking at the Covenant Fine Arts Center during an interview at the 2012 Festival of Faith and Writing at Calvin College. Photo by Christian Scott Heinen Bell.

Banned in Britain: Marilynne Robinson's Environmental Literary Journalism

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Abstract: Although considered one of the world's most distinguished living authors for her novels, Marilynne Robinson consistently regards her relatively underappreciated, nonfictional 1989 *Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State, and Nuclear Pollution* as her magnum opus. Few are aware that a twenty-five-year gap (1980–2005) separated her first and second novels, during which she ardently pursued the craft of nonfiction prose. As the crowning achievement of that period, *Mother Country* ranks among the environmental movement's most radical works, notable for its unprecedented assault on Great Britain's nuclear program. Like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Robinson's environmental literary journalism builds on the genre's method of civic engagement. Her writing blends artfulness and moral insight and deploys a representational and discursive strategy for social critique that features shocking imagery and tropes of pastoral apocalypse. This study argues that these staples of "toxic discourse" on the effects of pollution situate Robinson with literary journalists who build upon Carson's socioenvironmental approach, which exposes the toll of rampant and unfettered industrial waste. The study is important because it highlights a largely forgotten yet invaluable contribution to environmental literary journalism. *Mother Country* is a work that not only elicited a major lawsuit for libel against Robinson but was also subsequently pulped and banned in Britain. Robinson's achievement stands out for its indictments of corruption on behalf of government and industry perpetrated through the media.

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Although known mainly for her fiction, Marilynne Robinson dedicated a major portion of her prime years to the craft of nonfiction prose during the twenty-five-year gap (1980–2005) between her first two novels, *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*. Committed to the “real world, that is really dying,” Robinson’s literary journalism marked the first decade of that period with *Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State and Nuclear Pollution*, a work banned in Britain and listed as a finalist for the National Book Award for Nonfiction in 1989.¹ The book targets the British government’s attempts to “[manage] public reaction” to its “radioactive contamination of the world’s environment.”² This objective serves the text’s larger goal to “break down some of the structures of thinking that make reality invisible to us.”³ “A bookish woman like myself,” as she described herself, “with a long, quiet life behind her, has few opportunities to shock, even scandalize, and that is part of the appeal” of her assault on the British nuclear program.⁴

Like Rachel Carson’s 1962 environmental classic *Silent Spring*, which developed from her *New Yorker* series revealing the impact of pesticides on humans and wildlife, *Mother Country* began as activist longform journalism published in *Harper’s Magazine* in February 1985. Titled “Bad News from Great Britain,” Robinson’s article was an exposé, revealing more than thirty years of contamination of the Irish Sea.⁵ In the tradition of Carson, Robinson’s environmental literary journalism builds on the genre’s method of civic engagement, which John J. Pauly defines as cultural interpretation and critique through narrative strategies of “artfulness and moral insight.”⁶ As an international bestseller, Carson’s *Silent Spring* was at the forefront of her generation’s “turn toward questions of culture and away from standard categories of news coverage that no longer adequately captured that era’s sense of its own experience,” as Pauly describes the movement.⁷ David Abrahamson notes that *Silent Spring* “is often cited as one of the seminal texts of a new environmentalist awareness which emerged in the mid-twentieth century.”⁸ Decades later, in the 1980s, Robinson leveraged the “interpretive caste of literature” with “the contemporary interest of journalism,” according to Edwin Ford’s early definition of literary⁹ to expose the impact of government and industrial interests on the environment and human communities.

Within an oeuvre dominated by highly acclaimed fiction, Robinson consistently alludes to her only nonfiction book, *Mother Country*, as the proudest accomplishment of her long career.¹⁰ What is its place in the tradition of environmental literature, particularly with respect to Thoreau and Carson? What rhetorical techniques by this renowned prose stylist distinguish its writing and drive its politics? In light of the seriousness of its original impact that simultaneously elicited its banning in the United

Kingdom and placed it among the finalists for the National Book Award, the book warrants renewed critical attention. Tom Wolfe has claimed that the New Journalism was more adept than fiction and conventional news at addressing his era's social reality.¹¹ Robinson's literary nonfiction is similarly more effective than fiction and traditional journalism at capturing the full range of liabilities intrinsic to the escalating nuclear industry of the 1980s. *Mother Country* accomplishes this through representational and discursive strategies for social critique featuring shocking imagery and tropes of pastoral apocalypse, staples of "toxic discourse" on the effects of pollution.¹²

These strategies illustrate how "Robinson's solutions to problems, whether interpretive or ethical-political, usually turn on a shift in language," according to Alex Engebretson.¹³ The literary stylistics of *Mother Country* serve the larger political aesthetic behind her activist antinuclear agenda, placing it among the environmental movement's most potent assaults on the plutonium industry, one threatening enough to have sparked a series of vigorous counteroffensives from the press to the courtroom.

The following section situates Robinson's literary journalism in the tradition of activist environmental writing and theoretically frames her own journalistic alternative to mainstream British media. Next is a textual analysis of Robinson's radical rhetoric that deconstructs linguistic bias shaping Britain's neglected welfare state. Her operative literary techniques link class and empire to obfuscating reports of nuclear waste routinely pumped into the Irish Sea at the Sellafield nuclear plant on the shore of England's storied Lake District, the charming countryside that originally inspired William Wordsworth. The concluding section details the fate of Sellafield and Robinson's legacy of activist environmental journalism.

The Social Ecology of Robinson's Literary Journalism

Mother Country operates in the "social ecology"¹⁴ (or socioenvironmental) tradition of environmental literature concerned with deciphering the social and political mechanisms behind the human impact on nature. By contrast, "deep ecology" focuses on "the value of nature in and of itself," as told through narratives of self-sufficiency in the wild by authors such as Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder, and Edward Abbey.¹⁵ Influenced by Martin Heidegger, Norwegian environmentalist Arne Naess portrays deep ecology as the contemplative individualistic pursuit of meaning in nature premised in "the realization of a self that encompasses both the individual and the cosmos."¹⁶ Although it can include moments of epiphany in nature, socioenvironmental writing is concerned with exposing environmental crimes to defend the health of ecosystems. To this end, Robinson's "linguistic aestheticism deployed all

the resources of language,” as Tim Jelfs explains, but is “never simply about language” given its commitment to environmental consciousness raising.¹⁷

As with socioenvironmental works such as *Poison Spring: The Secret History of Pollution and the EPA* by E. G. Vallianatos with journalist and nonfiction writer McKay Jenkins,¹⁸ *Mother Country* exhibits the core traits of literary journalism, defined by Josh Roiland as “a genre of nonfiction writing that adheres to all the reportorial and truth-telling covenants of traditional journalism, while employing rhetorical and storytelling techniques more commonly associated with fiction.”¹⁹ Literary techniques in the journalistic storytelling²⁰ of *Mother Country* include the central symbol of the Sellafield plant as dark satanic mill; scene setting in which the idyllic English countryside is cast against the menacing encroachment of plutonium waste; the characterization of British and U.S. news consumers, scientists, and government officials; escalating class-driven conflict and tension drawing readers into the narrative; an incredulous, urgent tone; and a transparent first-person perspective. Robinson can be placed with “many of the best American nature writers” Scott Slovic identifies who have “long realized that the anecdotal imagination—the affinity for the specific, the experiential—plays an important role in our reception and expression of information about the world.”²¹ Her use of anecdotal first-person interludes is consonant with that of writers in this vein, from Henry David Thoreau²² to Barry Lopez, who, Slovic notes, “have discovered how the insertion of an occasional personal narrative, whether as a sustained structural trope or as a segue from one topic to another, can transform a dispassionate treatise”—or in this case a dry political tract—“into a lush evocative story, with the experiencing, writing self becoming an inextricable part of the subject matter.”²³ In this literary journalistic mode, the nondisclosure of one’s biases and subjectivity in nonfiction narrative is disingenuous, as Robin Hemley has argued.²⁴

