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## *Teaching LJ . . .*

### The Literary Journalism Doctorate: A Missing Piece in the Disciplinary Puzzle?

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**Abstract:** This edited discussion took place as a panel at the Fourteenth International Conference for Literary Journalism Studies, Stony Brook University, United States, in May 2019. Susan Greenberg proposed the topic for the conference as a way of exploring the question raised the previous year by the association's founding president, John S. Bak: Is literary journalism a full-blown discipline, or a more amorphous area of "studies"? One of the qualifying conditions identified by Bak was the existence of a recognizable body of doctoral work in the field. And so, the following question arises: What is the current state of doctoral-level research around the globe? To structure the response, Greenberg included doctorates in both the *practice of* literary journalism, and those involving research *about* the genre, or about related areas. She also widened the search to include all narrative

nonfiction genres, and posed a few starter questions, namely: Where is doctoral research on literary journalism taking place within higher education throughout the world? How much research is being conducted? Is this still a minority interest? What kind of critical constructs are used, and how does that influence the field in general and doctoral work in particular? Each contributor drew their own conclusions, but a thread can be seen running through all four contributions: namely, the need for a critical discourse that not only informs the practice but also responds to it, in a bilateral dialogue.

**Keywords:** higher education – doctoral studies – PhD – disciplines – literary journalism – narrative nonfiction – practice research

JOHN S. BAK

### International Dimension of Literary Journalism Doctorates

This is an important panel, and I am honored to be included with all these great names in literary journalism studies. I believe it is important to consolidate the information currently available on our international doctoral studies programs (methodologies used, authors studied, diplomas delivered, etc.), just as we do our academic research. Evidence of healthy doctoral programs in literary journalism studies around the world is evidence of healthy literary journalism research, which supports IALJS and *LJS*. And the good news is that there is ample evidence of a healthy and growing field of literary journalism studies around the world. But that development involves some growing pains that will have to be addressed, first at future IALJS congresses, but also by the senior scholars among us, as I will discuss later.

In the different doctoral work that I have been involved with, the first thing to note is the relative novelty of PhDs in the field, regardless of country or continent. The IALJS can take a bow for that because the majority have come after 2006, when the association was founded. The theses and postdocs I have identified below are the direct products of IALJS's global network that has helped make literary journalism a recognizable academic field in some places (though surely not all). Graduate students feel more inclined to undertake a PhD thesis on literary journalism (and its various monikers around the world) when they can see: an abundance of scholars out there who make up a vibrant academic community that they can join, with whom they can exchange ideas, and from whom they can choose a director/jury; respected and collegial outlets wherein they can present and publish their research; and a dynamic field in which they could potentially find a permanent (tenured) academic post. These three key elements are

now present throughout the world for young scholars of literary journalism studies, even if the third one remains precarious at the moment (more on that later).

The next trend to note is that most of the PhDs I have been involved with tend to come out of journalism or communications departments, rather than literature or language departments—be it *Lettres Modernes* or the *Département d'anglais* in France, or English departments in the United Kingdom, United States, or Australia. This is critical. It suggests that the majority of future PhDs risk not having proper literary training needed to fully exploit a literary journalistic text. The few PhD projects that are based in literary studies reside there only because they are not about literary journalism *per se*; the topic of literary journalism comes up only in specific chapters, for example, relating to research methods, such as immersion reporting.

For instance, many of my PhD students working from a non-literary discipline use aesthetics à la Wolfe or Sims instead of more pure literary analysis when analyzing their primary sources. The effect is that many follow the four or five *literary signs* of literary journalism (e.g., dialogue, scene development, characterization) which, in literary studies, make up only a small part of literary discourse analysis. When studying a Shakespearean sonnet, for example, a literary scholar does not first need to identify it as *literary* in order to write about it—it just *is*.

**F**uture PhD students in journalism, media, or communications departments would be well advised to follow courses in English or literature departments, just as PhD students in English or literary departments should be made to follow courses in journalism departments as part of the completion of their degrees. Ideally, a new discipline, subdiscipline, or even interdisciplinary degree that draws on courses in both established fields should be mandated for any PhD on literary journalism—at least, before literary journalism studies becomes a discipline in its own right, with all the academic privileges (and headaches) that accompany that status.

Those theses in which I have participated—from direction, to jury member, to formal adviser, to informal friend—were concerned with literary journalism in a particular country. The tally so far includes Australia, Italy, Brazil, Germany, Portugal, Sweden, Czech Republic, Poland, and Spain. Again, the majority were conducted within communications and media departments, including journalism, but several others came from different fields, such as cultural studies. That is good news, as it shows the diversity of interests in literary journalism studies. The downside is that it produces PhDs who do not fit within the traditional departments that are hiring.

