



Bhalki Machan reserve, August 19, 2014. Image by Satyamon1993, Wikimedia Commons.

IALJS-15 Keynote Address . . .

From within the Ecosystem: Notes from an Observer of Literary Journalism

Isabel Soares

CAPP, ISCSP, Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal

Good morning, afternoon, or evening, wherever you are in physical geography. From the “almost” post-apocalypse of Covid-19 and by the powers of Zoom, it is a great pleasure to be here with you in Copenhagen/the world.

Thank you to the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies for the invitation to deliver this year’s/last year’s keynote address. Taken as an honor and privilege, I experience it from the perspective of self-doubt and fear of embarrassment—to me and the association—and a genuine sense of not being able to play the part. The comparison with all my predecessors is unavoidable and so daunting as to be intimidating (pleonasm intended). The last time there was a keynote address, in the remote year of 2019 BC (Before Covid-19), Matthew Ricketson, also contemplating his part in this task and tracing the list of honorables before him, said:

I feel honored to have this opportunity. Looking at the list of previous keynote speakers, I noticed that one was from France, one from Norway, one from Portugal, and there were eight from the United States. I am the first keynote speaker to this conference from Australia, indeed the first from the southern hemisphere. That makes me feel good. But among my predecessors, ten were men and only two were women. That makes me feel less than good. Because whatever I bring to this conference—and I do aim to offer you something you’ll find useful—I know there are scholars in Australia who could well be standing here instead of me¹

Unlike Ricketson, I am not the first in anything. My country, gender, and first language have already been represented and that makes me feel good.

However, it is unclear to me whether I can offer you something you'll find useful, and there are several scholars in the world and here today "who could well be standing here instead of me," and that makes *me* feel less than good. I suppose I could talk to you about the specifics of Portuguese *crónica*, a variety of literary journalism found in the languages originating in the Iberian Peninsula and then spread around the world via historical circumstances and exchanges not always on the right side of human betterment. That, however, would be following the much-beaten track of discussing what constitutes literary journalism. Maybe I could talk about how literary journalism has looked at Covid, but we are still in the throes of pandemic trauma, and we—I, at least—need some distance before clarity settles.

Given two years to mull over this talk, and in this I am a first (take that, Ricketson!), I decided the only way out is walking in my own shoes even if that is a limp when compared to the elegant gait of the thirteen keynoters before me (there was no keynote at the first IALJS conference). Neither am I a renowned, towering academic, nor an award-winning practitioner of literary journalism, the hallmarks of previous keynoters. The only time I ventured into the writing of literary journalism, I did so timidly under the pseudonym with which I write novels, stories that are fifty percent nonfiction and fifty percent heightened reality. In that alias, I am Isabel Tallysha-Soares, an identity not to be confused with that of a corseted, more serious Isabel Soares, who does not want her academic work to be contaminated by any literary whiff. When I am in literary journalism research mode, I do so for limited audiences, to niche-oriented topics and, coming from a peripheral geographic and linguistic region, any contribution I might bring to the study of literary journalism will linger in the obscurity that so characterizes peripheries. Therefore, I bring no grandiose eloquence on research in literary journalism and no enthralling musings on life as a literary journalist. At best, I fall in the category of observer, sometimes participant, of the great ecosystem of literary journalism. Learning from both academics and practitioners, and having, by serendipity, landed on a vantage point from where to observe the ecosystem, this, ladies and gentlemen, is what I can offer you today: my observation.