Through what Norman Sims defines as a “humanistic approach to culture” in literary journalism “as compared to the scientific, abstract, or indirect approach taken by much standard journalism,”²⁵ Robinson’s literary journalism accomplishes social ecology’s objective of elucidating the social and political implications of human impacts on the environment. Traits also resonating with Sims’s definition include her attention to accuracy, responsibility, and advocacy for the interests of ordinary lives regarding the impending horrors of toxic pollution, particularly through prose emphasizing “voice . . . and attention to the symbolic realities of a story.”²⁶ By situating Sellafield in the broader context of empire and class, *Mother Country* displays the kind of thorough research into the subject’s context that Mark Kramer deems essential to narrative journalism.²⁷ Robinson’s journalistic impulse is

evident in her aim to raise the consciousness of her readers, to “cast out nets or lures . . . appropriate to snagging a bit of reality for them.”²⁸

In *Mother Country*, Robinson embraces the politically pertinent space of nonfiction as a tonic for the relatively detached realm of fiction in which she had been previously operating as a novelist. Through nonfiction, she discovers the new authorial role of service to the public good, thus assuaging the impending sense that “the worth of my own life [was] diminished by the tedious years I have spent acquiring competence in the arcana of mediocre invention,” like an expert on “some defunct comic-book hero or television series.” She casts this “grief borne home to others while I and my kind have been thus occupied” as a dereliction of duty to the public on behalf of democracy—the core principle of journalism in free societies—that “lies on my conscience like a crime.”²⁹ Hewing close to lived experience through what Hartsock describes as the literary journalistic “common sense-appeal of the shared common senses,”³⁰ *Mother Country* represents Robinson’s transformation into a public intellectual.

Mother Country shares the designation of *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson’s landmark 1962 indictment of pesticide use, as a “classic example of literary nonfiction designed to raise public consciousness,” a concern deemed valuable due to its “potential for political influence,” according to Scott Slovic.³¹ Carson’s biographer Priscilla Coit Murphy points out that “writing nonfiction to inform and raise public consciousness locates the work of such books” as Carson’s—and Robinson’s, as is argued here—“squarely in the same tradition as periodical journalism.”³² Beginning with her *Harper’s* piece, writing for political influence demanded a new understanding of language for Robinson. What was only abstract metaphor in her fiction took on the heft of lived experience in her turn to literary journalism sometime during the early 1980s. It was then, as Jelfs aptly illustrates, that she looked up from her fiction to discover a real world “in which the durability of a certain species of discarded matter—plutonium waste—is not a metaphorical proposition, but a state-sanctioned fact of everyday life.”³³

Anticipating slow journalism’s signature technique that “enacts a critique of the limitations and dangers” of mainstream news,³⁴ Robinson applies her socioenvironmental approach. For her, social and political change “begins with consciousness and language, flowing out from the mind and into the wider culture,” as Engebretson notes.³⁵ Equal parts advocacy and documentary journalism that “reads like a short story or a novel,” *Mother Country* is committed to making “a truth claim to phenomenal experience,”³⁶ as stated in John Hartsock’s foundational definition of literary journalism. Rather than setting out to “invent stories or otherwise actively deceive”—techniques Ted

Conover considers anathema to ethical narrative journalism,³⁷—Robinson adheres to facts and rigorous reporting to promote her environmentalist agenda. “It was largely a consequence of the experience of writing *Mother Country* that I began what amounted to an effort to re-educate myself,” Robinson recalled of this key turning point in her authorial development.³⁸

Narrative is central to environmental writing’s unique power to bring us—that is, every reader in touch with “our lives ‘out in the world,’” as Scott Slovic observes.³⁹ The reason is that “over its long course of coming to power, ecology became a narrative mode because natural science never fully rejected vernacular language,” and because environmental writing “advanced from description to advocacy after 1960, as its stories presented ethical choices that affect land and people,” as William Howarth notes.⁴⁰ Narrative description in environmental nonfiction then took on the New Journalism’s more decisive “demythification of secular myth, or the cultural and by extension personal assumptions that a society and its individuals tend to take for granted, according to Hartsock’s explanation of the movement’s aptitude for “making the familiar unfamiliar.”⁴¹ *Mother Country* similarly identifies with Ursula K. Heise’s description of the environmentalist social movement’s aim, “to reground human cultures in natural systems and whose primary pragmatic goal was to rescue a sense of the reality of environmental degradation from the obfuscations of political discourse.”⁴² Hence the dismantling of media messaging to lay bare such degradation reflected in the title “Bad News from Great Britain” of her *Harper’s* piece.

Although Carson had a passionate concern for what Nixon describes as the “complicity of the military-industrial complex in disguising toxicity, both physically and rhetorically,” her writing says little directly about empire and class.⁴³ *Mother Country* picks up where *Silent Spring* leaves off in this regard, as Robinson deals directly with empire and class via Britain’s imperialist governance that has chronically compromised the wellbeing of its poor. Robinson shares Carson’s “shift from a conservationist ideology to the more socioenvironmental outlook that has proven so enabling for environmental justice movements.”⁴⁴ Like Carson, Robinson focuses on what Nixon has called “the dubious funding of partitioned knowledge” on toxic waste and its “baleful public health implications.”⁴⁵ Robinson weds environmental literature’s concern for marginalized groups with epistemological questions “[W]hat do we know? how do we know? how do we organize this knowledge?” of the sort raised by Barry Lopez.⁴⁶ Such questions highlight undercurrents contributing to “the mentality that would produce poisonous wastes and experiment with nuclear weapons.”⁴⁷

Rhetorical inconsistencies regarding the British nuclear program during

the 1980s were particularly copious—she quips that they could “provide material for a dozen sobering volumes”—because of the Official Secrets Act. Under the Act, Robinson writes, “the British impound all government records for thirty years and then release them selectively,” making it a “crime for anyone to reveal, without authorization, any information acquired by him as a public employee.” The thirst for the truth in her narrative is intensified by the unreliability of most published contemporary histories of Britain, which “are typically undocumented, vague, lame, and opinionated or, when they are memoirs, self-serving.”⁴⁸ She situates herself here outside the realm of *opinion*, which she regards as undocumented polemic, a point reinforcing how subjectivity does not necessitate sensationalism, but can be reinforced by in-depth reporting and research. Further, hers is not a memoir either, but instead literary journalism in a censorious environment. First-person longform accounts indeed can fulfill the ethnographic and analytic approach media scholars have called for to provide the public with more accurate information.⁴⁹

Engebretson has noted the cultural privileging of fiction over nonfiction writing as a literary category because the former is more often associated with creativity and imagination, deemed “superior to the mundane, literal-mindedness of ‘journalism.’”⁵⁰ His point about the importance of nonfiction in her corpus is crucial for understanding why *Mother Country* should be considered literary: Robinson’s “intention is not for the nonfiction to supplement the fiction but rather for the nonfiction to be an equal and complementary intellectual discipline.”⁵¹ The book enters her into a tradition now continued in *Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change* by Elizabeth Kolbert, *The End of Nature* by Bill McKibben, and *Nature Noir: A Park Ranger’s Patrol in the Sierra* by Jordan Fisher Smith.⁵²