To illustrate these points, I can summarize a few examples here:

### **Direction or Codirection**

1. “From Pike to Twain: American Romanticism in the Mississippi Travel Narratives of the Nineteenth Century,” Gaëlle Lafarge, France;
2. “Literary Imagery and Subjectivity in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston,” Marie Pittman, France;
3. “An Epidemiological Study of the Counterculture and the Rationale for a Theory of Narrative Movements,” Talal Victor Hawshar, France/Czech Republic;
4. “Peace Journalism and War Journalism: Reportage on Migration in the Parisian Press 2016–2018,” Maria Carolina Giliolli Goos, France/Brazil;
5. “The Literary Journalism of Antônio Callado: Locating a Particularly Brazilian Style within a Genre Influenced by the New Journalism,” Lillian Martins, Brazil;
6. “A History of Portuguese Literary Journalism since the Nineteenth Century, Including Interviews with Contemporary Portuguese Journalists,” Manuel Coutinho, Portugal;<sup>1</sup>

The first three theses, from France, all of which are still in progress, are in English departments in which English is considered a foreign language, and the core of studies is based on literature, history/civilization, and language (grammar, phonetics, writing). The first of the three is being written in French. The students are not writing directly about literary journalism but are using components of literary journalism theory or immersion reporting methods as they apply to larger topics, such as nineteenth-century travel narratives, fact and fiction hybridity, and cognitive conditioning through non-fiction narrative discourse. The fourth, French PhD (Maria Carolina Giliolli Goos) is in a French journalism department. I can only codirect this PhD because I am not recognized by the French governing body to direct a PhD that is not connected to English studies, and her PhD is about contemporary French journalism and its narrative quality. The final two PhDs were defended in 2018. The Brazilian PhD, undertaken within a journalism department and written in Portuguese, was on a Brazilian literary journalist, and my goal was to support the thesis’ theory and methods as the graduate student analyzed the original books in Portuguese. Finally, with the PhD from Portugal, also within a communications department, a first draft of the thesis had already been completed (in Portuguese) before I was asked to serve as an additional adviser. Manuel Coutinho translated his work from Portuguese (for an additional European recognition on his diploma), and my job at first was

to help correct the English, but in the end, I also helped reshape the literary journalistic aspects of the thesis. The thesis was ultimately reshaped, and not simply translated. While the final two theses have already been defended, sadly, their candidates are still trying to find work within the academy.

### **Jury Member/External Reader**

1. “Inscribing Virtues in Australian Literary Journalism: An Analysis of How Journalists Communicate Emotions and Virtues in the Walkley Awards Winning Feature Articles from 1988 to 2014,” Jennifer Martin, University of Melbourne, Australia;
2. “Narrative Journalism (2008–2016): A New Generation of Spanish Authors,” Antonio Cuartero Naranjo, Universidad de Málaga;
3. “War Reportage in the Liminal Zone: Anglo-American Eyewitness Accounts from the Western Front (1914–1918),” Sara Prieto García-Cañedo, Universidad de Alicante<sup>2</sup>

I had no hand in the directing of these three PhD theses, but I was asked to sit on all of their juries. What is noteworthy here is that two of the theses were produced in Spain. In general, the hispanophone and the lusophone countries on both continents are responsible for a good portion of the PhD theses being written and defended right now—something worth noting. I have the feeling that, in Spain at least, the tradition of *periodismo literario* has existed as long as literary journalism has in the United States, and only now are the two traditions actually communicating with each other, and the PhDs being defended in Spain are evidence of that.

Perhaps, and this is just a supposition, while the Spanish and Portuguese theses are taking into account scholarship written in English, I suspect the opposite may not always be true. Real scholarship at the PhD level needs to be bidirectional between the anglophone and the non-anglophone communities, since serious scholarship on literary journalism has already been produced in certain countries for close to thirty years now and should figure in all our bibliographies whenever relevant.

As a side note, all three of these young *Doctors* did find jobs within the academy, but only one (Sara Prieto García-Cañedo) is on a permanent post; the other two (Jennifer Martin and Antonio Cuartero Naranjo) are currently employed on short-term postdoc projects that are quickly reaching term.

### **Additional PhD Theses and Postdocs**

1. Ailton Sobrinho, PhD student, Université Clermont Auvergne, is currently writing a thesis on the impact of the nineteenth-century French *chronique* and *fait divers* on the development of Brazil’s literary journalism;