In her Arthur Miller Freedom to Write Lecture, delivered at the PEN World Voices Festival on May 12, 2019, Arundhati Roy invited us to think about the place of literature in these troubled times that, little did she know, were about to get more troubled. Best known for her Booker Prize-winning novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997),² Roy is an essayist and a political activist whose nonfiction books she describes as "stories." Telling stories is her way to convey meaning and transmit an image of the perceived real. For Roy, her nonfictive narration presents:

. . . [D]ifferent kinds of stories, but stories nevertheless. Stories about the massive corporate attack on forests, rivers, crops, seeds, on land, on farmers, . . . US and NATO attacks on country after country. . . . stories about people who have fought against these attacks—specific stories, about . . . specific peoples’ movements, all of them being specifically crushed in specific ways. . . . [R]eal climate warriors, local people with a global message, . . . And yet, . . . consistently portrayed as villains—the anti-national impediments to progress and development.³

Roy’s words should be contextualized, as she was referring to her nonfiction books being used by Indian authorities as proof to build cases against political activists. However, as she further explained, these writings “sat at an angle to what is conventionally thought of as literature. . . , particularly among the taxonomy-inclined—because they couldn’t decide exactly what this was—pamphlet or polemic, academic or journalistic writing, travelogue, or just plain literary adventurism?”⁴ Were Roy to attend the more than a dozen conferences of the IALJS, she would realize taxonomy is one of our recurring topics of discussion when we let ourselves go in the prolific, seemingly never-ending and controversy-driven debate of how best to name the genre we study: literary journalism, nonfiction narrative, reportage, *crónica*? Were she to attend these conferences, she would probably be left with a sense that her nonfiction qualifies for what we term literary journalism. If she were to attend our conferences, she would understand that our field of studies is a hybrid journalism sitting at some “angle” of literature, often also posing for travelogue.⁵ If she were interested in discovering a bit more of our wars and struggles to find something as basic as a name, she would come across Richard Lance Keeble’s bold dispatch of the canon because “*all* journalism is worthy of attention as *literature*. So away with the canon, away even with the notion of literary journalism as a separate genre! And away with all those tedious debates about what precisely constitutes literary journalism that have dulled so many conferences over the years.”⁶

Were Roy a reader of our newsletters she would have read about our growing pains and some sense of “a certain repetitiveness—and tedium—we’ve all experienced after hearing for the thousandth time a presentation on Tom Wolfe.”⁷ It is always interesting to notice the feedback on the boredom of our conferences when it comes to discussing the academic standing of the canon, when the canon is begging to be done within a journalism we are still trying to name and that, maybe to our dismay, Lemann calls a “tiny subculture [of] journalism.”⁸ So fascinating to watch the obstinate, collective pull to study and move forward this exoticism of a journalism that sleeps with the enemy and refuses baptism. But basically, what Roy would discover is that

what interests us gathered here, remotely, is also what appeals to her as a non-fiction writer: a genre of reporting that is all about revealing reality through the personal, individual lense of the observer. As an observer, both in and out of the literary journalistic ecosystem, I find these pulls and pushes like tides in an ocean teeming with life, with currents and undercurrents, beaten by the occasional storm. In other words, amazing proof of life in the ecosystem

Searching for Life in the Ecosystem

From September 2019 to February 2020, the twilight of the BC era, I spent most of my academic time working on preparing a three-fold file to submit to a nerve-racking, almost medieval, two-day trial by jury called “The Habilitation.” This is the last rite of passage in Portuguese academe for those who nurture any hope of attaining full professorship. One of the requirements is that you write a book-length report justifying the field of study in which you wish your Habilitation to be granted. Usually what you prepare in these circumstances is a report of a class or seminar in which you have, over the years, developed your teaching and research. For the Kamikaze, this can also be the opportunity to open a new academic field. I went the full Kamikaze. Literary journalism is neither taught nor recognized as a subject in Portuguese higher education institutions. The only place it has a glimmer of consistent scholarly life in Portugal is at my institution, and the good, diligent people studying it there have all contributed to the 2020 Portuguese special issue of *Literary Journalism Studies*: Alice Trindade, founding member and first female president of the IALJS; Rita Amorim; Raquel Baltazar; and, more recently, Marta Soares (no relation to my Soares).⁹ Five people constitute the whole pool of Portuguese faculty interested in literary journalism as an academic field, and our institute is its small habitat. If I wanted to cry freedom for literary journalism to stand its ground as a fully-fledged academic field, I needed nothing simpler than to prove its existence. Ecology came to the help.