Robinson’s activist literary journalism deserves recognition for its place in the environmentalist movement. Her revelation in *Mother Country* of industrialization’s threat to the ecosystem and human health builds on the foundation of Thoreau’s 1856 *Walden* and, as mentioned, Carson’s *Silent Spring*. “Carson challenges the Food and Drug Administration (FDA),” as Priscilla Coit Murphy observes, “on the issue of contamination of consumer foodstuffs.”⁵³ Robinson is similarly guided by Carson’s “question ‘But doesn’t the government protect us from such things?’” to which Carson also answers, “‘Only to a limited extent.’”⁵⁴ *Mother Country* is an apt companion piece to John McPhee’s *The Control of Nature*, which also appeared in 1989. Focused on the desecration of America’s mightiest and most storied river, McPhee sounds a similar note in his litany of oil and chemical companies invading the shores of the Mississippi. “The industries,” he writes, “were there because of

the river,” especially its “navigational convenience and its fresh water.” Texaco, Exxon, Monsanto, and Dow Chemical among a host of others “would not, and could not, linger beside a tidal creek.” As with the proprietors of Sellafield, “for nature to take its course was simply unthinkable.” In an outraged tone resonant with Robinson’s, he envisions “the Sixth World War would do less damage to southern Louisiana. Nature, in this place, had become an enemy of the state.”⁵⁵ Since then, oppositional voices have emerged, such as Bill McKibben, editor of *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau*, and Phyllis Austin, feminist alternative press eco-journalist and coeditor of *On Wilderness: Voices from Maine*.⁵⁶ Robinson shares Carson’s belief “that the public had a fundamental ‘right to know’ ” and “should be mobilized to act to improve the system” in the spirit of Sinclair Lewis and Harriet Beecher Stowe.⁵⁷ Squarely in the tradition of radical intellectual culture, Robinson cites influential authors known for their activist journalism. Horace Greeley, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Karl Marx are among the activists who disrupted the rhythms of the news cycle with their revolutionary voices in the periodical press along with labor advocates such as Edward Bellamy. All appear in the Social Bibliography she appends to the text of *Mother Country*.⁵⁸

Robinson’s Social Bibliography is contiguous with her religious beliefs, which are central to not only her politics, but also her sense of herself as a writer. Shannon Mariotti and Joseph Lane argue that her democratic outlook is consonant with her spiritual sense that is captured in her words, “To identify sacred mystery with every individual experience, every life, giving the word its largest sense, is to arrive at *democracy as an ideal*,” her Whitman/Emerson-inspired belief, “and to accept the difficult obligation to honor others and oneself with something approaching due reverence.”⁵⁹ The practice of her narrative nonfiction craft thus redoubled her conviction, argue Mariotti and Lane, that “religion should motivate us to fight for tolerance, recognition of difference, and justice in terms of gender, class, and race.”⁶⁰ That fight, she believes, should be waged publicly for the widest audiences possible. That democratic ideal, however, often relies on the rhetorical figure of the nation, which, Tim Jelfs has argued, “[undercuts] the efficacy of [*Mother Country*’s] environmentalist critique, precisely because the true object of that critique, the dumping at sea of toxic nuclear waste, is not so much a national, as an international problem.”⁶¹ Jelfs has also argued that framing pollution practice in terms of national characteristics, in this case Britain as the title *Mother Country* indicates, renders a “peculiarly one-eyed approach to the environmental history of the United States.”⁶² The points are well taken, but tend to downplay that *Mother Country*’s central aim is not to target the national character of England so much as to hold it and nations

like it—“Is there any reason to believe the British are entirely exceptional in adopting such strategies of self-destruction?”⁶³ she asks—responsible for the hard truths behind its nuclear program, and its implications for the cancer and leukemia victims near the Sellafield plant. She is equally critical of the U.S. national character, especially the “tacit connivance of their silence” on the issue.⁶⁴ The U.S. arm of Greenpeace, further, spurned her request to help write the book, which was eventually banned in the United Kingdom because of her allegation that the British arm of the environmental group had failed to report ocean dumping.⁶⁵ The plight of the common citizen and their right to a safe environment is central to the book’s critique of the welfare state, which stands as a “protest against the marginalization of the people on the periphery of British society in the 1980s,” as Mariotti and Lane show.⁶⁶ The government’s placating use of the media to downplay the seriousness of nuclear pollution is part of a larger pattern of oppression. “Oppression,” as John S. Bak astutely points out of writing in censorious political circumstances, “has fueled the production of literary journalism as much as, if not more than, freedom has.”⁶⁷ Robinson may have approached the writing of *Mother Country* from the perspective of American literary journalists feeling, as Bak writes of them, “impunity to ramble on like a Tom Wolfe or to bite the hand that reads you like a Norman Mailer,”⁶⁸ All information in the news reports Robinson parses in *Mother Country* first “passed through a filter of official approval, simply by virtue of the workings of the Official Secrets Act and the government’s exercise of prior restraint,” or through “regular, off-the-record briefings of journalists by government, which are a major source of news.”⁶⁹

News of Her Own

Robinson’s literary technique of casting herself in the narrative dramatizes her transformation from outraged citizen to activist literary journalist. Robinson’s range of tones—from outrage to compassion to dark humor—favor shocking imagery and jarring ironic juxtapositions between official language and lived experience. *Mother Country* follows Carson’s signature method in *Silent Spring* of “presenting one aspect of the problem, providing explanations and illustrative incidents, and concluding with exhortations to acknowledge the problem and demand solutions.”⁷⁰ Like Carson, Robinson recreates imagined scenarios rooted in sociological fact fraught with threatening dramatic tension pitting an unsuspecting public at the peril of an industry and government willing to compromise its safety for profit. Unlike Carson, Robinson puts greater emphasis on representing civic life amid nuclear industry through the evidence of headline news, revisiting official versions of stories to provide meta commentary exposing their logical gaps,

manipulative twists, and ideological import. The radioactive fallout Carson figuratively compares to DDT pesticide contamination to elevate the stakes of *Silent Spring*'s truth claim is the reality Robinson unearths in *Mother Country*.

Robinson's "gift for lyricism" joins a "relish for disputation"⁷¹ in *Mother Country*, as Alex Engebretson describes it, reflecting what Bak calls literary journalism's "significant and controversial" nature. Its significance lies in its capacity to raise "our sociopolitical awareness about a disenfranchised or underprivileged people," in this case the British working class and citizens exposed to deadly radiation, while its controversial nature derives from its "emphasis on authorial voice" that can intensify reader responses.⁷² In accessible, jargon-free language, the narrative raises awareness and elevates the public discourse on industrial and environmental science then dominated by abstract, dispassionate scientific accounts and oblique mainstream media reporting in 1980s Great Britain.⁷³

Mother Country offers "an explicit reaction to the phenomenon of journalism" by providing an alternative to conventional news lacking moral conviction, a creative response Mark Canada has identified in the American literary tradition.⁷⁴ Just as Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron-Mills" and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*⁷⁵ shatter the silencing effect of conventional news, Robinson's nonfiction probes beneath the morally indifferent Sellafield headlines that drew her ire. She shares Davis and Sinclair's aim to replace deceptive mainstream media "with a particular brand of news of their own" that provides "their own forms of truth-telling in opposition to a press that, in their eyes, was failing in its role as reporter and reformer."⁷⁶ Discursive humanistic narrative was Robinson's response to the truncated brevity of conventional news.

Robinson thus adopts the role of "lady novelist as petroleuse"—despite risking "seem[ing] ill-tempered and eccentric" and "veering toward anarchy"—in order to break down official structures of thinking, to "jar a pillar or crack a fresco, or totter a god or two" with such directness that "no one will therefore take my assault as symbolic rather than as failed."⁷⁷ Although emboldened by the prospect of writing for real political change, she is not "the hyper-competent, and confident, hero of [her] tale," as Conover has warned against.⁷⁸ Instead she confronts, she writes, "the epic scale of my narrative" and "deficiency in treating this great subject" due to the United Kingdom's censorious Official Secrets Act, and because she knows "very little about plutonium" from a scientific expert's perspective. However, she dryly assures the reader that "I know better than to pour it into the environment," hoping "the British nuclear establishment will learn something from my work."⁷⁹ She thus situates her narrative in the

humanistic tradition of literary journalism Conover defines as being in opposition to the positivist one associated with the inverted pyramid and “5Ws” of standard journalism.⁸⁰

Robinson’s reaction to news coverage of Sellafield is consonant with Eric Heyne’s assertion that “just because we are without absolute rules universally accepted for the construction of accurate or meaningful narrative, we do not have to conclude that therefore we cannot claim that one story is truer than another.”⁸¹ In this manner, Robinson turned her literary eye toward the British news’s submerged agency and ethical vacuity that resembled a botched narrative. “Sometimes the news reads suspiciously like unusually clumsy fiction,” she quipped, noting how “a fiction writer has to braid events into a plausible sequence,” a point she emphasized to her creative writing students. She saw this lack of coherence between events as a symptom of how 1980s British “news is simply a series of reported incidents which, one assumes, manifest varieties of accident and causation, plausible if they were known.”⁸² Yet “there are no grounds for this assumption,” she realized. Although “the American zeal for establishing a narrative context for events” allows readers to “set events one beside another to see how they cohere,” they tend to falsify rather than clarify events, often distracting readers with apolitical celebrity and soft news gossip.⁸³