2. Sara Izzo, postdoc, Universität Bonn, defended her thesis, “Jean Genet und der revolutionäre Diskurs in seinem historischen Kontext,” on the late political literary journalism of French playwright Jean Genet;
3. Cecilia Aare, PhD student, Stockholms universitet, is currently writing her PhD, “Den empatiska reportern. Om reportagens narrativitet och reporterns uppdrag,” on the role empathy plays for a journalist writing, and an audience reading, a piece of literary nonfiction;
4. Federico Casari, postdoc, Universität Tübingen, defended his thesis, “The Origin of the Elzeviro. Journalism and Literature in Italy, 1870–1920,” 2015, Durham University;
5. Liliana Chávez, postdoc, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Mexico City, defended her PhD thesis, “Based on True Stories: Representing the Self and the Other in Latin American Documentary Narratives,” University of Cambridge, 2017.
6. Aleksandra Wiktorowska, independent scholar, defended her PhD thesis, “Ryszard Kapuściński: visión integradora de un reportero. Clasificación, construcción y recepción de su obra,” Faculty of Philosophy of the Universitat de Barcelona, 2014.<sup>3</sup>

I have also had the honor of conversing, either in person or through a series of emails, with other graduate students and former students who are currently completing or have recently defended PhD theses involving literary journalism. While I never had a direct hand in any of their PhD theses, I did play a role—as many of us have done within IALJS—in editing selections of the research that came from their theses and which were subsequently published in a book or journal that I have directed. I see this “mentoring” role as essential within IALJS, a mentoring that we can all agree has been there from the start, through the advice of scholars who have included Norm Sims, David Abrahamson, John Hartsock, Tom Connery, and others.

Of note here, again, is the variety of departments in which these PhD students have worked: Sobrinho, in a department of Portuguese studies; Izzo, in French and Italian studies; Aare, in the Department of Culture and Aesthetics; Casari, from an Italian department in the United Kingdom to an Italian department in Germany (his post recently rescinded); Chávez, from the Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages and Linguistics in the United Kingdom to a Latin American Literature department in Mexico; and Wiktorowska, from a cultural studies department in Spain to occasional postdoc work in France and independent research. The range evinces just how far-reaching literary journalism has become.

Of note also is that, while all of the recent graduates found work within the academy (though not always teaching literary journalism), they have been

employed on short-term postdoc positions that will be coming to an end shortly. In order to help each of them, I have tried involving them in my own research projects, but again, that will only bolster their CVs. It all depends on who will eventually hire them and in what capacity.

### Conclusions

What can be learned from all of this? First, that at the doctoral level, literary journalism is still considered a media-centered field, even within non-media departments, and perhaps we should continue to focus on that angle. But I would not want to abandon the literature and language departments at all, because media scholars tend to focus too much on “canned” aesthetics from Tom Wolfe, as described earlier, and not on literary discourse analysis as such.

Second, one of IALJS’s early challenges was to get students writing PhD theses on literary journalism so as to insure the field’s growth. And as I have argued here, it has succeeded in doing so. But IALJS’s greatest challenge today remains in helping recent PhDs find suitable employment, ideally within a university. Nearly all of our recent graduates are working in precarious, short-term posts, which give them little job security and even risks their abandoning their research on literary journalism studies all together. This would be catastrophic for IALJS and the field of literary journalism.

A lack of permanent academic posts is a widespread problem across all of higher education, but the additional problem in our field is that they are not simply waiting for the older guard (in which I include myself) to retire so that they potentially could fill our vacant positions. The fact is that many of us who are senior scholars are *not* in posts tied to literary journalism that will need refilling. So, in all honesty, what are these young scholars to do? We have all involved them in research projects and published their work to bolster their already strong CVs, but that is not proving enough. More needs to be done, and sooner rather than later. That should be a panel for a future IALJS congress.

While all of us at IALJS can pat ourselves on the back for having brought an increasing number of students to the doctoral level, our work is far from complete. We need to help them get permanent academic posts, and that will be no easy task.

ROBERT S. BOYNTON

**The Dog That Didn't Bark—Literary Journalism's Absence at the Doctoral Level**

U.S. academia and journalism have long had an awkward relationship. An offspring of Europe's ancient educational institutions, the U.S. university did not include professional schools of any kind until the nineteenth century. This is critical. Columbia University did not have a law school until 1858, or a business school until 1916. The nation's first journalism school, at the University of Missouri, was founded in 1908. So it was unsurprising that in 1892, when newspaper baron Joseph Pulitzer offered Columbia \$2 million (\$55 million, adjusted for inflation) for a journalism school, the university's president swiftly rejected it. It took two more decades and a new, more entrepreneurial president, before Pulitzer's offer was accepted. Columbia Journalism School opened in 1912, a year after Pulitzer's death.

This historical background is a touchstone for me, as I think about the relationship between literary journalism and PhD programs. These questions linger: Is journalism a profession or an art form? Is it an object of scholarship or a craft suitable only for instruction? Is it ensconced in the faculty of arts and sciences (as at my university) or taught in a self-contained school, as with law, medicine, and business? Such institutional considerations might be dismissed as inside baseball, but a discipline's academic pedigree influences and reflects the way it is perceived in the world.

Given journalism's uneasy place, *literary* journalism is *twice*-cursed: at odds with (or ignored by) academia and neglected—sometimes denounced—by mainstream journalism, it has no natural home, institutional redoubt, or constituency. The situation improved slightly with the founding of the IALJS in 2006 and its journal, *Literary Journalism Studies*, in 2009.