Considering journalism as a biosphere, the life-supporting stratum composed of earth, oceans, and atmosphere,¹⁰ we can proceed to identifying several of its ecosystems. An ecosystem is a physical environment composed of biotic, or living, and abiotic, or non-living, elements bound together by flows of energy and the cycling of nutrients.¹¹ There are marine, alpine, desert, coastal, larger, and smaller ecosystems all of which have unique characteristics and all of which communicate with one another by means of direct or indirect influence. For example, a reduction in phytoplankton in the Pacific basin due to an increase in surface water temperature in an El Niño year leads to decreases in fish stocks, thus affecting ecosystems as far apart as the equatorial Galapagos Islands or the sub-Arctic Bering Sea. In an ecological metaphor,

literary journalism can be a sub-system of the journalistic biosphere maintaining links and exchanges with other journalistic ecosystems. Journalists, researchers, and the public are among its biotic components, whereas abiotic components can be found in news outlets and platforms. The nutrients feeding this ecosystem stem from a rich smorgasbord of newsworthy material, and the energy flows responsible for the vitality and distinctiveness of the ecosystem are channeled in a narrative discourse that we also call literary.

Ecosystems can be broken down into more restricted life-enabling spaces known as habitats, places where an organism or community of organisms live, with all the transactions therein.¹² Focusing on a particular feature of the literary journalistic ecosystem, and its standing as an academic field, analysis was needed to determine its health and validity if we were to include it in the biosphere of journalism in the habitat of Portuguese academe. Prosaically, if I did not want to crash and burn in the Habilitation, the ecosystem had better be studied. First, observation was carried out pertaining to the local habitat, all materializations of literary journalism studies at the Institute for Social and Political Sciences of the University of Lisbon—and second, there was observation of the global habitat in which literary journalism occurs as course offerings at higher education institutions. When combined, these observations should draw a clearer picture of the life of literary journalism in academe and contribute to our better understanding of our place as researchers in this ecosystem and how far and wide it is spread.

If verifiable information is paramount in journalism, in science it is often shown by some means of quantification. To assess our local habitat, a simple method was used: to count all literary journalism-related publications by the five researchers at our institute between 2007 and 2020 (the start time chosen because the first PhD thesis about Portuguese literary journalism was awarded in 2007). In the thirteen years under scrutiny, forty-one publications were found, corresponding to an average of 3.15 publications specifically addressing literary journalism, coming out of our institute each year. Curiously, there were other quantifiable, literary journalism academic activities included in our observation of this period. Among them were the organization of the IALJS conference in 2008 and the submission of three research projects to the Portuguese Science Foundation and one to the European Science Foundation. Purposely, we left out participation in conferences because research presented on such occasions is not always published and, simply, because we could indulge in disregarding this indicator. In a school without a research line in literary journalism and without courses and students in literary journalism, we concluded that this local habitat was pulsing and ready for a next developmental stage. We needed now to observe the global academic habitat of literary journalism.

Because the main goal of our public discussion before the grand jury of the Habilitation was to attest to the validity of including literary journalism in the syllabi of communication studies courses, we needed to prove more than just the vitality of literary journalism research at our institute. There was a further, broader necessity of showing the maturity of this academic field. The technique used was benchmarking, by which means we intended to provide data on course offerings in literary journalism worldwide. This effort was possible in part by resorting to the ready supply of contacts stored in the IALJS LISTSERV with the assistance of its manager, Jeffrey Neely (University of Tampa), whom I now publicly thank. The thought was that the IALJS, as the sole learned society in literary journalism, could aggregate, by means of its members, a representative sample of the global universe of higher education institutions where literary journalism is part of the curriculum. On December 10, 2019, there were 876 email addresses in the IALJS LISTSERV, of which, according to Neely, an undetermined number were alternative contacts and/or inactive ones. An email message, that many of you here today may recall receiving, was sent to the LISTSERV on that date, asking members to respond to the following questions:

1. Name of university/country?
2. Name of literary journalism course?
3. Status of said course, mandatory or optional?

The introductory text to the email message asked for replies only from IALJS members who were teaching literary journalism at that moment and to further include such designations as “narrative nonfiction,” “literature of fact,” or “journalism and literature.” To strengthen our sample, while we waited for replies to the survey, independent research was carried out to find universities offering literary journalism courses—a metonym also encompassing curricular units, seminars, and programs, given that the cultural diversity of academe at the international level precluded standardized, matching denominations for units of teaching. This research was a basic Google search crossing the accepted designations of literary journalism with the words “university” and “course” in the languages of English, Portuguese, Spanish, and French. As in the case of the email survey, results of this search were taken into consideration only for current courses. Whether the courses were optional or mandatory was information used for a secondary study not under consideration today.

Setting aside email replies of respondents who had taught literary journalism in the past, those who were interested in teaching literary journalism in the future, and some who wrote but had not taught literary journalism,

there were thirty-four valid email replies. To these we added the information gathered from the parallel digital search, and the combined results show us an image of the university habitat where literary journalism was being taught at the point we compiled the data: January 7, 2020. Table 1 identifies the institutions, by continent and country with curricular offerings of literary journalism.

Continent	Country	Institution
Africa	South Africa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg) • University of Cape Town (Cape Town, Western Cape) • Rhodes University (Grahamstown, now Makhanda, Eastern Cape)
North America	The Bahamas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University of the Bahamas (Nassau, New Providence)
	Canada	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ryerson University (Toronto, Ontario) • University of King's College (Halifax, Nova Scotia) • Concordia University (Montreal, Quebec) • University of British Columbia (Vancouver, British Columbia) • Université Laval (Quebec City, Quebec)
	United States	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University of California, Irvine (Irvine, California) • University of California, Los Angeles (Los Angeles, California) • Ball State University (Muncie, Indiana) • New York University (New York, New York) • State University of New York Albany (Albany, New York) • State University of New York at Stony Brook (Stony Brook, New York) • New York City College of Technology (New York City, New York)

Continent	Country	Institution
North America	United States	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University of Massachusetts Amherst (Amherst, Massachusetts) • Boston University (Boston, Massachusetts) • Salem State University (Salem, Massachusetts) • Northwestern University (Evanston, Illinois) • University of Tampa (Tampa, Florida) • Towson University (Baltimore, Maryland) • Denison University (Granville, Ohio) • University of North Texas [now Midwestern State University] (Denton, Texas) • North Carolina Central University (Durham, North Carolina) • University of Maryland (College Park, Maryland) • Kutztown University of Pennsylvania (Kutztown, Pennsylvania) • University of Arkansas (Fayetteville, Arkansas) • Rutgers University (New Brunswick, New Jersey)
Latin America (South and Central America)	Argentina	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero (Buenos Aires Province)
	Brazil	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul (Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul)
	Chile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universidad Alberto Hurtado (Santiago, Santiago Province)
Asia	United Arab Emirates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • American University of Sharjah (Sharjah)
	Qatar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Northwestern University in Qatar (Doha)
	Turkey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Erciyes University (Kayseri, Kayseri Province)

Continent	Country	Institution
Europe	Belgium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Université Libre de Bruxelles (Brussels)
	Spain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Barcelona, Catalonia) • Universitas Miguel Hernández (Elche, Valencian Community)
	France	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • American University of Paris (Paris, Île-de-France) • Université Paris-Est (Paris, Île-de-France)
	Netherlands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University of Groningen (Groningen)
	United Kingdom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City, University of London (London) • Roehampton University (London) • University of Essex (Colchester) • University of Lincoln (Lincoln)
	Romania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University of Bucharest (Bucharest)
	Switzerland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Université de Genève (Canton of Geneva)
Oceania	Australia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University of Queensland (Brisbane, Queensland) • University of Technology Sydney (Sydney, New South Wales) • University of Wollongong (Wollongong, New South Wales) • Deakin University (Melbourne, Victoria)
	New Zealand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Victoria University of Wellington (Wellington)

Table 1: Curricular course offerings on literary journalism at higher education institutions, January 2020.