By playing the role of benevolent patriarch, Margaret Thatcher’s Administration emphasized that it had taken steps to protect citizens from radioactive “foreign wastes” that “enter the country at Dover and are transported by rail through London.” Meanwhile, the ministry promised to continue production of “finished plutonium [that] will be shipped from Scotland into Europe by air,”⁸⁴ at a safe distance from Britain. Such oblique reporting of the very bad news of contamination surfaced in Michael Kenward’s article in the *New Scientist*.⁸⁵ In it, the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) is cast as a benevolent environmental watchdog. Yet, as Robinson points out, NRPB’s plan for the investigation of Sellafield allowed—and even encouraged—the government to override that plan if it “wants to point its watchdog at new scents.”⁸⁶ Appalled by Kenward’s article, which William Brafford in a 2013 review of *Mother Country* called “a puff piece about a functionary,”⁸⁷ she draws the provocative connection that “this ‘independent’ watchdog agency is to allow its agenda to be set by the government, which is also the nuclear industrialist and trash collector.”⁸⁸ Those two roles are as civically incongruous as they are lyrically discordant, sounding a note of conflicted interest in government’s dual function to serve the nuclear industry and the welfare state, figured here in the quotidian and thus paradoxically alarming, image of trash collection.

Such coverage of the Sellafield nuclear plant led Robinson to ask, “whose judgment and what reasoning lie behind these practices and arrangements?” She laments that “the question is never broached,”⁸⁹ reflecting *Mother Country*’s activist agenda to expose this self-justifying news cycle: “The British government, the great constant behind the notional shifts of management, the proprietor and stock holder, never loses its ability to reassure the public, assuming the lofty role of inquirer into its own doings and finding nothing seriously amiss.” Such pseudo self-regulation amounts to “nothing a little finger wagging will not put right, a little expression of lack of confidence in the management.” The government leveraged the media as a public relations tool “to let the public know what it must accept,” in order to “produce quiet, while the government launches into the vast program of construction that will make Britain an ever greater center of plutonium extraction and waste dumping.”⁹⁰ The technique of deconstructing the logics of such industrial imperatives amplifies her contrarian tone aimed at raising public awareness in the face of prevailing quietism, a journalistic impulse that maintains her “outward focus on cultural revelation” as opposed to memoir’s “inward focus on personal revelation,” as Hartsock defines the genres.⁹¹

Beyond coverage of Sellafield in these outlets, other forms of environmental writing remained silent on the issue of nuclear pollution, from the *hook and bullet* outdoor-adventure genre to practical utilitarian works for industrialists to aesthetic pieces praising nature itself. No-nukes bestsellers like Jonathan Schell’s *The Fate of the Earth*, Robinson notes, focused on impending nuclear war to the exclusion of other problems, as well as that of “cleansing the sea of tons of radioactive sludge, and cleansing the air and the earth, and discovering and limiting the varieties of harm already done.” The problem stemmed from this systematic omission, placing it “outside democratic political control, first of all because books about nuclear issues do not tell the public the problem exists.”⁹² By exposing this gap in the publishing industry, she signals the need for activist socioenvironmental literature, a self-reflexive gesture that situates *Mother Country* squarely in that genre.

The Radical Rhetoric of *Mother Country*

Sellafield did not attract the media attention garnered by accidents and spectacular disaster events such as Three Mile Island. This is because “slow violence,” as Nixon terms it, in the ongoing operation of a plant such as Sellafield “poses acute challenges, not only because it is spectacle deficient, but also because the fallout’s impact may range . . . to the transnational and . . . may stretch beyond the horizon of imaginable time.”⁹³ Robinson indicts not only Britain, but the United States for slow environmental violence in

the ongoing operation of plutonium plants in Anchorage, Alaska, and at the Hanford site in Washington state.⁹⁴

To unmask Sellafield's slow violence, Robinson deconstructs nationalistic ideology, which to her appears most pointedly in the muted tones of euphemistic cheer inherent in the dialect of the British news media. *Mother Country's* narrative form consists of "cultural documentary reflected and refracted through interior consciousness," as Hartsock describes of James Agee.⁹⁵ It blends the urgency of activist reform with the inner subjectivity of ethical apotheosis. Like Agee, Robinson attempts, in Hartsock's words, "to break through conventional habits or 'myths' of seeing that consign or objectify"⁹⁶ social convention. She finds sheer terror, for example, in the simple act of going to the beach. "It seems to me indecent," Robinson writes, "that people are not warned away from this uniquely contaminated environment."⁹⁷ The beach lies in the shadows of "the largest source, by far, of radioactive contamination of the world's environment." This region in Cumbria by the Irish Sea is home to a "variety of sheep raised in that picturesque region [that] still reflects the preference of Beatrix Potter, miniaturist of a sweetly domesticated rural landscape" where literary tourists travel to "William and Dorothy Wordsworth's Dove Cottage." This recognizable domestic idyll of rolling green countryside is savagely undercut by surreal Kafkaesque horror delivered with well-mannered aplomb: "The lambs born in Cumbria are radioactive,"⁹⁸ the beach glows with toxic plutonium, and "the plant is implicated in these deaths of children" in the area in "an excess rate of 1,000 percent the national average."⁹⁹

As a reflection of Mark Kramer's call for literary journalists to "cherish the structural ideas and metaphors" that present themselves while reporting and writing,¹⁰⁰ Robinson's *Mother Country* provides a vignette of this fallen Eden that echoes Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* that begins with a similar provocation of "A Fable for Tomorrow."¹⁰¹ In it, Carson weaves the tale of an idyllic town "in the heart of America" suffering "a strange blight" that had sickened and even killed animals as well as its citizens. All suffered from "mysterious maladies" resulting in "a strange stillness. The birds, for example—where had they gone?" Hauntingly, spring arrived "without voices."¹⁰² Both Carson and Robinson deploy what Hartsock calls "narrative literary journalism [that] embraces the more personal as revealing a different dimension to the cultural in the attempt to narrow the empathetic distance between the protagonists in the discourse, the author, and the readers."¹⁰³ Through her first-person account of her incredulous reckoning with the sanitized news, Robinson counters what Walter Benjamin identified as twentieth-century journalism's tendency to "[paralyze] the imagination of

their readers” through objectivist reports designed “to isolate what happens from the realm in which it could affect the experience of the reader.”¹⁰⁴

England’s established narrative that Robinson so deftly deconstructs is reinforced by the news media which “see and do not perceive, hear and do not understand”¹⁰⁵ the full import of the atrocities perpetrated by the processing of plutonium on such a massive scale. This was due in large part to England’s role as a major world power under pressure to stockpile nuclear weapons on a scale far greater than its diminutive island could safely accommodate. But that condition of conducting massive nuclear production on a tiny densely populated island presented dangers directly challenging Britain’s cultural self-definition. Quietism prevailed. “The British are amazingly docile” in their “quietness and goodwill for which they are legendary,” a charming characteristic that nonetheless justifies their “impenetrable ignorance,” Robinson remarks. Protest is incongruous to a culture rooted in a sense of propriety defined by the studied avoidance of inconvenient truths like radioactive waste. When such subjects arise, the British avert their eyes, “meanwhile, winking in to drop a tear on the grave of Dorothy Wordsworth and snap a few photos of a gentler world.”¹⁰⁶ The operative literary technique of scene setting in this passage imagines a tourist’s excursion to the British countryside, immersed in sentimental reverence for the nation’s literary heritage, as captured symbolically by the commoditized teardrop and photo of Wordsworth’s grave. The tableau is deliberately hyperbolic, one designed to conjure up the docile English countryside and accepted cultural understandings and interaction therewith, in order to highlight, through ironic juxtaposition, the dark nuclear threat behind this blissful literary pilgrimage to Wordsworth country. The voice of what Engebretson calls “the disappointed expatriate” overwhelms the scene, sounding the book’s keynote of expected delight in Britain’s charms and storied literary past “spoiled by moral outrage.”¹⁰⁷ These are the sentence-level brushstrokes of Robinson’s literary art that serve the book’s larger political aesthetic.