Literary journalism ran afoul of academic and journalistic sensibilities for different reasons. With the exception of nineteenth-century polymaths like Stephen Crane and Walt Whitman, academics judged U.S. nonfiction writers too recent, and journalism too insubstantial, to warrant study. To be fair, they felt the same way about U.S. fiction, which English departments did not teach until well after World War II. In the 1920s, mainstream journalism, under the sway of Walter Lippmann, rejected literary journalism as lacking sufficient objectivity. As Miles Maguire notes in a forthcoming essay, the Pulitzer competition did not acknowledge anything akin to literary journalism until 1979, when it created an award for "feature writing."<sup>4</sup>

And, frankly, this is one of the reasons many of us are drawn to literary journalism. Neither codified by scholars nor assimilated by mainstream journalism, this duel neglect is one of the factors behind literary journalism's

enduring vitality, both across genres and across the globe. An air of raffish independence is part of its allure.

Aside from investigating the historical relationship between literary journalism and academia, I looked at the work that has been produced in the past twenty years. I searched all dissertations with the phrase “literary journalism” in their title, and then widened to include dissertations that used the phrase frequently in their texts. I then added some of the icons of the genre to expand the pool. The resulting tally came to roughly thirty-five dissertations.

By far the largest departmental home was English with fifteen, journalism/communication programs came second with eleven dissertations, and American studies with just five. Spanish/Portuguese studies had another four.

Literary journalism is itself interdisciplinary, so I looked at two relatively recent developments in the university—area studies and American studies—to see whether either field provided guidance for literary journalism scholarship. Emerging after World War II, area studies was too dominated by Cold War ideology to be a model, so I focused on the latter.

The birth of American studies is commonly dated at 1927, with the publication of Vernon Lewis Parrington’s three-volume *Main Currents in American Thought*.<sup>5</sup> Following that, Harvard’s department of history and American civilization was founded in 1936, and the *American Quarterly* was launched in 1949.

One attraction of American studies as a model for literary journalism studies is that both have an interdisciplinary core. “Whereas other disciplines define themselves by their purview—French studies French language and literature, etc.—American Studies defines itself by its approach, its vision,” writes Mark Bauerlein in “The Institutionalization of American Studies.”<sup>6</sup> In many respects, American Studies resembles literary journalism’s uncomfortable relationship with mainstream academia. Both have “[a]n uneasy relationship with traditional scholarship and with academe as a whole,”<sup>7</sup> he concludes.

American studies has absorbed each iteration of the culture’s self-expression—African-American Studies, Cultural Studies, Film Studies, Women’s Studies, LGBTQ studies—proving itself as protean as the phenomenon it examines. As such, I argue that American studies is the best rubric under which literary journalism studies might thrive.

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KEVIN M. LERNER

**Falling between the Cracks: A Recent Student's View of the  
Wider Disciplinary Problem**

At first I thought, "I'm not qualified to talk on this subject." Then I realized no one is. I came to earn a doctorate in journalism—not strictly literary journalism, and if we are being honest, not even technically in journalism, but in communication—in something of a roundabout way. Which is to say, in more or less the usual way.

I backed into studying journalism, and while my career makes sense read backward, I would never tell another student that my path to what I am doing now is *the* path to what I am doing now. Doctorates, done right, are particular. After all, the goal is to become the world's foremost expert in a topic that no one else is quite as expert in. One does not just earn a doctorate in history, but in early modern east Asian history, and one's dissertation is about a particular person or movement or work of art. One does not just earn a doctorate in philosophy, but in the relationship between neuroanatomy and the philosophy of mind, with a dissertation combining functional MRI scans of cat brains and a disquisition on feline epistemology. And the problem is compounded in the world of journalism, since journalism does not have one particular academic home.

I began my studies as an undergraduate in a department of English literature—and when I began, the major offered only critical studies of fiction. Halfway through my time there, the department introduced a concentration in "creative nonfiction writing," one of the aliases of literary journalism. I quickly switched to that. But I earned a master's degree in journalism in a program where, at the time, any deviation from the inverted pyramid style of writing was viewed as somehow decadent. Sure, there are MFA programs in writing that will allow for nonfiction writing, but I felt the pressure to do something more . . . important.

And when I came to explore doctoral programs, I did not yet know how specific, how particular, the PhD was going to be, and I found myself in a small program where those of us studying journalism were sharing classrooms with information scientists and scholars of human communication. And within the journalism program itself, there were students taking critical theory approaches, students who took the more traditional social science approaches of mass communication, and I, a historian.

The problem with the literary journalism doctorate is that journalism is a topic, not a discipline. There is no one, accepted way to study the phenomenon of journalism; and literary journalism, as a subspecies of journalism, has even less secure an academic home.