The first result shows that literary journalism is a university course subject in higher education institutions on all continents (Antarctica excepted). Fifty-three universities in nineteen different countries offer literary journalism courses. There is a blind area in the research, however. The search could not be conducted in languages impenetrable, and so an unknown percentage of potential survey respondents could not reply. In any case, the information compiled shows a thriving habitat, particularly because the first university

program in literary journalism in the United States dates only to 2003 at the University of California, Irvine,¹³ and the founding of the IALJS to as recently as 2006. These landmarks represent the coming of age of literary journalism as an academic field, reinforcing the notion that literary journalism has swiftly gained ground as an academic subject. And, with the launch of an undergraduate curricular unit in literary journalism at the Institute for Social and Political Sciences in Portugal in September 2021, a new country and a new institution has joined this habitat.

If, within the literary journalism ecosystem, the academic habitat is showing signs of vitality, we can also observe another habitat: that of the international scholarly association created as a hub for the promotion and dissemination of knowledge in literary journalism.

Life within the Habitat of IALJS

I might also have been invited for this role today because I am a repository of the collective memory of the IALJS. I have dedicated countless working hours to the association, been present in many pivotal decision-making moments and, because of the IALJS, repositioned my research from imperial studies—a politically correct way of saying colonial and post-colonial studies—to focus more closely on literary journalism. I am also a woman, a polyglot, a German-Portuguese hybrid, and an academic from a peripheral, non-Anglophone country, who pioneered analysis on the wondrous journalism that interests our community, in a language other than English and with authors far from what was the established, (in)famous canon in the early years of the millennium. I am, let us say, a figure of inclusion. When IALJS President Tom Connery invited me to give this keynote, he wrote me an email, dated May 10, 2019: “Giving the keynote would give you the opportunity to reflect and assess our journey to this point but also to perhaps even consider where we might go from this point in our history. I know your address would be interesting and perhaps it might even be provocative, if need be.”¹⁴

I don't know about provocation, but I would dread to contribute “dull” to this conference. Given my long standing in the association, immodestly, I think am well-suited to play its chronicler. However, what could be duller than presenting you the chronology of the IALJS?

At fifteen years of age, the IALJS is a teenager trying to understand its own self, testing limits and boundaries, having occasional outbursts of anger and yet, growing, evolving, maturing, and offering worthy ideas from fresh or unexpected perspectives. In this process, generational clashes are expected and unavoidable. Again, metaphors from the fields of biology can be used in relation to this organism.

Observing its growth, I have witnessed how IALJS has made its own breaks, managed to survive, been financially secure enough to sponsor awards and carve a path of quality standards, as epitomized in the indexing of its journal, and the number of submissions for both the conference and the journal outnumbering the slots available. This is all to the good, projecting to the outside world an image of smooth sailing and success. Backstage is, however, not so glamorous. Internally there has been discussion of the ways officers are selected and/or elected. Pivotal areas, such as the research, program, and awards committees go through straining peaks of work to ensure the regular pace of our annual conferences. Keeping a lookout on our finances involves assuming great responsibility, and I am deliberately leaving for last the roles of editors of the *Literary Journalism Studies* journal and the newsletter, the latter of which, once published quarterly, is now a biannual publication. Finding volunteers to fill these roles is challenging. I have been in many conversations giving invitations, just to hear polite refusals. By this I mean that the IALJS does not drink from an inexhaustible pool of potential officers. It lives on because of the generosity of those who are willing to put in the time and worry to deal with the problems that add to many other aspects of professional and personal lives. To point out what is lacking, what does not work so well is easy because it is visible. Life backstage seldom comes to the forefront and is seldom, if ever, publicly appreciated.