Such instances illustrate how shifts in language are the key to social and political change in *Mother Country*. Writing in the vein of Carson, she criticizes complacency in the culture, especially by the way British citizens and English-speaking visitors are ideologically anesthetized by the news that “is absorbed by the public very quietly, which means that the government has made a fair estimate of public passivity.”¹⁰⁸ Such passivity is abetted by how “the ‘clever’ of Britain, whose distinguishing marks are verbal first of all, consider themselves their culture’s ornament and justification.” Their language often refers to its own authority of custom and tradition, whereby words such as “slum,”

which is “cant slang from the word ‘slumber,’ ” are freighted with classist implications. Given the endless workdays of the average working class citizen, “these people must have done little more than sleep in the few hours they had to themselves,” she notes, adding that the upper classes have nonetheless held them in contempt for being “deficient in domestic culture.”¹⁰⁹ She traces this sentiment from George Orwell’s depiction of the working class—especially in his portrait of them in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, as “bitter or imbecile and uniformly evil-smelling”—to Thatcher’s privatization of public housing that literally turned millions of poor into the streets.¹¹⁰

Language is thus both the subject of her interrogation and the means of her Lown rhetorical performance. Such ethnographic social critique appears through shocking imagery playing out the industrial logics of the commercial nuclear industry. Beyond the profit motive, she does not ascribe a particular intent behind such deceptive use of language that masks and aids the dumping of toxins into Britain’s own environment. Careful not to pin Sellafield’s operation on a single motive, she instead provides “an etiology and a history, in which the institutions which expedite it and the relations it expresses evolve together.”¹¹¹ In conjunction with empire, the profit motive clearly subordinated public service, a point emphasized in socioenvironmental literature.

The text reveals Britain’s violence toward the poor through its nuclear program. “Sellafield amounts, in its dinosaur futurism,” a cogent phrase capturing the oxymoron of such nuclear advancement, “to a brutal laying of hands on the lives of people: a blunt, unreflecting assertion of power.”¹¹² Herein Robinson turns to what Sims describes as “attention to ordinary lives,” a core characteristic of literary journalism.¹¹³ Even well-meaning crusaders on behalf of the working class, such as Daniel Defoe and Henry Fielding, inadvertently justified class bias and the Poor Laws, as Engebretson observes of *Mother Country*,¹¹⁴ socially immobilizing the common man as a “great reservoir of pathology, crudeness, belligerency, vice, and malice.”¹¹⁵ The slow violence she points to is not only industrial, but cultural, especially as exhibited in the code of the gentleman. The impropriety of illegitimate children, for example, takes precedence over the ongoing pollution of the environment: “They fret because at random babies are fathered and neglected and become in their turn bad young men. They do not fret that babies are poisoned in the womb,”¹¹⁶ she writes, leveraging parallel repetition with syntax turning on the verb “fret” and noun “babies” for maximum rhetorical impact. Her insistence throughout the text that England is not exceptional in such cultural blindness nonetheless turns to local descriptive detail to bring the narrative a visceral nearness. When stating that “plutonium concentrates in the liver, kidneys, and bone marrow,” for example, she adds, “it passes into the food chain—

into black pudding and kidney pie,¹¹⁷ thus bringing an otherwise abstract point in a horrifying embodied reality through defamiliarized imagery, recasting charming English fare as deadly poison. Such imagery of poisoned wombs, radioactive sheep, and glowing beaches serve her central claim that destruction lies beneath this charmingly clever culture known for its propriety and reason. Crucially, this technique of ironically recasting British culture in horrific light leverages hyperbolic sensational imagery to fuel her activist agenda. Such an impassioned ethical presence eschews “scholarly disinterestedness for moral commitment,” Engebretson observes,¹¹⁸ and thus contributes a prime example for the strains of criticism in literary journalism studies dedicated to the writer’s voice and its treatment of subject.¹¹⁹

This theme of linguistic power extends to scientists and government officials who strategically deploy the terms *dispersed* and *undetactable* to describe plutonium waste sent into the air and sea, in effect making it *nonexistent* since it exists outside of the immediate phenomenological world of the five senses. A major point of *Mother Country* is thus to make the invisible slow violence of nuclear waste visible and to amplify the reality of its impact on humans and nature through literary devices, with which she says, “I know I will shock my readers”¹²⁰ at both sentence and narrative levels. The power of slow violence in this sense meets the power of slow journalism to thoroughly elucidate the full scale of its contours and patterns of its existence.

Her subjective narrative voice rejects formal scientific objectivity not only to maximize the book’s political impact, but to provide a corrective against “the somber, officious, foolishness”¹²¹ with which government officials treat nuclear waste. One Cumbria resident, for example, was forced to sell her *defective* home at a lower price after sending her vacuum cleaner bag to the United States, where it tested positive for radioactivity, “because it had a defect—the contamination.”¹²² Hence Robinson’s “problem in writing this apocalyptic tale in a style suited to the importance of its subject” lay in the culture’s normalizing nomenclature, reflected in using the term “defect” to describe a home saturated with plutonium.¹²³ In foregrounding her outrage, “I am angry to the depths of my soul that the earth has been so injured while we were all bemused by supposed monuments of value and intellect,” she begs both pardon for writing that “has perhaps taken too much of the stain of my anger and disappointment,” and assistance in reading this narrative “by always keeping Sellafield in mind.” With a novelistic pause, she glosses her narrative’s central symbol, “Sellafield, which pours waste plutonium into the world’s natural environment, and bomb-grade plutonium into the world’s political environment. For money.”¹²⁴ Through the technique of characterization,

Robinson casts Sellafield as a nefarious and voracious force that consumes capital as readily as it toxifies both nature and the geopolitical peace.

The most arresting revelation of Robinson's narrative is also the most intimately subjective moment in the text. It describes her jarring discovery that Greenpeace—the original whale conservationists and guardians of the sea who would inspire radical branches of the environmental movement such as Earth First and the Sea Shepherds—was complicit, perhaps inadvertently, in the Sellafield cover-up. Robinson retells the event as portrayed by official reports, and then follows with a forensic analysis with Poe-like precision. This replicates her method of retracing deceptive scenes in the media's dominant narrative to reveal the reality beneath.

Through a bizarre publicity stunt reflective of the government's effectiveness in conditioning public opinion—or *engineering consent*, as public relations pioneer Edward Bernays would have it¹²⁵—Greenpeace proved more lapdog than watchdog. At stake for literary journalism studies in this case is recognition of the unique power of socioenvironmental reporting and writing to capture and decode duplicitous media messages from recognized sources of authority. In this case, Robinson exposes dubious tactics, the results of which directly aid industry at the peril of common citizens.

Striking a pose of opposition, Greenpeace tested the outer limits of its credibility with the reading public in its reports of what Robinson found the most absurd mission in its history, a plan that disintegrates rapidly when held up to scrutiny. A group of bronzed young divers manned a vessel with the objective of capping the double pipeline that had been spewing plutonium into the Irish Sea. The *rescue mission* was actually a pseudo-event akin to the *fake live shot* that became a staple of broadcast television news in the 1980s. In its reports to the media, Greenpeace cast the organization as heroically launching into action after a family had written their member of Parliament raising concern about the conditions near the plant upon return from a holiday at the seashore where they were accosted by a stranger. The informant was “an employee of the plant, nameless and faceless as figures in this narrative very often are,” as Robinson points out. The figure told the young family “not to allow their children to play on the sand” because “children absorbed the material many times more readily than adults.”¹²⁶ Robinson invokes the leitmotif of innocent children under threat of nuclear contamination.