I have studied journalism in an English literature department, in a dedicated journalism school, and in a department of journalism and media studies in a school of communication that also offers library studies, communication studies, and information science courses. I have *taught* journalism in an English literature department, in a department of communication that also offered theater and public relations courses, and in a department of communication that also offers sports communication and advertising courses. Literary journalism has always found its way into what I am studying and what I am teaching.

I could not reasonably tell any aspiring scholar or practitioner of literary journalism to follow my path, exactly, but neither is there a clear path of any kind to follow. So what, then, is one to do when pursuing a terminal degree in literary journalism? The first thing to know is that doctoral-level degrees in how to do literary journalism are practically unheard of in the United States. The doctorate of fine arts does exist, but good luck finding a writing program in one—or in persuading a university hiring committee that this is the degree that should get a tenure-track job.

But if you are not intent on learning the ins and outs of producing literary journalism, there is always the doctorate in literature, with a focus on nonfiction writing. That's one possibility, but of course you'll be learning literary journalism through the lens of literature. That's a perfectly valid approach to the field, but it is a specific one, and you are unlikely to find an adviser who has much expertise outside of literary studies.

Similarly, you might find that your best bet is in an area studies program. You could study Latin American literary journalism in a Latin American studies program. Or in East Asian, American, or even queer studies or women's studies programs. All of these are valid places to pursue the degree.

The other big option in the United States, of course, is the communications PhD, which is where you are most likely to find someone studying journalism. A lot of the big programs that have traditionally turned out PhDs made their names with a social science focus: that is, the midcentury mass communications degree. There is far more diversity of approach in these schools now, but there are vestiges of this social scientific legacy in most degree programs. You might be asked to learn your way around inferential statistics and how to craft a Likert scale as a part of a media effects survey. You will probably have to learn something of framing theory or agenda setting.

They're useful in their way, but maybe you won't find a way to apply them to a reading of the work of Susan Orlean, whose journalism is more specific, intellectual, humane, than anything that a theory of mass communication can explain. So one option here—and this is probably the most realistic op-

tion for pursuing a literary journalism doctorate—is to grit your teeth and power through the parts of the coursework that don't help your research, knowing that when you get to the comprehensive exams and the dissertation, you should have a little bit more freedom to direct your own studies.

Of course, that's true of anyone in a doctoral program: some of the material in the coursework will stay in the coursework and not follow into your career. But that material for most people does establish the field. In literary journalism studies, you might feel even more alienated, given that this subfield has not been widely adopted in these programs, and so you might find yourself leaving behind nearly all that coursework as you progress through your career as a scholar.

I found myself in a similar situation as a budding historian of journalism. I could have applied to doctoral programs in history had I known that history was where I would end up. But as an early career scholar, I knew that the journalism-half of journalism history was important to me, but I had not yet discovered the history-half. Historians of journalism are not unheard of in these big mass communication programs, but you don't find the same emphasis on historiography that you do on learning mass comm theories. My eventual dissertation adviser holds a dual appointment in the department of journalism and media studies and the department of history. He was trained as a historian in a "proper" history department. So, I see how a path into journalism studies from another discipline can work.

But perhaps the more important lesson to take from my adviser is not his path to working in a department of journalism, but my path to working with him. Because in the end, earning the doctorate is really about individual people. Choosing a program is important. And that's particularly true if you're undecided about the specific approach to the discipline you plan to take. You will want a big enough program that you can change your mind if you need or want to. But if you're directed, and you know what you want to study, then you need to identify the individual scholars you want to work with. Read their work. Reach out to them and talk to them on the phone or visit them. Talk about what you might want to study and build rapport before you ever enroll. My doctoral program was a decent fit for me. But my dissertation committee—literally, those four human beings—shaped me into the scholar I am.

And so, even though literary journalism studies has yet to become entrenched in the academy, that may not matter for you as a scholar, as long as you find the right people to work with.

SUSAN L. GREENBERG

**Supervising Narrative Nonfiction Practice as Creative Writing**

The United Kingdom offers an interesting example for our topic. John Bak says that literary journalism has found a home primarily in communications or related media fields such as journalism, rather than English studies. That is quite correct, but my experience indicates that it is true only for research that is *about* literary journalism. If you wish to carry out doctoral work that consists of the *practice of* literary journalism—or more broadly, narrative nonfiction—you will find it not in media studies but rather, in the discipline of creative writing. And within the institutional structures of U.K. higher education, that discipline is typically based in English departments.