My words should not sound as criticism of any kind; they result from participant observation, an observation that leads me to other truths. For fifteen years we have all maintained this association—and by “we,” I mean the officers and all those who come to conferences, submit research, choose *LJS* and the newsletter as publication vehicles, who offer criticism and new insights. No harm derived from the newsletter having gone from quarterly to biannual. Quite the opposite, it now resembles more of a journal than a mere newsletter with news and events. If you look at the slate of officers, there are not many dinosaurs that were there in the moment of our Big Bang. I happen to be one, but I am leaving my remaining functions this year. More importantly, and to me, so worthy of praise is the fact that Covid did not wipe us out. Dedicated officers of more recent vintage have come up with the means for our gathering, our schedule of future conferences has not been broken, awards have progressed, and so has the journal.

Also, research has been shifting, and hasn't it always? We are ever more interested in new media, digital platforms, empathy and emotion, social justice, ecology, literary journalists as naturalists, and never have we been less than international or internationally focused. In my research for the Habilitation, I found there is a lot going on, as far as literary journalism teaching is

concerned, in places such as Romania and Southeast Asia, but the language barrier prevented me from including any findings. Literary journalism itself is also changing—just look at what LCB-Diplomatique is doing every week with the social media—by publishing only international literary journalism short pieces.

In a nutshell, can we do better? Can we include more women keynoters as Ricketson pointed out? Can we find ways to be even more international and inclusive? Can we look at more hidden peripheries? Can we do something to ease language obstacles for those who feel unheard or lessened because our working language is English? Can we devise any program, award, or grant for scholars in fragile economies? Can we learn from a Zoom conference model new ways to meet remotely, how to get to more places and people, or more flexible ways to meet? Can we find better or newer platforms to disseminate our profile as the learned society for literary journalism? Of course we can improve—and we will, as we always have. We are far from being what we started out as, in 2006. One needs memory to go that far. As a long-standing, patient observer, what I can say is, let the tides of this ecosystem ebb and flow, let the winds blow, for all of that constitutes our energy. The one true provocation I can incite is to look ahead and walk where the path leads us. Let contrasting opinions be heard and meet in the middle of bridges. Together we can. Thank you IALJS for being such a rich habitat. Thank you all. *Obrigada.*

(Post Scriptum: Two days after the delivery of this address, I received an email from an academic in Hungary who had heard me say there is the teaching of and academic interest in literary journalism in neighboring Romania. He asked me if I could facilitate contact with the fellow academic in Romania, which I gladly did. Again, proof of life in the ecosystem.)

Isabel Soares's keynote address was delivered on Friday, May 21, 2021, at the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies Annual Conference, IALJS-15, hosted virtually by University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark.



Notes

- ¹ Ricketson, "Navigating the Challenges of Writing Book-Length Literary Journalism," 116.
- ² Roy, *The God of Small Things*.
- ³ Roy, "Literature Provides Shelter," para. 8.
- ⁴ Roy, para. 10.
- ⁵ Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism*, 13.
- ⁶ Keeble, "Literary Journalism as a Discipline and Genre," 93–94 (italics in original).
- ⁷ Calvi, "Thoughts for Moving Forward," 2.
- ⁸ Lemann, "The Journalism in Literary Journalism," 52.
- ⁹ See Soares and Trindade, eds., "Lusophone Literary Journalism: A Special Issue," 6–13.
- ¹⁰ Thompson, *Britannica Online Encyclopaedia*, s.v. "Biosphere."
- ¹¹ Editors, *Britannica Online Encyclopaedia*, s.v. "Ecosystem."
- ¹² Editors, *Britannica Online Encyclopaedia*, s.v. "Habitat."
- ¹³ Garcia, "Literary Journalism at UCI: The Backstory."
- ¹⁴ Tom Connery, email message to author, May 10, 2019.

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