At this moment, Robinson's slow journalism enacts a critique of the news story as it appeared in mainstream media. Once the ministry received the message of alarm, according to Greenpeace's improbable tale, the organization sent divers beneath the sea “to cap the pipeline.” Because “over a million gallons” of radioactive material passed through that pipeline “in the course

of a day,” Robinson rightly questioned whether “people working under water [could] actually hope to cap a double pipeline through which so much toxic liquid was flowing?” Such exposure to radioactivity would certainly harm the divers, and capping the pipeline would precipitate further disaster by flooding the shore and “the interior of the plant,” making for “a dubious piece of environmentalism.” Reports insisted that Greenpeace’s mission would have succeeded had the divers not discovered that “the [pipe’s] mouth had been changed so that the cap they had prepared for it would not fit,” an explanation suggesting the government’s surveillance over Greenpeace.¹²⁷ Perhaps the least credible aspect of the story was Greenpeace’s willingness to expose its own divers to waters they had not measured in advance with a Geiger counter, which later revealed radioactivity at 1,500 times normal levels.¹²⁸ Incredulous, Robinson asks, “Why would fit young men with their lives before them, diving near the pipeline *because* it released radioactivity, and who had a Geiger counter along, *not* test the condition of the water before they entered it?” The operation as it was reported presumed that “one could dive into the thick of the most prolonged and intense contamination in the world and rise out of it as fresh as Wordsworth’s Proteus,” an apt literary allusion given the proximity of the poet’s Cumbria cottage to the scene.¹²⁹

Coverage of Greenpeace’s attempts to cap the pipeline, according to Robinson, reflected the organization’s desire to appear proactive (at the behest of the government) and willing to face mortal risk to save the environment. But it was a farce, she submits, designed to assuage public concern by leading readers to believe that Greenpeace had made a heroic effort to solve the problem with its young team of divers. Robinson figuratively enters the scene as editor, scanning the narrative for plausibility and concluding that “the idea of capping pipeline from which comes a massive flow of toxic materials clearly must be scrapped on grounds of implausibility.” She also notes that “the detail concerning the contamination of the divers and their boat had best be crossed out, too, since the reader would wonder about the other ships in the Irish Sea that day and the catches pulled up through the toxic film” and shipped to other countries for sale.¹³⁰ The more reasonable and sustainable course of action, she argues, would have been to launch a cleanup effort. The government removed contaminated sand, she notes, only at the end of the profitable tourist season on the Cumbria beaches.¹³¹

Rather than concocting an air-tight conspiracy theory here and throughout *Mother Country*, Robinson makes clear that “so very much misfeasance is not compatible with the idea of actual conspiracy” but instead part of a broader cultural predilection of misplaced priorities with which multiple U.S. groups are also complicit. She exposes the serious errors which stem from a combination

of authoritarian censorious governance and ill-conceived publicity stunts.¹³² The Greenpeace dive into the toxic waters of Sellafield, Robinson explains, could have been attributable to faulty Geiger counters. “In fairness, Greenpeace seems to have a Geiger counter problem.” Yet she points out that although they had several on their boat that were functional according to news coverage, “they seem[ed] not to use them to maximum effect.” Broadening the implications, she notes “their shortcomings in this regard replicate precisely those omissions of government, industry, the regulatory agencies, and the scientific community which create the aura of mystery around Sellafield, an uncertainty a little monitoring could so quickly dispel.”¹³³

The Fate of Sellafield and Legacy of Mother Country

The central symbol of Robinson’s narrative—the Sellafield plant as a dark satanic mill—was unsustainable, as she predicted. Although the British government censored her cautionary tale of public alarm, antinuclear protocols ironically went into effect in the years to follow. By 1993, Britain banned the dumping of nuclear waste into the sea. Sellafield, the world’s first commercial nuclear power plant designed to produce bomb grade plutonium on an industrial scale, commenced decommissioning in 2008.¹³⁴ By 2016, Sellafield accounted for more than twice the expenditure of all other Nuclear Decommissioning Authority sites combined, as costs and delays escalated, topping £117.4 billion in 2015–16.¹³⁵

The fallout from *Mother Country* ranged from the courtroom, in which Greenpeace showed no mercy in suing Robinson to the fullest extent of the law, to the pages of the *New York Review of Books* where she endured a savage British counterassault.¹³⁶ The content and style of her literary journalism positioned her as a threat to the nuclear establishment, and a voice of radical environmentalism within the larger culture. Greenpeace demanded that Robinson redact *Mother Country’s* allegations that the organization was “both duplicitous and inept with regard to its coverage of nuclear waste dumping into the sea.”¹³⁷ The book continues to be banned from sale in the United Kingdom. The defenders of Sellafield took issue with Robinson in the *NYRB* after the initial *Harper’s* piece was published. Among her fiercest detractors upon its reception was Dr. Douglas Black, a British chemical engineer who insisted that contaminants were not harmful because they were dispersed at sea and/or stuck to the ocean floor. To Robinson, this claim was tantamount to the “destruction of evidence,”¹³⁸ but is generally not seen this way because Sellafield occupies cultural terrain “where there are no such things as liability and culpability.”¹³⁹ In another logical sleight of hand, Black argued that plutonium could only be linked to the area’s soaring leukemia

death rate if a decrease in waste resulted in a decrease in disease. Since no plans to reduce waste existed, such measurements were impossible. This meant “future leukemia excesses will *exonerate* the plant, as present ones have done.”¹⁴⁰ Information about Sellafield was limited and of poor quality despite Greenpeace’s claim to have placed a mole in the plant. The laxity of laws and lack of public information through the press were due to the British government’s interest in maintaining and expanding its nuclear program under Thatcher and protecting its tourist revenue from the popular beaches of Cumbria. Stylistically, after deploying a barrage of legal diction—“evidence,” “liability,” “culpability,” “exonerate”¹⁴¹ in recounting Black’s counterattack.¹⁴² Robinson’s tone shifts from fierce disputation to a heartfelt direct address to the reader. She ends by expressing her “greatest hope” that “we” will have “the courage to make ourselves rational and morally autonomous adults, secure enough in the faith that life is good and to be preserved, to recognize the grosser forms of evil and name them and confront them.” She asks, “Who will do it for us? . . . Greenpeace? The Duke of Edinburgh?”¹⁴³

Robinson stands out for her first-person narrative account that renders a shocking Caronesque glimpse at the lived reality—one affecting the everyday lives of common citizens—behind the industrial logic and justification of nuclear pollution. Robinson’s belief that “the cost in human well being as a part of the calculations that go into economic decisions can be valued at almost nothing” resonates with socioenvironmental writing on the topic of toxic waste. “American Greenpeace was no help to me in writing the book,” she said in a recent interview, noting that their current pamphlets disingenuously credit themselves for having “‘scored a ban’ on sea dumping of nuclear waste” although they knew well that “British Greenpeace sued me for damaging their reputation, though I grieve at my failure to have done so.”¹⁴⁴ Even among the most radical environmental journalism, Robinson bears the distinction of operating as watchdog of the watchdogs. The book’s reception was profoundly influenced by its censorship that removed it from the market of readers to which it spoke the most directly. Readers may have agitated for tighter pollution restrictions and a concerted cleanup effort of Sellafield had Greenpeace, who ironically might have otherwise supported the book’s activist agenda, “not succeeded in having the British edition banned and pulped.”¹⁴⁵ Although banned in Britain, Robinson’s message that “abuse of the natural environment involves contempt for the health and the life of human beings”¹⁴⁶ has not been silenced like the songbirds of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*.