Furthermore, if you wish to carry out doctoral work in writing practice of any genre, you are more likely to be able to do that in the United Kingdom than in the United States, which is otherwise a much more established home for the discipline of creative writing. This is because in the United Kingdom, the terminal degree in creative writing is usually the PhD, not the MFA, and the United Kingdom sees a steady stream of U.S. students who come to the United Kingdom precisely because they want the doctoral-level experience. It makes a difference for our discussion, because the creative writing doctorate has an explicitly critical element that sets it up as more directly comparative to the *about* kind of research. The other key thing about the U.K. example is that there are a sufficient number of doctorates in writing practice to support generalization, including a steady trickle of practice-based doctoral work in narrative nonfiction genres, some of them overlapping with literary journalism. This work is usually identified as *creative nonfiction* or *life writing*. Out of the 180 or so creative writing PhDs logged on the British Library's ETHoS database, perhaps ten percent fall in that camp.<sup>8</sup>

I speak about this kind of U.K. doctoral work from direct experience. I have been supervising my own doctoral student (who is also present on this panel). I have served as an external examiner at other universities. And I have sat on the higher education committee of the creative writing subject association NAWE,<sup>9</sup> contributing to an update of the research benchmark that is used across the United Kingdom, so I have benefited from learning about the wider experience of colleagues. What might the U.K. experience mean for literary journalism as a discipline? And what experiences might be transferable to other contexts?

One potentially positive contribution is the use of a critical component as a standard part of the creative practice PhD. The critical commentary, usually comprising twenty or thirty percent of the total thesis, offers a chance to articulate the ways in which the creative work is original and to situate it in

the wider conversation about that genre. The requirement to define and contextualize the work is helpful for the same reasons as for a more conventional thesis: it encourages the candidate to aim higher and helps to develop the discipline by building a critical literature. In sum, it underwrites the process of making an original contribution to knowledge, relevant to both theory and practice.

As a doctoral supervisor, I can vouch for the usefulness of supervising a critical commentary in tandem with a creative work; I find that it keeps me on my toes, both pedagogically and intellectually, and I have gained immeasurably from the discoveries and unexpected perspectives that the supervisee brings to the subject. At the same time there are challenges in supervising narrative nonfiction practice at the doctoral level. My argument is that the challenges facing creative nonfiction are directly relatable to the challenges that face literary journalism as another, even newer, entrant to the academy, and can inform our discussion about the interpretive frameworks that might support the growth of the latter.

The main challenge is that narrative nonfiction writing practice is still a minority interest and there is generally a dearth of suitable specialists who can serve as supervisors and examiners. Those of us in that position are in demand but we would rather have less rarity value, because even when specialists are present, the wider lack of familiarity that results from narrative nonfiction's minority status in the academy can impact the process. For example, nonspecialists serving as internal examiners may bring unexamined assumptions about the form, and the attitude of colleagues who start from a low base of knowledge can veer sharply from hostile or overextracting to *laissez-faire*. At one end of the scale, they may have unrealistic expectations about the critical component and expect the student to do twice as much work by producing a full literary text *and* a conventional criticism. At the other, they may assume that *anything goes*, and the critical element is allowed to be erratic or purely anecdotal, thereby undermining its quality.

Alternatively, the critical commentary may be rigorous enough in its own terms but divorced from the creative work. This may be linked to a trend, whereby faculty members from literature programs—left under-employed by falling demand for PhDs in English—are redeployed to the supervision of creative writing students for the critical element of the thesis. The supervisee may end up working with two entirely separate supervisors on two separate writing projects.

In my own view, this latter approach is just as likely to undermine the quality of the thesis as does excessive laxity. A successful commentary that engages fully with the creative part of the thesis can help to raise the standard

of writing practice by creating a virtuous loop of discovery and innovation. By the same token, a commentary that does not engage successfully—either through laxity or separation—can weaken the work, resulting in something derivative or predictable.

Many difficulties can often be traced to a lack of familiarity with the literature, either about narrative nonfiction specifically, or more generally about creative writing as a discipline in its own right, including readings on reflexive practice. And that in turn reflects a wider difficulty for creative writing as a new subject area in the academy. The editorial board of the NAWE journal *Writing as Research*, for example, found it necessary to produce a bibliography that is distributed to all potential contributors, to avoid submissions that address their subject matter in a vacuum, and to raise the general quality of work that is coming through the pipeline.

To minimize the impact of any of the difficulties outlined above, I have worked hard to engage in regular debate with colleagues about the genre and my own approach to it, as a way of creating a supportive environment for such work. But there is a limit to what one person can do in isolation. The support I get from the network created by the IALJS has been crucial in that effort. The same has been heard from other members of the panel audience, who testify to their loneliness in the home institution, and the support from the IALJS that helped fill the gap.

Perhaps there is scope here for the IALJS to create a research benchmark statement tailored to literary journalism or even, with the right partners, to sponsor an international doctoral program.

### **Differences between United States and United Kingdom**

If we look at the situation in the United States, we can see a level of interest in creative nonfiction as a genre that dwarfs the attention it receives in the United Kingdom, but the MFA as a terminal degree sets out to achieve different goals than the doctorate, and so it is less obvious as a comparative example.