The current generation of environmental literary journalists now faces the challenge of becoming the new watchdog of watchdogs to call out

corruption, a process that can involve immersion into environmental groups. Charles Bowden renders an inside account of a Greenpeace voyage in *Some of the Dead Are Still Breathing*,¹⁴⁷ a work that shows the influence of Hunter S. Thompson and Edward Abbey. Like Bowden, who passed away in 2014, only the most courageous of writers enter their culturally sanctified realm and act as the alternative press, the police of the police, as Emerson once said, judges of judges. “Such a truth-speaker,” he wrote, “is worth more than the best police, and more than the laws or governors;” because officers and elected officials “do not always know their own side, but will back the crime for want of this very truth-speaker to expose them.”¹⁴⁸ Herein lies environmental literary journalism’s power, in Hartsock’s words, to enable society to “engage in a healthy self-critique” regarding human impact on nature by “making the familiar unfamiliar.”¹⁴⁹

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Notes

- ¹ Robinson, *Mother Country*, 236; Stevens, “Marilynne Robinson: A Chronology,” xiii.
- ² Robinson, *Mother Country*, 31, 3.
- ³ Robinson, 32.
- ⁴ Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, 116.
- ⁵ Robinson, “Bad News from Britain,” 65–72.
- ⁶ Pauly, “Literary Journalism and the Drama of Civic Life,” 77.
- ⁷ Pauly, 77; Pauly, “Journalism and the Sociology of Public Life,” 148.
- ⁸ Abrahamson, “The Counter-Coriolis Effect,” 83n4.
- ⁹ Ford, foreword to *A Bibliography of Literary Journalism*, i.
- ¹⁰ Robinson, “The Art of Fiction,” 37–40, 60. *Gilead* won a Pulitzer Prize in 2004 and was followed by her 2008 publication of *Home*, its prequel that won the coveted Orange Prize for Fiction awarded in the United Kingdom. That year, the *Times* of London proclaimed Robinson “The world’s best writer of prose,” however arguable such designation is in a global context. Robinson, “Heaven Is a Place on Earth; Interview,” by Appleyard.
- ¹¹ Wolfe, “Why They Aren’t Writing the Great American Novel Anymore,” 272.
- ¹² Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World*, 35–54.
- ¹³ Engebretson, *Understanding Marilynne Robinson*, 102.
- ¹⁴ Heise, “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Ecocriticism,” 507.
- ¹⁵ Heise, 507.
- ¹⁶ Heise, 511. See Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*.
- ¹⁷ Jelfs, “Marilynne Robinson’s Turn to the ‘Real World,’” 134.
- ¹⁸ Vallianatos, with Jenkins, *Poison Spring*.
- ¹⁹ Roiland, “Derivative Sport,” 176.
- ²⁰ Sims, *True Stories*; Kramer and Call, *Telling True Stories*; Schudson, “News as Stories”; Kidder and Todd, *Good Prose*.
- ²¹ Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, 152.
- ²² Foundational research in literary journalism studies names Thoreau, one of the most influential nature writers in the genre, among six other authors who blend literature and journalism in their books. Thoreau was thus an early exemplar of the writer who “is sufficiently journalistic to sense the swiftly changing aspects” of his dynamic contemporary moment, “and sufficiently literary to gather and shape his material with the eye and hand of the artist.” Ford, foreword, i.
- ²³ Slovic, *Seeking Awareness*, 152.
- ²⁴ Hemley, *A Field Guide for Immersion Writing*, 10. Robinson’s exposure of her own personal biases has drawn controversy. Although it is not explicit in *Mother Country*, her liberal Protestantism drives her activist politics, as it does all of her nonfiction. In his *Harper’s* piece on Christians as public intellectuals, for example, Alan Jacobs assailed Robinson for her article “Fear,” a critique of the religious right’s high-jacking of Christianity to fuel its obsession with gun ownership. “If Robinson wants to persuade her fellow American Christians to reject the culture

of guns and overcome their fear, *The New York Review of Books* is an odd place to do it," Jacobs alleged. Jacobs, "The Watchmen," para. 31, web. Her conversations published in the *NYRB* with then-President Barack Obama, rather than a more radical figure such as Cornel West, struck Jacobs as equally suspect, given that "fear" is a term that might apply to the figure "who promised but failed to close the prison at Guantánamo Bay," Jacobs, web, para. 35. In these ways, he argued, Robinson is another intellectual creature of "the liberal secular world" and its tepid ineffectual neutrality, para. 34. Robinson's rejoinder indicated that the essay "Fear" was originally delivered as a speech for a conservative church in Michigan, precisely the audience Jacobs claimed she was studiously avoiding by presenting her argument to liberal intellectual readers of *NYRB*, Robinson, "Letters: Acts of Faith," 2. Further, Robinson did not select Obama for the *NYRB* interview as Jacobs assumed, but instead accepted the President's invitation. Just as ineffectual secular quietism hardly describes Robinson's nonfiction, neither does atheism. Fox News, for example, insisted that her discussion with Obama was a partisan occasion to allege "that Obama hated Christianity," which in fact was precisely the opposite of the exchange. Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here?*, 298–99.

²⁵ Sims, *True Stories*, 12.

²⁶ Sims, 12.

²⁷ Kramer, "Reporting for Narrative," 27.

²⁸ Robinson, "An Interview with Marilynne Robinson," by Schaub, 240.

²⁹ Robinson, *Mother Country*, 32.

³⁰ Hartsock, *Literary Journalism*, 152.

³¹ Slovic, *Seeking Awareness*, 169.

³² Murphy, *What a Book Can Do*, 204.

³³ Jelfs, "Marilynne Robinson's Turn to 'The Real World,'" 137.

³⁴ Le Masurier, "Slow Journalism: An Introduction," 405 (emphasis in original).

³⁵ Engebretson, *Understanding Marilynne Robinson*, 102.

³⁶ Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism*, 1.

³⁷ Conover, "Immersion and the Subjective," 171.

³⁸ Robinson, Interview, "The Art of Fiction No. 198," by Fay, 62.

³⁹ Slovic, "Ecocriticism," 13; see also Adamson, *American Indian Literature*, xiii.

⁴⁰ Howarth, "Some Principles of Ecocriticism," 74–75.

⁴¹ Hartsock, *Literary Journalism*, 151.

⁴² Heise, "The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism," 505.

⁴³ Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, xi.

⁴⁴ Nixon, xi.

⁴⁵ Nixon, xi.

⁴⁶ Lopez and Wilson, "Dialogue One," 15, quoted in Slovic, *Seeking Awareness*, 163.

⁴⁷ Slovic, 163.

⁴⁸ Robinson, *Mother Country*, 31, 30–31.

⁴⁹ Davis, "Slowing Down Media Coverage," 462–77; Neveu, "Revisiting Narrative Journalism," 533–42.

⁵⁰ Engebretson, *Understanding Marilynne Robinson*, 100. It is telling of *Mother Country*'s critical neglect as book-length literary journalism on par with her novels that it is relegated to discussion in the "Essays" chapter of *Understanding Marilynne Robinson*, after coverage of her novels in the book's first chapters.

⁵¹ Engebretson, 100.

⁵² See Kolbert, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*; McKibben, *The End of Nature*; Smith, *Nature Noir*.

⁵³ Murphy, *What a Book Can Do*, 7.

⁵⁴ Carson, *Silent Spring*, 181.

⁵⁵ McPhee, "Atchafalaya," *The Control of Nature*, 6–7; see also Sims and Kramer, *Literary Journalism*, 411.

⁵⁶ See McKibben, *American Earth*; Austin, Bennett, and Kimber, *On Wilderness*. For more on Austin, see Whitt, *Women in American Journalism*, 116–21.

⁵⁷ Murphy, *What a Book Can Do*, 13.

⁵⁸ Robinson, *Mother Country*, 259–61.

⁵⁹ Robinson, *When I Was a Child, I Read Books*, xiv; quoted in Mariotti and Lane, *A Political Companion to Marilynne Robinson*, 2 (emphasis mine). See also Robinson, *When I Was a Child, I Read Books*, ix–xvi.

⁶⁰ Mariotti and Lane, 3.

⁶¹ Jelfs, "Democracy and Other Fictions," para. 16.

⁶² Jelfs, "Democracy and Other Fictions," para. 16. See also Jelfs, "Marilynne Robinson's Turn to the 'Real World, That Is Really Dying,'" 133–47.