The main difference is that in the United States there is great variety in the requirements for critical work, and a *commentary* directly related to the creative work is rare—possibly nonexistent. An MFA may require critical coursework to be taken alongside the creative workshop, but the potential choice of subject matter is broad, and the coursework is typically taken in other disciplines. In such circumstances the critical element of the degree operates separately from the creative work, minimizing the potential for an integrated analysis and an original contribution to knowledge about narrative nonfiction as genre.

The difference exists at the pre-doctoral level as well; in the United Kingdom the *critical reflection essay* is a standard element of *all* writing practice degrees, undergraduate as well as postgraduate. Which raises the question, how and why has this divergence emerged between the two systems?

A colleague from the NAWE Higher Education committee, Derek Neale from the Open University, offered me this rationale: “You could say that the U.K. requirement was intended to introduce criticality to creative practice, and its natural conclusion is the discipline-edifice qualification, the PhD. Or you could just say that it was canny—someone knew how funding bodies worked, and the critical requirement legitimizes the study in the eyes of funding bodies.”<sup>10</sup>

The differences may also be linked to how other practice-based arts such as music, fine art, dance, and design are treated, says Neale. In the United Kingdom, for example, there is a history of fine art colleges and conservatories that were once parallel with the universities. Now that division has been eroded, and art schools have become part of the university, where PhDs prevail. The practice-origins of those subjects are not forgotten, but they are subordinated.

Overall, the comparison throws light on the way in which *all* disciplines, not just creative nonfiction or literary journalism, are subject to the prevailing higher education system in each country.

ALEX BERTRAM

**The Student Experience of a Practice-Based Doctorate**

My practice-based creative writing PhD looks at the themes of photography and memory. The creative part of the thesis is a work of creative nonfiction, defined, following John Hartsock, as “narra-descriptive” writing in which cultural and personal revelations are intertwined.<sup>11</sup> I tell the story of the cultural life of a portrait of French actress Sarah Bernhardt that was taken at the London studio of Walter Barnett in 1910. Bernhardt was in her sixties at the time, and Barnett was a renowned Australian photographer who struggled to find a creative outlet within the confines of a professional practice. The thesis weaves the stories of these two people together through a personal journey into the history and travels of the portrait. It offers new insights into Barnett’s contribution to the art of photography through the prism of Bernhardt’s photographic and broader theatrical performances.

The research sits within the broader subject area of material culture history. This interest within history, a traditionally text-based discipline, is still relatively new. It forms part of a wider cultural turn that began in the 1970s, in which scholars believed that *culture*, or our interaction and relationships with objects and visual representations, could provide new insights into the constructions of social life. My research interest in photography draws on the specific anthropological concern with spatial and chronological contexts within which these objects, considered here as aesthetic and material objects, take on meaning over time.

Briefly, recent work by anthropologist and photographic historian Elizabeth Edwards has shown that when one looks beyond the image and engages with the material properties of a photograph, the researcher can glean information about the intentions of the maker and the social contexts in which it operated. Edwards’s approach offers what has been described as an “alternative” history of photography, and she argues “that photographs, at the moments of their taking and circulation, constitute a complex matrix of power, authority, agency and desire.”<sup>12</sup> Her approach is more about “a phenomenology of photography . . . the complexities of an experiential relationship to photographs that was not addressed by semiology.”<sup>13</sup>

But how does my work offer an original contribution to knowledge? I propose that the project contributes in two ways. It offers a new consideration of the relationship between the form of narrative nonfiction and the subject areas of photographic history and material culture history. I explore these three artistic and academic forms—in effect, three different ways of envisioning the past, three different forms of *memory*—through the figures of both Barnett and Bernhardt in order to get a fuller sense of their histories.

Secondly, I follow the insight that the very act of writing, re-writing, and reading is in itself a research method, and propose that this process has led to the development of my technique and the discovery of my voice as a writer.<sup>14</sup>

I can offer six main discoveries so far:

First, I have found that there is a natural sympathy between my form of writing and the subject matter. Creative nonfiction and analog photography are both highly contingent forms of memory that are made to create a sense of the real. The link to the phenomenal world is a strength but it can also be a limitation. Both share the status of being between art and information and are therefore difficult to categorize. I have observed, however, that an inability to be categorized can also be an advantage. As my treatment of Sarah Bernhardt demonstrates, it can be one of the greatest sources of power. She cannot be reduced to a one-dimensional character.

Secondly, in this project I conceptualize the photograph as a three-dimensional object and chart its life story from studio to present day. My approach to research is informed by the discipline of visual anthropology in which there has been a move away from semiology towards a phenomenology of photography. By adopting this methodology for my research, I in turn become aware of my experiences with the photograph that I follow. I am sensitive to changes or inconsistencies in the photographic records that I might otherwise have missed. By combining a phenomenological approach to writing with a phenomenological approach to photographic research, I directly experience the unpredictable nature of the Bernhardt portrait. When I cannot date it due to her chameleon image, which shifts within a single sitting, I know what the disorientation of spectacle feels like, and I write it down. Critically, I can respond with far more flexibility to the inconsistencies of this photographic record that might otherwise be off-putting to the researcher.

My direct experience engaging with the portrait has also helped me to see that the narrative itself operates much like the tragic Greek chorus: the use of personal revelation (the way I experience things and respond to them) and cultural revelation (the things that I find), which enables me to step in and out of the text, gives the reader the bigger picture. As this is a work of creative nonfiction, I can neither invent nor control the events of the portrait's *life* as it unfolds, in much the same way that the Greek chorus can only comment on the drama unfolding on stage. While I am aware that there are limits to an analogy with live performance, the observation reflects my approach in which I directly experience and record the unpredictable and fragmentary nature of the photographic archive. The observation also fits with the central theme for the project, which is *tragedy*. The term is defined here in both the literal and dramatic sense of the word. Sarah Bernhardt was, of course, one of the great-

est tragic actresses of her time. But the term also refers to what I perceive as Barnett's hurt at the lack of recognition of his work in his lifetime, and the irretrievability of the past. This theme gives a rationale to the entire thesis.

In the last chapter of my creative thesis, the analog portrait is digitized. For scholars in the field of visual anthropology the process of digitization is a process of translation. In any translation there is an understanding that the two representations are not the same. The process of digitization makes me aware that my form of creative nonfiction, in which I trace the life of a photograph, is also a form of translation. I offer a verbal representation of a visual representation. In much the same way as the digitization of the image has led to a new awareness of the material original, I too am highly aware of the balance between personal and cultural revelation, simply because the photograph is there.

The very act of digitally encoding an object also teaches us to look at ordinary objects or texts in a completely new way. In examining a photograph, for instance, one becomes aware that it is three-dimensional, with a front *and* a back. One might then say that when we attempt to describe the photograph digitally as a material whole, and when we take account of its experience over its lifetime, we reveal the shaping subjectivity of the people it has interacted with and its rhetoric of value in much the same way that the form of creative nonfiction reveals the shaping subjectivity of the narrator and his or her "aesthetics of experience."<sup>15</sup>

Finally, in terms of writing as a form of discovery, I have found that the very process of researching, writing, and reading has also helped to clarify why I chose to research this topic in the first place. When I began this project, the answer seemed straightforward: Walter Barnett's death passed largely unnoticed in Australia, his wife Ella burned his correspondence, and I wanted to see if his photographs held clues to his past. As I continued my work, however, I became aware that my interest in the project was equally about place and the complex nature of individual and cultural identity. I saw that the project was not just about remembering Barnett, an Australian expatriate who had lived for years in London, like me, but also, on a personal level, about not forgetting my own country. I also realized that I had become increasingly intertwined with the portrait itself, as a poignant object of memory.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lafarge, “From Pike to Twain: American Romanticism”; Pittman, “Literary Imagery and Subjectivity in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*”; Hawshar, “An Epidemiological Study of the Counterculture”; Giliolli Goos, “Peace Journalism and War Journalism”; Martins, “The Literary Journalism of Antônio Callado”; Coutinho, “A History of Portuguese Literary Journalism Since the Nineteenth Century.”

<sup>2</sup> Martin, “Inscribing Virtues in Australian Literary Journalism”; Naranjo, “Narrative Journalism (2008–2016)”; García-Cañedo, “War Reportage in the Liminal Zone.”

<sup>3</sup> Sobrinho, Impact of the nineteenth-century French *chronique*; Izzo, “Jean Genet and der revolutionäre Diskurs”; Aare, “Den empatiska reportern”; Casari, “The Origin of the Elzeviro”; Chavez, “Based on True Stories”; Wiktorowska, “Ryszard Kapuściński: visión integradora de un reportero.”

<sup>4</sup> Pulitzer Prizes, “Feature Writing,” accessed March 3, 2020, <https://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-category/211>.

<sup>5</sup> Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought*.

<sup>6</sup> Bauerlein, “The Institutionalization of American Studies,” 39.

<sup>7</sup> Bauerlein, 49.

<sup>8</sup> British Library, ETHoS e-theses, Online Service British Library, <https://ethos.bl.uk>.

<sup>9</sup> See Neale, et al., *Creative Writing Research Benchmark Statement*.

<sup>10</sup> Derek Neale, Senior Lecturer, Open University, email to author, November 29, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Hartsock, *Literary Journalism and the Aesthetics of Experience*, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Durden, “Elizabeth Edwards (1952–),” 87.

<sup>13</sup> Durden, 88.

<sup>14</sup> Cook, “Creative Writing as a Research Method,” 204–5.

<sup>15</sup> Hartsock, *Literary Journalism and the Aesthetics of Experience*.

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