⁶³ Robinson, *Mother Country*, 26.

⁶⁴ Robinson, 22.

⁶⁵ O'Rourke, "A Moralism of the Midwest," para. 25.

⁶⁶ Mariotti and Lane, *A Political Companion to Marilynne Robinson*, 3.

⁶⁷ Bak, introduction, 6.

⁶⁸ Bak, 6.

⁶⁹ Robinson, *Mother Country*, 31. The climate of the British press, and the nonfiction book publishing industry by extension, continues to be strikingly censorious. As a U.S.-born media and literary scholar, I, too, underestimated the severity of the British libel laws, as the publisher of an academic journal operating out of the United Kingdom refused another version of this article despite favorable peer reviews. The publisher indicated that its legal team could not allow for publication because the article treated a book banned in Britain, a revealing case in point illustrating the authoritarian nature of its legal code that actively suppresses free speech. Britain not only banned Robinson's book, but also made clear it would censor any discussion of it, even of a scholarly nature nearly thirty years after the book's banning. The British government continues to maintain libel laws far stricter than those in the United States.

⁷⁰ Murphy, *What a Book Can Do*, 7.

⁷¹ Engebretson, *Understanding Marilynne Robinson*, 103.

⁷² Bak, introduction, 1.

⁷³ Engebretson, *Understanding Marilynne Robinson*, 100.

⁷⁴ Canada, *Literature and Journalism in Antebellum America*, 121, 80.

⁷⁵ Davis, "Life in the Iron-Mills," 3–34; Sinclair, *The Jungle*.

⁷⁶ Canada, *Literature and Journalism in Antebellum America*, 121, 124.

⁷⁷ Robinson, *Mother Country*, 32.

⁷⁸ Conover, "Immersion and the Subjective," 171.

⁷⁹ Robinson, *Mother Country*, 143.

⁸⁰ Conover, "Immersion and the Subjective," 168.

⁸¹ Heyne, "Toward a Theory of Literary Nonfiction," 489.

⁸² Robinson, *Mother Country*, 207.

⁸³ Robinson, 209.

⁸⁴ Robinson, 209 (emphasis mine).

⁸⁵ Kenward, *New Scientist*, 58–59.

⁸⁶ Robinson, *Mother Country*, 182.

⁸⁷ Brafford, "The Unsettling Emergence of Marilynne Robinson," para. 10.

⁸⁸ Robinson, *Mother Country*, 182.

⁸⁹ Robinson, 209.

⁹⁰ Robinson, 210.

⁹¹ Hartsock, *Literary Journalism*, 151.

⁹² Robinson, *Mother Country*, 228–29; see also Schell, *The Fate of the Earth*.

⁹³ Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 47. Cold War logics also factor in. Due to its proximity to Western Europe, for example, the 1986 Chernobyl explosion in Russia received more media attention than the 1984 Bhopal disaster in India. As Nixon astutely observes, Chernobyl could be readily "assimilated to the violent threat that communism posed to the West," whereas Bhopal could be "imaginatively contained as an Indian problem" Nixon, 47.

⁹⁴ Robinson, *Mother Country*, 232, 216.

⁹⁵ Hartsock, *Literary Journalism*, 38.

⁹⁶ Hartsock, 39.

⁹⁷ Robinson, *Mother Country*, 11.

⁹⁸ Robinson, 3.

⁹⁹ Robinson, 221, 220.

¹⁰⁰ Kramer, "Reporting for Narrative," 28.

¹⁰¹ Carson, *Silent Spring*, 1.

¹⁰² Carson, 1–2.

¹⁰³ Hartsock, *Literary Journalism*, 4.

¹⁰⁴ Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," 159; see also Hartsock, *Literary Journalism*, 15.

¹⁰⁵ Robinson, *Mother Country*, 207.

¹⁰⁶ Robinson, 228.

¹⁰⁷ Engebretson, *Understanding Marilynne Robinson*, 103.

¹⁰⁸ Robinson, *Mother Country*, 31.

¹⁰⁹ Robinson, 91, 90.

¹¹⁰ Robinson, 129.

¹¹¹ Robinson, 37.

¹¹²Robinson, 42.

¹¹³Sims, *True Stories*, 12.

¹¹⁴Engebretson, *Understanding Marilynne Robinson*, 105.

¹¹⁵Robinson, *Mother Country*, 22.

¹¹⁶Robinson, 23.

¹¹⁷Robinson, 148.

¹¹⁸Engebretson, *Understanding Marilynne Robinson*, 104.

¹¹⁹Hartsock, *Literary Journalism*, 151; Sims, *True Stories*, 12.

¹²⁰Robinson, *Mother Country*, 26.

¹²¹Robinson, 153.

¹²²Robinson, 153.

¹²³Robinson, 153.

¹²⁴Robinson, 32–33.

¹²⁵Bernays, “The Engineering of Consent,” 113–20.

¹²⁶Robinson, *Mother Country*, 210–11.

¹²⁷Robinson, 211.

¹²⁸Robinson, 211.

¹²⁹Robinson, 213 (emphases in the original).

¹³⁰Robinson, 214.

¹³¹Robinson, 217.

¹³²Robinson, 22.

¹³³Robinson, 213–14. The incident was one of many in Greenpeace’s long history of controversy, in part due to its hierarchical structure consisting of a small group of individuals who control both international and local divisions. Finger, *Research in Social Movements*, 16. In the digital age, Greenpeace’s use of stunts for favorable PR to promote their organization without affecting real change, furthermore, occurred most conspicuously in its 2006 “Guide to Greener Electronics,” which ranked Apple at the bottom in terms of toxic material for its cell phones. Greenpeace, “Electronic Companies Race for Top.” Another example of the dubious environmental ethics was the British government’s attempt to downplay the critical nature of the accident at the Fukushima nuclear plant in Japan in 2011. “Anti-nuclear people across Europe have wasted no time blurring this all into Chernobyl and the works,” a British official wrote in a leaked email. “We need to quash any stories trying to compare this to Chernobyl,” Edwards, “Revealed: British Government’s Plan to Play Down Fukushima,” para. 12. Echoes of Sellafield thus continue well into the twenty-first century.

¹³⁴Three firms from France, the United States, and the United Kingdom accepted £6.5 billion to complete the project over a five-year period. The *Guardian* carried a report that the British government issued an indemnity to protect Sellafield from liability for all spills and accidents, including those caused by the firms responsible for carrying out the shutdown. Reversing an operation of this size proved extraordinarily expensive, as Sellafield accounted for forty percent of the government’s funds for the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority in 2009. Delays and escalating costs have increased dramatically over time, particularly in 2013

when the costs for operating Sellafield leaped from £900 million to £1.6 billion. Hencke, "MP's Anger as State Bears Cost of Any Sellafield Disaster."

¹³⁵Nuclear Decommissioning Authority, "Nuclear Provision"; National Audit Office, "Progress on the Sellafield Site."

¹³⁶Engebretson, *Understanding Marilynne Robinson*, 108. See Perutz, "Is Britain 'Befouled'?" 51–57.

¹³⁷Stevens, "Marilynne Robinson: A Chronology," xiii.

¹³⁸Robinson, 217–18.

¹³⁹Robinson, 217.

¹⁴⁰Robinson, 220 (emphasis mine).

¹⁴¹Robinson, 154, 252n, 9, 220.

¹⁴²Robinson, 217–21.

¹⁴³Robinson, 236.

¹⁴⁴Robinson, "An Interview with Marilynne Robinson," by Stevens, 257.

¹⁴⁵Robinson, "An Interview with Marilynne Robinson," by Stevens, 257.

¹⁴⁶Robinson, "An Interview with Marilynne Robinson," by Stevens, 256.

¹⁴⁷Bowden, *Some of the Dead Are Still Breathing*.

¹⁴⁸Emerson, "Concord," 1:306; see also Dowling, *Emerson's Protégés*, 50, 294n27.

¹⁴⁹Hartsock, *Literary Journalism*, 151.

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